

Angus Lockyer

From Corporate Playground to Family Resort:  
Golf as Commodity in Postwar Japan

For: Penelope Francks and Janet Hunter, eds.,  
*The historical consumer: consumption and everyday life in Japan, 1850-2000*  
(to be published by Palgrave Macmillan, 2012)

1. Introduction

From a distance, say on Google Earth, the mountainous landscape of the archipelago would seem to make Japan an inhospitable place for golf. The familiar statistic of the uncultivable 80% of the land mass suggests that real estate might be better turned to other, less profligate uses. Closer up, however, many cities are ringed with the tell-tale worm castings of fairways, bunkers and greens. In the countryside, the bucolic vista of paddies climbing into the hills, abutting the woods that, if not primeval, still reassure about the Japanese ability to coexist with nature, is rudely interrupted. Decapitated hills and shaven slopes announce the presence of a course, which is more often than not brown, despite the chemicals required to maintain the pretense of the green carpet (*midori no jūtan*) that is thought to be the object of desire. At ground level, suburban landscapes are punctuated with the tall nets of driving ranges, city centres by equipment emporia, membership exchanges and even golf bars, while bookshops and station kiosks are festooned by the tell-tale green and now pink of golf-related publications.

Similarly, the waves of demand for the discretionary golf goods of courses, ranges and equipment that swept through Japan in the postwar period might seem to be at odds with the producer-oriented GNPism that provides the basso ostinato of many accounts. We know, of course, that the latter is a little too simple. Urbanization in the early modern period and industrialization in the early 20th century had long established habits of consumption, albeit hedged about with ecological, geo-political and other constraints, which placed a premium on discrimination and refinement, producing the cultivation of a somewhat obsessive practice well-suited to the frustrations of golf. Panning in past the iron triangle that has been seen to structure the postwar political economy reveals the myriad of local actors, whose individual

decisions to invest in ventures not sanctioned by MITI, to spend rather than save, may have provided the surplus with which to drive the creation of a middle mass habit.

Might golf, then, also provide a counter-point to the corporatist line composed for our standard accounts of postwar growth? To cut to the chase, probably not. Both in terms of supply and demand, the drivers for the explosion in golf course development, practise and play in postwar Japan seem to have been corporate. In contrast to the prewar period, when golf was sustained by private membership clubs, postwar golf was provided and consumed for the most part by companies, who built the courses, bought the memberships and mandated that executives and aspiring middle managers should learn to play the game. Together with an interesting set of externalities (financial speculation, yakuza involvement, membership scandals, labour disputes and environmentalist critique), this produced a very strange kind of pastime: exhausted salarymen might leave the house at 6 on a Sunday to trek out to the countryside, where they would spend the day wining and dining, more than hitting, establishing and re-establishing the corporate hierarchies and business networks through which the work of the week might be done. Entertaining in any society has its protocols, which raises problems for an account of consumption premised on the individual choices of free agents; but *settai gorufu* in Japan seems to have been an extremely prescribed kind of demand, a rather productivist, if highly conspicuous kind of consumerism: if you built it, you could almost guarantee that they would come, either because they already worked for the company that owned it and paid for their membership, or because the proximity of the club to a major population centre and/or the prestige of its designer and members could ensure that it would become an object for speculation on the relevant, sky-rocketing exchange.

This kind of golf, however, had its limits. Investment continued into the early 90s, the majority of the clubs have survived, and it is still common to break after the first nine holes for a long, carb-heavy, alcohol-saturated lunch. But the model for golf has begun to change. It is clear that both the business case for course development and the social demand for golf à la Japonaise was unsustainable. In the wake of the bursting of the bubble, the distressed asset of Japanese golf became a prime target for new players: Goldman Sachs and others swept in during the fire sale, creating portfolios with which to cultivate a new kind of demand. Together with the industry more broadly (equipment manufacturers, designers, publishers and the rest), the new owners and brokers are targeting a new consumer and creating a new golf: family-friendly, young at heart and often female. The individuality that is the stock in trade of the virtual memberships and leisure advertising directed toward this audience might suggest that Japan too, finally, is acknowledging the economic potential of

consumer demand. Up to a point. As is clear to anyone who spends an hour or so navigating the baroque complexity of booking systems, the technophilic prose of a golf magazine or the glacial play of a Japanese foursome, golf, however changed, remains an unlikely place to find the free radical of liberal fantasy.

Or perhaps, golf might be one place to rethink how and why consumers do demand. In what follows, through a brief history of how golf has been consumed in and beyond the archipelago by Japanese people over the last century or so, I want to suggest both why we need the Japanese consumer, if not necessarily Japanese golf, in our accounts of Japan's modern history but also how Japanese golf can reveal the way in which consumption is always more complicated than our transparent language of and clear distinctions between demanding subjects and desired objects might suggest.

## 2. Prelude

Golf did not emerge *ex nihilo* from the ashes of defeat. While prewar golf was a minority interest at best and its history is more often than not an occasion for antiquarian debates about who came first, it is nonetheless significant for the story of golf as consumer good, inasmuch as prewar clubs and golfers established both the local rules by which golf was played in Japan and the hierarchy of value that continues to determine the golfing economy today. At this point, it is not clear when and where the former—female caddies, breaking for lunch, et al.—first came into being, but it is still prewar courses—Hirono, Hodogaya et al—that comprise the majority of the *meimon* among golf cognoscenti and that have retained their value in the last two decades, even as bubble-era late-comers have seen their value and reputation collapse. Koganei Country Club, established in 1937, has notoriously long been the most expensive club in Japan and still demands a seven-US-figure joining fee.<sup>1</sup>

The first golf in Japan, however, was expatriate, a by-product of the trading profit and lifestyle aspirations of the foreigner communities in Kobe, Yokohama and beyond. Kobe Golf Club was formed in 1903 on top of Mt. Rokko, using land purchased as a way of summering away from the muggy port below. Negishi followed three years later, making do with the land in the middle of the Yokohama race course and allowing for the development of another dimension to the inter-port rivalry. Unzen, in 1912, was an initiative on the part of

---

<sup>1</sup> Interview, September 2007.

the local government rather than foreigners, but again targeted at the latter as a summer resort, not least for those seeking to escape the heat of Shanghai.<sup>2</sup> These early courses allowed space for the development of a particular kind of sociality, which did not exclude the Japanese. There were seven Japanese among the founding members of the Kobe Golf Club, including two Matsukatas, a Sumitomo and the head of the Kobe tax office. None of them played, however: the club was useful as a place to network with locally prominent foreigners.<sup>3</sup> This function of the club, absent the foreigners, would continue to remain at the core of the demand for golf in Japan, but in the first decade of the twentieth century, there was little Japanese demand for golf.

It was not until 1914 that the first indigenous sprouts were visible, with the creation of the Tokyo Golf Club. The cultivators were telling. Inoue Junnosuke, then President of the Yokohama Specie Bank and soon to be head of the Bank of Japan, had played a bit of golf while studying in England, like many of those who found themselves sent to America and Europe during the Meiji period. He wasn't a golfing enthusiast, but understood its value for rest, recreation and networking. With 30 founding members, including a Saionji and Iwasaki Koyata, he was able to raise the capital to lease a site in Setagaya, newly accessible through the Tamagawa railway. The characteristic combination of public figures, private capital and informal networks inaugurated the playing of golf in Japan. The importance of the last was evident in the number of non-playing members, which prompted the introduction of green fees for those among the membership who chose to use the course itself, in addition to their initiation fee and annual dues. Soon enough, the practice had spread. Karuizawa had been developed in the 1880s and saw its first nine holes in 1921. At the same time, a tussle with the landlords at the Tokyo club had produced a search for an alternate site, which resulted in a move to Komazawa but also the creation of a second club, Hodogaya, in 1922. One year later, golf went imperial. Hirohito had watched golf during his visit to the UK in 1921, had played a couple of times at Komazawa later in the year and played the Prince of Wales when Edward visited Japan the following year, albeit not with much success. In 1923, a 9-hole course was opened in Shinjuku Gyōen for the exclusive use of the imperial family.<sup>4</sup>

Following its most venerated chronicler, the prewar history of Japanese golf falls easily into a number of periods.<sup>5</sup> The first expatriate and the second inaugural were followed

---

<sup>2</sup> Mowa, 8-28. Kubota, 18-34.

<sup>3</sup> Kubota, 20. Lockyer, forthcoming.

<sup>4</sup> Mowa, 31-70. Tanaka, 75-76.

<sup>5</sup> Mowa

by a third, which took the story up to 1929, and a fourth, which carried the enthusiasm for golf past the depression and the invasion of Manchuria. The third was marked officially by the creation of the Japan Golf Association in 1924, acknowledging a certain critical mass of courses and golfers, which demanded and might sustain a coordinating infrastructure, nationwide competitions and the like, but also exploiting an increasing media interest in the sport. The latter was catalyzed by Akaboshi Rokurō, who would quickly become the leading celebrity of the prewar scene, but was then in the US. Having attended prep school and Princeton, in the spring of 1924, he won a tournament at Pinehurst. The potential of golf as media event was soon evident. The Osaka Mainichi was quick to organize the Japanese professional championship, from its second year in 1927, although they might have preferred to sponsor the first Japanese Open, in the same year at Hodogaya, where Akaboshi triumphed, beating a number of pros in the field.<sup>6</sup> Nor did the enthusiasm ebb in the wake of the economic crisis or the invasion of Manchuria. For decorum's sake, presumably, Hirohito had to keep his swinging in-house, on a practice course inside the palace grounds, but golf, like much of life, continued to thrive during the 1930s. 1933 saw the beginning of the domination of the Japanese Amateur Championship by the newly-married Marquis Nabeshima Naoyasu and the first golf exhibition at Mitsukoshi in Nihonbashi, 1935 the inauguration of the All-Japan student championship and 1937 the establishment of the Koganei Country Club with a lay-out by Walter Hagan, as well as a well-publicized visit to Japan in October by Gene Sarazen, two of the three dominant US players of the time. Hagan would play an exhibition match at Koganei the following April.<sup>7</sup>

There was interest in and demand for golf, therefore, throughout the prewar period. But the interest seems to have been limited to and golf remained something played almost exclusively by the elite. Golf occasionally appears in the visual culture of the day: a panel depicting an iridescent course and elegantly attired golfers by Yamaguchi Hōshun in a 1928 handscroll illustrating contemporary customs and mores (*Gendai fūzoku emaki*) might be evidence that golf was one element the modern life to which one was meant to aspire. But the strange placement of the golfers suggests that the painter did not himself play the game and, as Kubota Seiichi has noted, however, the absence of golf in prewar books about sport indicates that it was at least seen as a different kind of pastime.<sup>8</sup> The suggestion is born out by the statistics. In 1940, there were only 71 courses and some 110,000 golfers in Japan,

---

<sup>6</sup> Mowa, 47-48. Tanaka, 76-80.

<sup>7</sup> Tanaka, 80. Koganei, 77-93.

<sup>8</sup> Kubota, 15.

comprising 0.8% of the population. The extent to which golf remained an aristocratic monopoly was suggested by a recent genealogy published by *Choice*, the most upmarket of the many golf magazines, which sketched a Konoe-centred network incorporating most of the golfing great and good from the prewar years. By the same token, golf was an object of desire for a newer elite, the club a place where alliances might be forged and support assured. Golf was therefore a private affair, not yet a consumer good.

For the same reason, perhaps, golf was vulnerable as Japan turned to war and recovered from its effects, so ripe for investment and reinvention in the second half of the century. Golf was a particular target as the country was mobilized for war in the late 30s and early 40s, given its elite status and foreign origins, evident not least in the katakana with which the game had to be played. The authorities made various attempts to indigenize things, renaming balls, clubs and the sport itself with Chinese characters in an attempt to coat what was clearly beyond the pale with a veneer of East Asian respectability. Golf enthusiasm persisted and golf was played throughout the war. Golfers, however, were targeted and had to resort to subterfuge, sending clubs ahead and dressing down in an attempt to reach the course unmolested. Golf courses, too, proved tempting for the Japanese authorities simply as land, while the resources needed to maintain them as such were seen to be better deployed for other uses. By the last years of the war, even golf magazines were beyond the pale. The oldest such publication, which had started life in 1922 as *Hanshin Gorufu*, had prophylactically changed its name to *Nippon Gorufudomu* in 1933 and had been rechristened again under military pressure at the beginning of the Pacific War as *Nippon dakyū*, was forced to cease publication in February 1944.

The problems continued during the Occupation. Americans were eager to play golf during their sojourn, commandeering the remaining courses and demanding that their Japanese staff provide the material wherewithal to play the game. Their enthusiasm suggested one possible use for golf as the Occupation came to an end. In 1951, a Mr. Hirayama, writing in *Kankō* (Tourism) magazine, noted that there had been some 50 courses before the war, but noted that there were only 12 left, with another 3 under construction, but only 4 could be used by the Japanese. His statistics may not have been entirely accurate. The USGA in 1957 suggested that only 18 had survived of 62, while more recent accounts have revised both figures upwards. In any case, as Hirayama pointed out, the current supply was inadequate to meet even the existing domestic demand. But his purpose in writing was to suggest how golf might also comprise a key ingredient in the development of a tourist industry with which to resuscitate the Japanese economy. It wasn't enough simply to give

foreigners something to look at, one also needed to provide things to do: hunting, shooting, golf. Twenty years ago, Hirayama noted, when golf was booming in the US, there were 13 golfers born every minute.<sup>9</sup> Hirayama was looking in the wrong direction, however. As in the US, the demand, when it came, would be home-grown. And while it may not have outpaced the American miracle simply in quantitative terms, given the respective populations of continent and archipelago, its effects, given the constraints of the landscape, were striking.

### 3. Boom

As with the prewar, so the postwar enthusiasm for golf in Japan can be seen to have come in several waves, the first of which came in the late 50s. Already by 1957, there had been some improvement since the dire situation at the end of the Occupation, with some 118 courses and some 300,000 golfers, increases of 66% and 172% over their respective figures for 1940, who played a total of 1.8 million rounds of golf during the year. The USGA, commenting on the nascent Japanese scene, emphasized the pent-up demand produced by the rapid increase in the number of golfers, with some 5,000 taking up the sport every month. Nearly every club, it noted, had a membership of 1,000, with some topping 2,000, and most had barred visitors at weekends. Five years later, it might have been encouraged to note, the landscape had been transformed, with some 295 courses, which saw nearly 7.4 million rounds. 1961 alone had seen an additional 68 courses and 1.4 million rounds.

The usual reason trotted out for this first boom is the Canada Cup, which was held in Japan for the first time in 1957, was televised and saw Nakamura Torakichi win both the individual and team competitions. Nakamura became the first postwar golf celebrity, his rivalry with Hayashi Torakichi providing fodder for the media, before passing the baton to the first of a number of 'big threes'. The Canada Cup may indeed have proved inspiration for some, not least Miki Tokuchika, then building up the organization of Perfect Liberty Kyōdan, whose gospel included the power of golf as a medium of self-expression and which was also busy in 1957 building what would become Seikyo Country Club next to its headquarters in Tondabayashi, Osaka. Despite the media coverage, however, the clear potential, not least for spiritual growth, and the astonishing numbers, golf in the 50s and 60s still seems to have been pastime for a privileged class. By the middle of the latter decade, it was clear to ambitious salarymen that they needed to work on their swing if they were to aspire to the

---

<sup>9</sup> Hirayama 1951. USGA 1957.

executive suite. In 1964, *Life* captured the serried ranks of white-singletted office workers practising at a flood-lit three-story driving range, presumably somewhere in the Tokyo suburbs. But there would be an enduring distinction between using a range and playing a course. At least anecdotally, the latter privilege seems to have been restricted to the top three in most companies. While the numbers suggest that there must have been a few rounds played by people other than executives, the fact that golf had not yet been taken up as grist to the mill of the emerging manga industry might support the impression that it remained a minority, if no longer entirely elite interest.<sup>10</sup>

Change was in the air, however. 1964 saw the Tokyo Olympics and the wide-scale adoption of colour tv, 1967 the broadcasting of the 'Big Three in Japan' by TBS, Arnold Palmer, Jack Nicklaus and Gary Player demonstrating just how good one could look on the green carpet of the golf course. The following year, the inauguration of the Japan Women's Open introduced a new factor into the media equation. Women remained the main attraction of golf on tv for the next few years, until the emergence of the out-sized figure of Jumbo Ozaki in the early 70s, and a useful source of revenue for much longer, though not yet as consumers themselves. Golf Digest's World Ladies Golf Calendar was produced for the first time in 1975. The photographs of foreign female pros in mini-skirts seem to have excited enough demand for the proceeds to have paid for a new building for the company and remain in demand today. The previous year had also seen the publication of the first golf-themed manga in a general-interest magazine (*Puro gorufā Saru* in *Shōnen Sandē*). But there remained a gap between the various aspirations of viewers and readers, as encouraged and relected on screen and page, and the material fact of building courses and swinging clubs.<sup>11</sup>

By the end of the 60s, there were more reasons to do the latter. The accumulating profits of Japanese companies needed investment, the shift away from older industries demanded that land be turned to new uses. Reminiscing in 2008 with Shima Kōsaku, the manga phenomenon whose own 25-year ascent to company president was at least smoothed if not enabled by his golf prowess, Aso Tarō recalled his own experience as head of Aso Cement converting mines to golf courses. (Neither the conversation or the company history published at the time mentioned the wartime forced labour that continues to haunt what is now the Aso Iizuka Golf Club.) By the 1970s, a tipping point had been reached. For one interviewee, working in Osaka, the Expo saw the beginning of a shift, from golf as a monopoly of the company executives to something played by middle management. The

---

<sup>10</sup> USGA. Tanaka, 96-117. Interview, December 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Tanaka, 107, 124-5. Interviews, October 2008 and June 2009.



numbers support the contention of a rapid expansion in the playing population and, perhaps therefore, in the number of courses. The 1960s had continued the steady growth of the first boom, with an increase of some 1.5 million rounds a year, but the early 70s saw a sudden spike, taking the total rounds from 20.5 million in 1970 to 41.7 in 1975. Courses soon followed, with over 100 new courses built every year from 1973 to 1976, taking the total number from 773 to 1,228.<sup>12</sup>

Not all of the demand for golf can have been corporate. There was a general shift in the 1970s away from older uses for the countryside, such as hunting, to the newer hobby of golf. But the supply was calibrated to meet a corporate demand, producing a particular kind of course and a particular kind of golf. As for the former, courses were not designed to challenge the pro, but to flatter the executive hacker with a 24 handicap. To do so meant crafting holes that were difficult to par, but easy to birdie, so raising the possibility that even the company president might play to if not beyond his potential: putting bunkers within driving distance, therefore, was a no go, whatever the club professional might have wanted. The golf itself, after all, was only one part of a complete package. Everyone arrived at the same time, played at the same time and had lunch together. Coordinating the whole operation took some doing, inasmuch as only four golfers could tee off on the first or the tenth at any one time. But the day was facilitated by female company, carrying the bags around the course and bringing the food and drink in the restaurant. The impression was only heightened by the grandeur of the clubhouse, by a famous architect if possible, such that the amount of time spent on the day was offset by the exclusivity of the surroundings. In other words, this was *settai gorufu*, golf as corporate entertainment, where a membership at a club, more often than not owned by one's company and close-ish to one's work, was part of the remuneration package and where playing the game was subsidiary to the corporate bonds and business relationships that were thereby strengthened.<sup>13</sup> Golf, perhaps, was the counterpart of the company training long ago identified by Tom Rohlen and others as central to the creation of the white-collar class: work and play were both disciplined, corporate concerns.

The boom in the 1970s, however, was only a small indication of what was to come. The numbers of courses and users continued to tick upwards in the late 70s and early 80s. By 1983 there were just under 1,500 courses in Japan, seeing some 63 million rounds a year. Then things got out of hand. In part, what followed was simply a story of surplus capital seeking decent returns. The supply was such that much of it washed up overseas, flooding

---

<sup>12</sup> Tanaka 98-9. *Shukan Asahi* 2008/6/13, 27. Interview, December 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Interviews, November and December 2007.

prestige properties such as Turnberry and Pebble Beach, but perhaps nowhere more strikingly as in Hawaii, where at one point every course on Maui was Japanese-owned. In Japan itself, however, irrational investment became outright speculation, underpinned by Nakasone's post-Plaza attempts to prop up the economy, most significantly in the form of the notorious Resort Law. Low-interest rates, government funds, land privatization and weakened regulations prompted a flood of investment into shady ventures, not least by local governments and criminal syndicates. Takeshita's subsequent attempt to revivify the rural economy with a 100 million yen grant to all local authorities only exacerbated the lemming-like stampede. By 1989, there were over 1,700 courses in Japan, with another 325 under construction and 983 in their planning stages, together with 4,790 ranges, which would increase to nearly 6,000 the following year. Golf courses alone had become a trillion dollar industry in 1988. One year later, courses and ranges were a market worth some 1.663 trillion yen, to which the golf equipment industry added another 237 billion. It was no surprise that by this point golf was also a prime target for environmentalist critique, which accused the courses of destroying the archipelago.<sup>14</sup>

Supply was part of the story, therefore, but it was overwhelmed by demand. Apart from 1983 and 1985, the courses saw an increase of over 5% per annum in the total rounds played throughout the 1980s. In 1989, this amounted to almost 90 million rounds a year, added to which were the 135 million individual uses of the driving ranges. Practising on the range was the seventh most popular leisure activity in the country, playing on a course the fifteenth. Nearly 26% of men were habitués of the range (23% of a course) and 34% (31%) of those in their 30s and 40s. But golf still lead all others as the sport which men wanted to take up.<sup>15</sup> The ravaging hordes enabled all kinds of excess. Just as golf course development had invited infusions of unaccountable capital, so golf club membership became a target for speculation. It was no surprise that the Nikkei should have created an index of membership prices, nor that it should have seen a nearly eight-fold increase between 1982 and 1990. The aggregate concealed all kinds of variation, of course. At the top end, a club like Aqualine, an hour southeast of Tokyo, could charge nearly \$135,000 as a joining fee, while still under construction. The objective was to have as few members and to be as luxurious as possible. (It was no wonder that memberships and even rounds soon became a useful bait with which to tempt politicians and bureaucrats and so a leitmotif of political scandals from Recruit to the present.) The pre-sale tactic was a general one, but elsewhere, the strategy was to

---

<sup>14</sup> Tanaka, 98-9, 144-5, 184-92. Yamada.

<sup>15</sup> Tanaka, 92, 98-9, 143.

maximize the return by selling as many memberships as possible. The problems that arose from such a system had been evident from the 1960s, but by the late 1980s, the situation was out of hand. In some places, clubs had over 20,000 members, meaning that it was almost impossible for most to play the course. At Gatsubi GC in Shizuoka, things got so bad that the disgruntled members formed an association to protect their rights.<sup>16</sup>

The numbers alone suggest that by the end of the 80s, golf had spread beyond the corporation to become an object of desire more generally. Golf manga became commonplace, holding out the possibility that even an overweight junior-high-school student from the wrong side of the tracks might end up beating Nicklaus in the Open at St Andrews, albeit in volume 58 (*Ashita tenki ni na are*, 1981-92). Meanwhile, the late Chūsonji Yutsuko created the *oyaji gyaru*, the ball-busting, take-no-prisoners OL, whose resistance to office norms were signaled in her free-wheeling adoption of the obsessive habits of her male superiors, including smoking, drinking and, not least, golf (*Suīto supotto*, 1989-92). Despite the popular culture dreams, however, the average consumer remained a salaryman: 39 years old, with an income of 6.1 million yen, a wife and a child, and an allowance of 50,000 yen a month, almost all of which went on the 1.5 rounds and 4 practices at the range that he allowed himself per month.<sup>17</sup> More generally, the extent to which demand outpaced supply meant that even if golf could be consumed at various price points (none of them reasonable by international comparison), there was little incentive to change the product itself--or indeed to provide a public alternative. There were only 27 public courses out of the 1,722 total in 1990. Golf remained the privatized, corporatized product that had emerged over the previous eight decades, a very prescribed kind of consumption, with female caddies, mandatory lunches and largely male patrons.

#### 4. Bust

And then the wheels came off. The broad narrative is a familiar one, given what we know of the lost last two decades. Already in 1990, there was a slight downtick, with 400,000 fewer rounds and 1.1 million fewer practices than the year before. The following year saw perhaps the most notorious revelation of the shifting sands on which the whole edifice had been constructed. The company behind Ibaraki Country Club had pre-sold memberships, promising to limit the total to 2,830 (still a bloated roll by the standards of many clubs elsewhere in the world). In fact, however, the developer sold over 52,000

---

<sup>16</sup> Tanaka 194-205.

<sup>17</sup> Tanaka, 208.

memberships, channeling the 100 billion yen thus acquired to associated companies. The course was never completed, the company went bankrupt and the main defendant was given 11 years and fined 700 million yen for his troubles, a fair exchange perhaps for a take of nearly 15 billion and having avoided nearly 6 billion in tax.<sup>18</sup> Despite the warning signs, it took some time for the house of cards to collapse fully. The Nikkei index had halved by 1992, as the collapse in the property market brought the speculative trade in memberships to a grinding halt, but for most of the 90s, golf club bankruptcies hovered in the single figures, with total liabilities running under 5 billion yen. Then, at the end of the decade, the problem exploded, with 27 bankruptcies in 1999, 25 in 2000, 57 in 2001 and 98 in 2002, the last year seeing liabilities of over 30 billion yen. The problems continued through the rest of the decade. In 2005, there were 71 bankruptcies, with over 14 billion yen in liabilities, while even in 2009, there were 26 bankruptcies, though total liabilities had again subsided to under 5 billion yen, meaning that fully 33.6% of the then 2,356 courses in Japan were in administration.<sup>19</sup> Given the over-supply, it was no surprise that construction too ground to a halt. 2007 saw the opening of the first new golf course in Japan for nearly a decade.

The trail of destruction, however, proved fertile ground both for new players and new ways of playing the game. It was American vultures that were the first to take the initiative, Ripplewood Holdings swooping early in the new millennium to buy out the hubristic Seagaia resort in Kyushu, following its acquisitions of a bank and the record label known for its catalogue of enka.<sup>20</sup> It was soon overtaken by slightly more established, though no less ravenous beasts. By the end of the decade the two largest portfolios were held by Goldman Sachs, operating as Accordia, and Lone Star, a Texas-based investment firm, operating as Pacific Golf Management. Both saw past the highly leveraged position of many bubble-era courses to the positive cash-flow, averaging \$1 million a year, that most were generating. Buying the debt at a nominal price put them in a position to negotiate with the various stakeholders, repaying the banks some 20 to 30 cents on the dollar and the long-suffering members only 2.5 percent of their investment. Not everyone was happy and many chose to walk away. The Nikkei began to creep upwards again from the middle of the decade, but remained less

---

<sup>18</sup> Tanaka, 142.

<sup>19</sup> Tsubaki gorufu, <http://www.mmjp.or.jp/tubaki-golf/newsfail/1news.html> and <http://www.mmjp.or.jp/tubaki-golf/newsfail/2010/0421-hoteki-zennkoku.html>.

<sup>20</sup> 'Foreign invaders', *Time*, 11 March 2002.

than 10% of its 1990 peak toward the end of the decade.<sup>21</sup> But for those who chose to remain, the new owners also began to provide a new kind of product.

At Aqualine, even in the mid-90s, when the writing should have been on the wall, having paid one's \$135,000 joining fee, one was expected to submit to the familiar rigmarole of corporate golf. "We didn't realize that there is an alternative to everyone arriving at the same time, playing at the same time and having lunch together." Following Goldman's purchase of the club in 2005, course maintenance and food have both improved, while the cost of a round for non-members has halved. Most important, perhaps, you can start to play more or less when you want, you don't have to stop for lunch and you don't have to hire a caddy. You can even drive a cart onto the fairway. It has become conceivable if not always achievable for a round of golf to take less than an entire day.<sup>22</sup> It is not only the Americans, however, who have understood the potential for changing the game. Golf Digest Online (GDO), an offshoot of Japan's largest golf-related publisher, has also got into the business of making golf accessible to a larger audience, by acting as an intermediary between a huge number of clubs and an increasing number of customers. Its rationale for doing so points to older scruples that may still govern the consumption of golf: for the club, to admit their eagerness to cater to visitors would be to damage their special relationship with the existing membership; for the visitor, to call a club directly and to be asked if one is a member is to risk awkwardness. For both sides, the ability to bypass the niceties of *tatemae*, together with the discretion and assurances provided by an admittedly virtual membership, is a good solution, as well as a nice earner for GDO itself.<sup>23</sup> The technology through which it operates, the number of courses to which it can provide access, together with the range of other goods available online also suggest a new consumer-orientation in the world of Japanese golf.

Such an orientation is essential for the golf industry, no less than any other sector, if it is to sustain the demand for its various products in the face of declining discretionary incomes and ongoing demographic decline. It is not enough to cater to the traditional male market, particularly given the well-documented cost-cutting by most companies and the anecdotal unwillingness of many younger employees to give up their weekends to play an interminable round with the colleagues with whom they spend the rest of the week. Courses, manufacturers and publishers are searching for new markets, promoting younger role-models

---

<sup>21</sup> 'U.S. Firm's Deft Play Helps Japanese Golf Out of Rough', Washington Post, 15 June 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Interview, March 2008.

like Ishikawa Ryō, the ‘bashful Prince’, emphasizing the family-friendly fun to be had at made-over resorts and above all targeting women. While 22.4% of men already played golf in 2000, suggesting market saturation given international comparisons, only 5.4% of women had picked up a club. And so the last few years have seen a wave of initiatives and publications inviting women to play the game. The serried ranks of green-jacketed course guides, technical manuals and the like that mark the well-populated golf section in most bookstores are now complemented by a small but growing number of introductory guides, more often than not bound in pink. Many golf magazines have a *redisu senyō kōnā*, most fashion magazines carry regular golf-related features, while *Regina* leads the pack of golf magazines targeted explicitly at women. Some of these include at least some emphasis on playing the game. Elsewhere, performance and turnout are emphasized as part of the requisite repertoire of a professional young woman. More often than not, however, golf is merely an excuse for other kinds of consumption, above all of fashion, but also food, travel and perhaps even love. Equipment as accessory, course as backdrop, golf becomes another stage on which to craft the cute quasi-cosmopolitan self at home in the commodified world. As *Regina* memorably put it, when describing the joys of ‘romantic golf in Hawaii’, ‘no love, no golf, no life’.

## 5. Inconclusion

What does all this say about consumption and everyday life? (What else needs to be said about the everyday consumption of golf?) Golf of course cannot be perceived as a staple, like sugar or rice, however much the needs for these might have been manufactured during the process of modernization. Golf is not a necessity, like clothing or medicine, although the transformation of the former into fashion and the commodification of the latter suggests a common mechanism that also worked to promote the practice of golf. Nor is golf part of the material infrastructure—of rail, mail, and long-distance retail—through which the modern consumer came into being. Golf is discretionary at best, more likely marginal to the grand narrative of Japanese consumption.

But golf is also telling, albeit of a story that may already be quite familiar. Golf in Japan seems to have been consumed not so much for the joy of playing the game, although an extensive literature on the epiphanic experience of a well-struck long iron might argue otherwise; rather, playing the game provided and provides access to a particular kind of space—for speculation, interaction and performance—through which to fashion an appropriate self. This space for much of the last century was of course the club rather than

the course, the pantomime exertions on the course counterbalanced by the well-heeled ease of the nineteenth hole to provide a convincing stage for the sophisticated man of leisure. As such, golf in Japan underpins Daniel Miller's argument for a turn away from the liberal emphasis on individual choice to a Hegelian acknowledgment of the interaction between consuming subject and consumed object subsequent to the moment of choosing.<sup>24</sup> What is striking in Japan, perhaps, is the limited nature of the choices that were available for much of the twentieth century. If you wanted to play golf, you had to be a member, you had to pay a lot, you had to stop for lunch and you had to use a caddy. That model proved unsustainable and more recently the choices have seemed to multiply, but it still seems hard to claim that golf is any less prescribed. The complexities of online booking, the necessity for the latest clubs and kit, the reiteration of rules and etiquette and the torrent of technical advice (about everything from swing to slope, stretching to diet) all make it quite clear that there is a right way to play the game. Meanwhile the female caddies who continue to help and applaud customers, as they navigate the virtual fairways of golf bars in downtown Tokyo, suggest that it will take some time for older habits to die.<sup>25</sup> To suggest that the Japanese consumer historically has had little say to say in how he or she might play golf is not necessarily to revert to a productivist account of political economy, much less a Maruyaman indictment of missing subjectivity, but it does point to the way in which a crowded island and corporatist growth has left little room for the awkwardness, which some would say should characterize the game.

---

<sup>24</sup> Miller, 1987.

<sup>25</sup> 'Get into golf's virtual swing', *Japan Times*, 25 June 2008.