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Elise M. Edwards

*Butler University*, [emedwar1@butler.edu](mailto:emedwar1@butler.edu)

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**Bodies in Motion:  
Contemplating Work, Leisure, and Late Capitalism in Japanese Fitness Clubs**

**Elise Edwards**  
*Stanford University*

*Laura Spielvogel. 2003. Working Out in Japan: Shaping the Female Body in Tokyo Fitness Clubs. Durham and London: Duke University Press.*

In the opening pages of her book, Laura Spielvogel presents readers with a social scientific puzzle, a seemingly inexplicable phenomenon that she will decipher and elucidate in the rest of her book. Fitness clubs, and more specifically the popularity of aerobics in Japan beginning in the late 1980s and through the 1990s, are the twinned subjects of her ethnographic study. Despite a socio-cultural, political and economic environment seemingly conducive to supporting a robust fitness boom, fitness clubs and other venues providing health and fitness opportunities have not taken off in Japan at anywhere close to the rates seen in the U.S. In the mid-1990s, approximately 97 percent of Japanese adults did not exercise on a regular basis of three times a week (p.2). Fitness membership rates in 2001 in Japan were only one-third of the levels in the U.S. (p.3). These statistics, Spielvogel argues, are particularly surprising when one considers dominant notions of beauty in Japan today. "The message of the beauty industry in Japan is unavoidable: Thin is beautiful and beautiful is thin. It stands to reason, doesn't it," she asks, "that fitness clubs, aimed at building and sculpting a stronger and leaner body, would be a booming business in Japan?" The mediocre response to aerobics and fitness clubs, she continues, is even more puzzling when one factors in the increased leisure time afforded by economic prosperity, government policy [**End Page 165**] initiatives implemented since the 1980s aimed at encouraging and facilitating increased leisure and healthier lifestyles, the popularity of beauty and diet aids, and what Spielvogel refers to as Japan's "cultural system of achievement that awards hard work, industriousness, and discipline."

The inability of fitness club owners to capitalize on what ostensibly appears to have been the convergence of various factors propitious to the clubs' success is one question driving Spielvogel's research. Inside the fitness clubs, the activity—and notable inactivity—of (the overwhelmingly female) members is another phenomenon, fundamentally connected to the first, that fuels Spielvogel's curiosity, and justifies, as she argues in her Introduction, fitness clubs as a worthy site of ethnographic investigation. In the end, it is the pieces that do not fit—club members who barely work out and female aerobics instructors who live "unhealthy" lifestyles off of the job—that inspire the most interesting inquiries in Spielvogel's work, with the former pointing to the cultural and historical specificities of notions of health and fitness, and the latter exemplifying individual acts of resistance and rebellion.

Spielvogel's project benefits from her thorough understanding of her subject matter, and her proximity to her fieldsites and informants. An accomplished aerobics instructor before she went to Japan, Spielvogel worked as an aerobics instructor and a staff member at two clubs, one located in the heart of Tokyo and the other in a more suburban area outside the city. Her status as a staff member and expert aerobics instructor inhibited comfortable communication with some members, she admits, but it also made her privy to backroom conversations and after hours employee events that very likely would have been unavailable had she been in a different position. With information collected from the front of mirrored aerobics studios to the cramped "break room" used by exhausted and frustrated employees, Spielvogel's investigation provides insights into the structural division between work and leisure in contemporary Japan, and the positioning of exercise within that structure. Because leisure is understood in Japan, she argues, as relaxing and requiring little exertion, the task of fitness clubs in Japan, which in the U.S. are typically associated with sweat

and physical exhaustion, is to "mask the necessary hard work and discipline of exercise under a veneer of relaxation and luxury" (p.20). A country stereotypically imagined as filled with workaholic salarymen, over-exhausted students cramming for exams, and doting mothers dedicated to serving all their children's needs, Spielvogel shows us a different Japan: gyms where rigorous workouts are actively avoided, and (aerobics) instructors often struggle to get their students to move. **[End Page 166]**

### **Warming Up: Leisure and Sport Studies**

A welcome addition to anthropological work on Japan, Spielvogel's book will augment a small but growing collection of English-language material on leisure practices in Japan (e.g. Linhart and Frühstück 1998; Robertson 1998; Hendry and Raveri 2002; Edwards 2003a, 2003b). Some anthropological inquiries have been inspired by the newfound prominence of "leisure" within discourse—both governmental and popular—and as practice in Japan, with the affluence of the late 1970s and early '80s translating into a surge in golf course development, overseas travel, and other leisurely activities. At the same time, even more scholars working on leisure in historical and contemporary contexts in Japan have asserted (rightfully, in my view) that sites and practices marked as "playful" and "fun" have been too readily ignored and dismissed as meaningless and lacking import. It is play and various modes of entertainment, they argue, that fill everyday lives and thus so powerfully shapes commonsense; it is also the apparent political neutrality of play—its appearance of frivolity—that often is central to its social power.

In recent years, scholars have shown that attendance at Yomiuri Giants baseball games (Kelly 1998), participation in Takarazuka Revue fan clubs (Robertson 1998), and reading comics during long train commutes home (Allison 1996; McLelland 2000) are all leisurely practices that produce moments in which national, ethnic, and gendered identities are rehearsed and that, at other times, create opportunities to resist normative identities. These scholars have shown that leisure and work are often deeply interconnected, with moments of "restful" leisure frequently supporting and even indoctrinating proper, hardworking behavior on the job. Following in this tradition of leisure studies, and similarly attending to the relationship between leisure and work, Spielvogel argues that fitness clubs and aerobics have in many ways epitomized dominant discourses and practices in Japan since the 1980s. She suggests that activities in weight rooms, saunas, and step aerobics classes reflect an increased emphasis on identity construction through consumption and shifting relationships between work and play.

Spielvogel's book will also join a relatively small but growing list of anthropological studies of sport produced by American scholars. Historically, in the United States, sports was a subject studied primarily by sociologists. Anthropologists have gradually been stepping on the playing field, as it were, employing ethnographic methods and theoretical approaches in their analyses of sports as a realm of disciplining practices, embodied performances, symbolic rituals, and mediated spectacles. However, Spielvogel does not really engage with **[End Page 167]** a large and growing body of Japanese-language literature on sports. Instead, she suggests that the Japanese material consists of quantitatively thick and analytically thin sociological studies, in addition to a small number of ethnographic works that focus on men's sports, such as baseball and sumo (pp.33-4).

My own research on Japanese female athletes has revealed quite the opposite (Edwards 2003a). A significant amount of intriguing anthropological and sociological work on sport has been and is currently being pursued in Japan. Had she availed herself of it, Spielvogel may have been able to more "thickly" describe and contextualize the larger contemporary sporting landscape in Japan. For instance, the emergence in the early 1990s of what the media deemed a "soccer boom" has made soccer a particularly popular focus of scholarly inquiry. One of the primary areas of researchers' focus has been the role of J-League teams in efforts to boost local economies and rejuvenating forms of local-place identification. Japanese researchers are also exploring new forms of social interaction, volunteerism, and local activism that have emerged in combination with the popularization of soccer in the 1990s (e.g. Yamashita & Saka 2002). This is just a small sample of the broad range of exciting academic work by Japanese scholars that is seriously engaging with sports and recognizing its roles in various processes of identity construction, shifting forms of social organization, and its relationship with larger national and international political, economic, and cultural developments. While only tangentially related to Spielvogel's work, some sense of the larger contemporary sporting landscape would have strengthened her analysis since she claims that aerobics has "provid[ed] a whole new metaphor for sport" (p.49).

### **Pre-Workout Stretch: Situating Aerobics**

In the first chapter of *Working Out in Japan*, Spielvogel contextualizes her ethnographic project and outlines her argument in broad, definitive strokes. She introduces the history of aerobics in Japan and situates it within the larger history of modern sport in the country. She suggests that aerobics is the "latest import in a long history of popularized Western sports in Japan," but that in various ways it is categorically different from its predecessors (p.34). More so than earlier imported sports, she posits, the "Americanness of aerobics "has been exaggerated and capitalized on." This exaggeration, she in turn argues, reifies cross-cultural differences and "serves to highlight local inconsistencies and discrepancies over definitions of body, health, and beauty" (p.34). While earlier sports were readily imitated as Japanese teams tried to best their foreign competitors, the contemporary **[End Page 168]** fitness club, on the other hand, is a place where Westernness is emphasized and both accepted and resisted. The fitness club thus "provides a backdrop against which ideological debates between Japan and the West *and* within Japan play out" (34). Although Spielvogel's assertion about the unproblematic adoption of previously imported Western sports is overly generalized and inaccurate (and her conflation of the United States and "the West" problematic), her suggestion that the fitness club is an interesting site to explore the cultural specificities of contemporary Japanese notions of health and leisure is successfully argued and substantiated in the rest of her ethnography.

Spielvogel also suggests that aerobics, which were introduced to Japan in the early 1980s, are emblematic of larger shifts in attitudes toward and utilization of sport and leisure activities. During the wartime period she writes, "sport became an expression of physical strength, national unity, and combative and competitive spirit." And, although connections between health and productivity can still be seen, she insists, the sporting body in the postwar period "became a site on which to project images of progressive and competitive sophistication" (p.40). The popularity of aerobics over the past twenty years, she argues, marks a new stage of sport, leisure, and consumption. Fitness club members' use of the clubs is "symptomatic of larger social changes that began to occur

at the height of stable economic growth" (p.45). Meeting friends at the gym and attending aerobics classes became just one part of a larger set of consumptive practices that emerged in the 1980s, and according to Spielvogel, that individuals used to assert unique identity and social status. The rise of aerobics in the 1980s, was emblematic in her estimation, of "postindustrial, late-capitalist Japan," a country in which, like its late-capitalist peers, "consumerism began to replace production as a determinant of social status and self-worth" (pp.44-5). "Presenting an entirely new metaphor for sport," she writes, "aerobics fits neatly into the shift toward modernity that has distinguished the late twentieth century" (p.49).

Some of the most interesting material in this first chapter is Spielvogel's historical account of the introduction of aerobics to Japan. In 1981, the heads of the newly-formed recreation division of the Asahi Newspaper Company invited the U.S.'s anointed aerobics guru, Kenneth Cooper, to Japan to introduce his new exercise routines, which were already extremely popular in the U.S. It is interesting to think that an exercise method that was first brought to Japan to help improve the health and productivity of company employees'—both male and female—quickly became a form of recreation practiced primarily by women and became strongly associated with female bodies, femininity, and consumption [End Page 169] rather than productivity. As Spielvogel explains, aerobics' rapidly shifting status in the 1980s was strongly influenced by the media and the manner in which aerobics was marketed: Cooper's reliance on scantily clad women to attract people to his lectures, and the soft-porn camera techniques and ample attention to bare legs, arched backs, and glossy lips in the American-produced program *Aerobicize* (which, according to Spielvogel, enjoyed great popularity in Japan) helped guarantee that aerobics was quickly sexualized and feminized. Aerobics status as an "imported" American sport, and the manipulation of its "Americanness" by fitness club staff is central to Spielvogel's investigation. Using her years of experience as an instructor and a practitioner in both countries, Spielvogel notes numerous differences in the ways that aerobics is pursued in the U.S. and Japan. For her, it is these points of contrast and difference that underscore the cultural specificities of Japanese notions of work, exercise, health, and beauty at the turn of the 21st century.

### **The Workout: Disciplined Spaces and Bodies**

Following themes very common in other sport research, Spielvogel examines aerobics as a mechanism of social discipline in Chapters 2 and 3. In Chapter 2, she attends to the structuring logics of space within fitness clubs. She points to the ways that the club is simultaneously a space of discipline and a realm of luxury, arguing that this dual emphasis, architecturally coded into the interiors of the club, is inextricably connected to "larger cultural ideologies of leisure, gender, class, and hygiene" (p.61). Using Foucault's notion of the panopticon, Goffman's theory of front and back stages, Douglas' ideas about pollution, and other theoretical tools, Spielvogel discusses how staff and member spaces are enclosed, exposed, divided, and thoroughly sanitized in ways that encourage discipline and surveillance, and also "exaggerate and create power inequities of class and gender" (p.83). She also notes that the fitness club is a space designed to offer entertainment and relaxation at the same time that it provides spaces for hard work and exertion. In her words, it is a "contradictory space" in that it is "a site of discipline and control on one hand, and privilege and service on the other" (p.83).

In Chapter 3, Spielvogel continues to look at the disciplining features of the fitness club, but moves from architectural spaces to the actual practices and regimens experienced by individuals in the club. It is also here that she differentiates between what she refers to as "monastic practices," which she deems inherently Asian, and "militaristic" regimens that produce "docile bodies" à la [End Page 170] Foucault, which are Western—and in the case of aerobics, purely American. In Spielvogel's schema, "monastic practices" refer to all processes of education or training that include "*seishin kyôiku*" or "spiritual education." A topic of study for many Japan scholars over the years (e.g. Rohlen 1996, Kondo 1990, Reynolds 1980), *seishin kyôiku* is an educational paradigm that emphasizes intense mental and physical disciplining strategies in order to achieve spiritual growth. In the most general terms this paradigm envisions human growth as derived from emotional, mental, and physical hardship. Scholars have argued that *seishin kyôiku* is central to disciplining and education practices in numerous social spheres, including schools, companies, and monasteries; Spielvogel adds fitness clubs to that list. As she reviews the arduous process required to become an aerobics instructor, she notes that the emphasis placed on repetition and conformity in learning routines, as well as the use of techniques of written self-critique in the training process resemble forms of education and indoctrination found at Japanese monasteries and corporate training programs. Club members, she notes, are run through similar routines of repetition and self-critique by the well-trained staff. Central to these forms of *seishin kyôiku*, claims Spielvogel, is recognition of a mind-body synthesis, and the connection between physical development, exertion, and or pain and spiritual development. As Spielvogel explains, however, the irony—and one of the reason for the minimal success of fitness clubs in her estimation—is that "the clubs fail to make explicit the links between training the body and training the spirit" (p.86). The lack of mind-body synthesis central to other forms of *seishin kyôiku*, she argues, renders aerobics relatively vacuous of culturally salient meanings and thus generally unpopular.

As an American import, the Japanese fitness club also incorporates a range of what Spielvogel qualifies as "Western" disciplining practices. Exemplified by various forms of measurement, quantification, and objectification, these regimens reflect what the author argues is a decidedly Western form of mind-body dualism or separation. Rooted in the rationales of Western science, calipers designed to measure fat percentages and tape measures used to size up almost every limb of a members body, represented, according to Spielvogel, the primary tenets of Cartesian dualism: that the body has the capacity to betray the self, and that the mind must work to control and master the body. The intense focus on body measurements, including weight and body fat percentages, she points out, creates unrealistic expectations among club members and inspires unhealthy diet regimens and workout routines; the emphasis on measurements and beauty over health, however, also keeps fitness clubs in business. As [End Page 171] Spielvogel notes, "it makes economic sense for the club to emphasize fat percentages and measurements as a way to induce insecurity and thus to maintain consistently high membership numbers" (p.93). Despite the apparent persuasiveness of these seemingly scientific rationales—they are much of what lures Americans into clubs on a regular basis—they too fail to produce consistent attendance, or significant efforts from most Japanese club members according to Spielvogel. The reason for this failure, it seems Spielvogel wants to argue, is again the lack of mind-body integration within this "Western" paradigm. The lack of any persuasive spiritual or intellectual rationale for diligent and painful exercise, renders the effort meaningless for many Japanese members, and produces "a clientele that does not want to exercise but desires results" (p.88).

In her discussion of dominant beauty standards in Chapter 5, Spielvogel again contrasts "Western" forms of mind-body dualism with an integrated or non-atogonistic "Japanese" or "Asian" approach to mind and body. In her effort to explain the large number of "half-hearted members" at Japanese fitness clubs, Spielvogel devises a comparative schema that seems unnecessarily essentializing and reifying at times. In addition, although Spielvogel probably did not intend for this to happen, the "West" and "Westernization" are often cast as bad and evil in contrast to a more integrative and benign Asian/Japanese approach to embodiment. This, despite the fact history shows that both dualistic and more integrative approaches to mind and body have furthered processes of domination and social control in Japan and elsewhere. I also wonder about Spielvogel's decision to label various forms of scientifically-inspired bodily measurement and manipulation as "Western," especially when she herself acknowledges that scientifically informed and hyper-rationalized forms of physical measurement and regimentation have been central to state-led programs of social hygiene and eugenics in Japan since the turn of the 20th century (cf. Robertson 2001). Practices and technologies that Spielvogel calls "Western" would probably be most aptly defined as "modern," but they are certainly as "Japanese" as they are "Western" or "American" in this day and age.

Lastly, as a scholar of sports, I tend to shy away from assertions, which are common in this subfield, that the Western European and American philosophical tradition of Cartesian dualism has branded its disconnected approach to mind and body on all Western traditions of exercise and sport. When we actually attend to the theoretical underpinnings of many practices of gymnastics, calisthenics, and sport in the Western world, we find they incorporate clear ideas about the co-constituting relationship of mind and body. In addition, understandings of sport among participants and fans reveal that individuals commonsensically [End Page 172] create multiple linkages between morality, intellectual ability, emotional strength, and other mind-centered processes, and physical development and athletic mastery. Spielvogel herself admits, "neither mind-body synthesis nor mind-body dualism consistently explains the myriad social and institutional relationships" in Japan. The complexity that she herself acknowledges within Japan also precludes the use of dichotomizing schema that match dualism with the West and synthesis with Japan. Early on in the book, Spielvogel explains that she does not see the cultural categories of Japan and the West as mutually exclusive or explicitly tied to geography. Instead, she says she is interested in how these categories are invoked on the ground, and how national boundaries are imagined (p.38-9). While reading *Working Out in Japan*, however, I often felt as though Spielvogel was much more interested than were her Japanese informants in assigning "Japanese" and "Western" labels to physical practices, notions of beauty, and the like. In her efforts to produce elegant and seamless arguments, Spielvogel ended up reinscribing and reinforcing the essentialized categories of "Japanese" and "Western." This seemed particularly ironic since at other moments she claimed that it was these very categories that she hoped to dismantle and problematize with her work.

More attention by Spielvogel to her informants' understandings of aerobics and the fitness clubs they attend might have provided alternative explanations for their relative lack of popularity in Japan. Does aerobics qualify as a sport in their minds? And, if not, what is it, and how is that significant? Do members see these clubs as providing a social space equivalent to things such as knitting circles, English language clubs, hobby centers, lunch groups? Or, do they join for other reasons? (e.g. Due to free membership offers from their companies? As a means of achieving higher social status?) Are interviewees concerned about weight, overwhelmed by media-inspired



fears of obesity, or tuned in to the benefits of cardiovascular fitness in the same way as American club-goers? Although simplistic, these types of questions may have opened new doors of inquiry and generated more complex findings.

### **Cool Down: Contemplating Images and Voices**

Another significant portion of *Working Out in Japan* is dedicated to exploring contemporary discourses of beauty in Japan and their cultural effects. Using information culled from surveys and interviews, as well as images found in the popular media and more specifically fitness club advertisements, Spielvogel asserts that dominant standards of beauty are characterized by emphases on **[End Page 173]** youthfulness, "balanced" proportions, and waif-like thinness. Spielvogel notes that the dominant image of beauty embodied by models featured in fitness clubs advertisements and elsewhere (who are described evocatively by the author as figures of "voluptuous emaciation" [p.157]), is not an image of actual health: the models' bodies show none of the muscles or physical robustness that would actually result from proper use of the club facilities. Marketing the promise of thinness and good looks in their advertising, as well as a beauty that is predominantly defined using images of Western models, Spielvogel argues, there is a fundamental disjuncture between images and reality for Japanese women. Following a line of argumentation well-developed by feminist scholars, such as Susan Bordo, Sandra Bartky, and others, Spielvogel suggests that these images fuel unrealistic expectations and drive women to pursue such things as fad diets, and in more extreme cases, plastic surgery, in their efforts to achieve an ideal that is unhealthy and realistically unobtainable. Although undoubtedly true for some Japanese women, Spielvogel's depiction struck me as overly monolithic. In our anthropological efforts to understand the relationship between images and human lives, some of the most critical information, which is often the most difficult to collect, are the details of the reception of and engagement with those images. There are only a handful of informants featured in Spielvogel's "beauty" chapter, and those we hear from unanimously support her arguments about the psychologically unhealthy and alienating effects of dominant notions of feminine beauty. There are undoubtedly women who contest or differently negotiate dominant ideals. Similarly, there must be women who do not envision the fitness club as a space to pursue a dream of perfect beauty and waif-like thinness. There are some of the voices missing from Spielvogel's account—voices that disrupt assumptions about the monolithic and dominating power of media and other ideological forces.

Similarly, I wanted to hear from more informants when reading Spielvogel's intriguing accounts of rebellious aerobics instructors, those who express their frustrations by smoking and drinking, and women who deploy dieting and food refusal to assert their independence and resist normative gender roles. Her arguments would have been even stronger and more richly textured if her intricate theoretical analyses had been accompanied by more practical accounts from actual women. Spielvogel notes that she distributed hundreds of surveys and we can assume that she culled a large amount of information in the countless hours she spent working as an aerobics instructor and employee manning the weight rooms, pool areas, and front desks at the two clubs. However, more attention on Spielvogel's part to the diversity of fitness club members and employees **[End Page 174]** with whom she interacted and their different explanations and justifications for working out, or not, would have been welcome.

Lastly, I was surprised that Spielvogel did not include and consider any statistical data regarding rates of obesity, anorexia nervosa, bulimia, and so on in Japan and America. While it is true that thinness is idealized in Japan, the country's population does not suffer from obesity at anywhere close to the alarming rate found in the U.S. It is true, as Spielvogel notes, that "thinness is culturally defined," and "what may appear thin to a Westerner can seem unbearably heavy to a Japanese woman" (p.173). However, in my experiences with female athletes as well as non-athletic women in Japan, I have not found the fear of fatness, or the compulsion to diet, to be anywhere close to the intensity found in the U.S. While women in both countries may desire to be "thin," it would have been interesting to see Spielvogel engage further with fears of fatness, and consider how dramatically different real rates of obesity, and media discourses about obesity, may factor in to differences in the popularity of fitness clubs in Japan and the U.S.

In the end, Spielvogel's book offers information on a range of topics including Japanese attitudes toward tanning, culturally-specific meanings attached to dieting and food refusal, and contemporary trends in the beauty industry that have received relatively little scholarly treatment (by Anglophone scholars) up until now. She persuasively defends her claim that fitness clubs and the introduction of aerobics to Japan in the last two decades are topics worthy of anthropological study and analysis. As someone who shares Spielvogel's interest in topics of sports and exercise in Japan, I must admit that I was somewhat surprised that she did not engage with the abundant Japanese-language literature on the history of calisthenics and gymnastics practices that were imported by Japan from Europe beginning in the final decades of the 19th century. Many of the narratives that make up the larger story of the introduction of modern gymnastics and physical education to Japan seem strikingly salient to Spielvogel's contemporary study. They include competing ideas about proper health and desired bodies, and lively debates about both cultural uniqueness and the physical and mental qualities inculcated through exercise and training. Most prominent, when drawing connections with Spielvogel's work, is the fact that around the turn of the last century physical educators and students were negotiating practices and regimes that were variously identified as Japanese, Asian, Western, American, European, and so on. I am left wondering if Spielvogel's research would have taken the same course, or her theory the same form, if she had started unpacking her puzzle with this historical precedent. **[End Page 175]** This question, of course, is a rhetorical one on my part and intended to stimulate further research. Spielvogel does provide instructive insights into the ever-shifting landscape of leisure and work in Japan, and illuminates useful ways to think about intersections between consumption, ideologies of health and beauty, gender, and identity in that country. Her work will be a useful resource for scholars like myself who are wrestling with similar questions of sporting culture and identity in contemporary Japan. *Working Out in Japan* will be of interest to Japan scholars and other social scientists interested in the ways that spaces of sport, exercise, and leisure are inextricably linked, and fundamentally inform and are informed by the larger cultural worlds in which they exist.

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