



TOKYO — There was a time when slimness was the absolute prerequisite for urban Japanese women, when designers like Shinichiro Arakawa and Yohji Yamamoto professed a flat refusal to make clothes for women who weren't fragile and thin, whose chests and hips were barely discernable through the fabric.

That aesthetic went out when the health and exercise boom came in about seven years ago - the new Japanese woman, according to the fashion critic Ikuko Hirayama, is: "strong, robust, bursting with energy. She takes care of her body but is not obsessed with being thin. She's proud of her biceps and also proud of her sexuality." Accordingly, the most popular relaxation sport for single working women nowadays is "boxercising," or the combination of boxing moves plus aerobics, which is said to increase adrenaline flow by 80 percent and is an ideal way to blow off aggression and stress.

In stark contrast, it's the men who want to be slender, vulnerable and protected. Young males between the ages of 18 and 30 make up the slimmest segment of the population and the ideal fashion weight as decreed by the apparel industry is 57 kilograms, or about 125 pounds, for a height of 175 centimeters, or 5 feet 8 inches. Many men try to adhere to that figure and some claim they want to be even skinnier.

Twenty-five-year-old Junichi Shirakawa, who works at the denim boutique 45 RPM, said that his goal is to get his weight down from 57 to 55 kilograms, although his height is 182 centimeters. "Being really skinny is essential, not just for fashion and work purposes but also because girls seem to go for thin guys," he said.

Both Shirakawa and his girlfriend like the fact that she weighs more than he does, and is the leader of the couple. "She's a lot stronger than I am, can lift heavy things and go drinking until dawn. I admire that about her, and feel protected when I'm around her," he said. Older than he by five years, it was Shirakawa's girlfriend who made the approach, started the dating process and decided what course their relationship would take.

"Frankly, I think women should be in the driver's seat. Society and relationships work better that way," he said. Shirakawa likes to wear his girlfriend's clothes and often shows up for work wearing her blouse and jeans, to the general approval of his co-workers.

Hirayama said: "For young men, wearing women's clothes has almost become a status symbol - a confirmation of being slim and pretty and, therefore, desirable. Young women, on the other

hand, are less interested now in looking beautiful for the benefit of young men. They dress up for themselves, for their own satisfaction."

This seeming reversal of traditional gender roles has spawned such interesting fashion items as the "unsexy miniskirt," a term coined by the TV commentator Ryuichi Fujita. All the rage this autumn is the short, short skirt combined with boots or ballet shoes - the salient feature of this look is that it shows a lot but says nothing and is consequently "apolitical and not sexy at all," according to Fujita. Indeed, it seems that Japanese women have reclaimed sexuality as their very own and now dress to enhance their self-esteem rather than to please the male gaze, which was what a big part of street fashion had been about. Now that the male gaze is focused primarily on the men themselves, the equation of short skirts and wolf whistles just doesn't work anymore.

As Hirayama said, "The term *kawaii* [cute] used to be something that described women, or female attributes. Now women are more likely to use that to talk about men and what they're wearing. As a result, more young men aspire to be cute."

Indeed, young men claim to want to be pursued and then nurtured - they often hate to make the first move and often shy away from conflict. "I never fight with my girlfriend because I know I'll lose," is how Shirakawa put it. "It's just a lot more comfortable for me if I go along with everything she says."

That mind-set is reflected in men's fashion and fashion design. The trend now is for men to look like they want to be fed and/or devoured by women. One of the pioneering brands for that is Lad Musician, headed by the designer Yuichi Kuroda. Lad Musician burst onto the Tokyo fashion scene in 1995 in a glam-rock/low-slung-guitar kind of way, espousing an emaciated, tragic sexiness enhanced by clinging silhouetted tops and slim, revealing pants with no pockets and very little breathing space. Lad Musician aesthetics has grown thanks to the general weight loss among young men, and the silhouettes (especially for long-sleeved T-shirts, polo shirts and sweaters) are tighter than ever before. Young men will combine these tops with baggy jeans that are suspended 8 centimeters below the navel on terrifically flat stomachs, subconsciously channeling, perhaps, the Kate Moss look of the late 1990s. Kuroda's designs are famed for being extremely selective, shunning those who weigh more than 63 kilograms or are overly muscular.

Other brands are following suit, so that men's sizes are steadily diminishing while women's clothing sizes are getting distinctly roomier. To Nigo, who directs A Bathing Ape, Tokyo's most successful and visible street brand, this makes sense: men's designer clothes should target the thin and seemingly unfit. "Designer clothes look best on men whose bodies don't do the talking, that are silent, slim, practically invisible," said Nigo, a waif-like figure with slender,

girlish wrists. "Because the clothes should do all the talking, right?

"That's why men pay money for clothes, so they won't have to say anything. Otherwise, why bother?"