

## Media Report: Japan's Battle of the Weekly Magazines

By Benjamin Dorman

A battle royale is shaping up between two of Japan's major weekly magazines ("shukanshi"). Weekly magazines generally trade in scandal and sensationalism, with the odd bit of sleaze thrown in for good measure. The main market is middle-aged men who, according to the major daily *Asahi Shimbun* (14 August 2003), indulge in "swirling flights of fantasy" by purchasing the weeklies.

The battle lines are drawn between *Shōkan Post* and *Shōkan Gendai*, owned by the major publishing companies Shōgakukan and Kōdansha respectively. These magazines are leaders in a market that has been struggling with sales because of a weakened economy and more online media content available.

What sets these two magazines apart from their closest rivals in the weekly magazine genre is their regular inclusion of foldout posters of "hea nōdo" (naked women whose pubic hair is on full display—before the late 1980s pubic hair was air-brushed out). Like the panting breath of their aging readers, the contest between the magazines is steadily heating up.

In May 2003, after receiving figures from Japan's Audit Bureau of Circulations on circulation results for the second half of 2002, both claimed top spot. *Shōkan Post*, which had until then claimed top position, was only just edged out by its rival. Nevertheless, it brashly boasted on its cover, "after ten years, we're still at the top," in response to *Shōkan Gendai*'s cry, "we've reached the number one position in terms of circulations for weekly magazines." In the first half of this year, out of a total of 25 issues *Shōkan Gendai* achieved top circulation figures for 13 issues as opposed to the *Shōkan Post*, which gained the points for 12 issues. These close rivals are trying to pull out all stops to be number one, even if the circulation facts don't quite match the claims.

The two main categories for weekly magazines are serious “hard” journalism and “entertainment” pages, which include the foldout posters. Both *Shōkan Post* and *Shōkan Gendai* clearly have a preference for the latter category. In the race for top spot, they have been matching each other blow for blow. *Shōkan Post* features a young pop idol one week, *Shōkan Gendai* hits back with a popular “tarento” (someone who, allegedly, has “talent”) the next. When *Post* first ran a feature on adult websites in its 3 May edition, its sales boosted substantially. Not to be outdone, *Shōkan Gendai* followed with a similar story. In a new intellectual twist, a recent poster in *Shōkan Gendai* featured “A 4<sup>th</sup> year Law Student from Tokyo University” in her morning suit; *Post* responded with “A 2002 Waseda University Seminar Student.” While the permutations seem endless, there are a few stumbling blocks.

The *Asahi Shimbun* reports that some representatives within the parent companies feel, frankly, embarrassed with the direction the magazines are taking. Attempting to boost circulation with titillating pictures has its downsides. Production costs are hefty, and it is difficult to entice major companies to advertise in the magazines that appear to simply be peddling sleaze with little other content. “Although printing the posters is effective for increasing circulation,” complained one representative of Shōgakukan, “we can’t seem to find any other good ideas to resolve this dilemma.”

In addition, some feel that these magazines have been somewhat negligent in other areas. One writer, Takeshi Kamewada, stated that even though they are run by major publishing houses, compared to other weekly magazines, such as *Shōkan Bunshun* and *Shōkan Shinchō* (neither of which print nude photos), *Shōkan Gendai* and *Shōkan Post* simply have not had a scoop on any big stories recently. *Shōkan Bunshun*, for example, recently scored a big hit with its coverage of the white-clad religious group Pana Wave (see my article on Pana Wave in this current issue) and its connections to a very popular seal. In other words, Kamewada felt, the reporting standards of the major players are dropping.

*Shōkan Post*'s chief editor, Takaaki Ebihara, agrees that the magazine needs to pick up its game. In terms of "hard news," *Shōkan Bunshun* and *Shōkan Shinchō* simply beat *Shōkan Post* and *Shōkan Gendai*, who are concentrating on posters to grab readers' attentions. And a commentator from the rival Kōdansha company also admits that they are trying to think about both the posters and the more serious articles. Despite this recognition that they have to provide both news and "entertainment," both *Shōkan Gendai* and *Shōkan Post* have actively escalated their policies of publishing naked women over the last several years.

For the middle-aged male consumers the ideal format for weekly magazines seems to be as follows: nude foldout posters, articles containing gossip about female television announcers, comics showing businessmen with a bevy of their female office subordinates submitting to their every desire, and the odd article on the North Korean situation or a hard-hitting exposé of the latest social or political issue. In order to cater to the fantasies *and* attract advertising from major clients for whom image is a priority, *Shōkan Gendai* and *Shōkan Post* need to show a lot more than naked skin.