An increasing number of middle class women in the paid workforce, known as ‘professional working women,’ was a striking new social phenomenon in Japan during the decades after the First World War. Among the many new occupations that opened up for educated middle class women, the department store sales clerk or ‘shopgirl’ (shoppu gâru) proved to be one of the most attractive to girls’ higher school graduates. This paper will examine the reasons for the popularity of department store employment, which will suggest the social significance of young middle class women moving from country to city (especially ‘up’ to the capital Tokyo) and ‘out’ of the home into the workplace. Expectations about department store work also involved social and personal mobility as the women prepared to move to the next stage in their lives – marriage.

However, the reality of department store work was not as glamorous or fulfilling as expected, as evident in commentaries by journalists, social reformers, and government officials. Commentators expressed fascination with the beauty and other allures of the department store shopgirl, but also concerns about the deleterious effect of the work on women’s moral as well as physical health. Such contradictions reveal complex considerations of both class and gender during this period of transition to a modern, industrialized society.

When: Friday, September 24, 2010, 3:00-4:30 pm
Where: Tokioka Room, Moore Hall 318