IJCC, Vol. 13, No. 2, 160 - 168(2010)

The Ironies of Japan Going into Trousers

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(Received April 11, 2010 : Accepted October 31, 2010)

Abstract

This paper examines a particular period in Japanese history, when clothing was systemically changed through government policy. It demonstrates the complex relationships between an Eastern nation and a Western clothing system. It also explores the complexity of roles which clothing plays in society, clothing which brands a nation as masculine, but which resists the discourses of modernity, which were found on native clothing. It demonstrates that native, Japanese clothing has always been developing to meet the needs of its wearers, according to technology, sumptuary laws and prevailing tastes, and therefore that fashion is not any more a product of Europe than it is of the East. It reveals the Japanese fashion system as a complex and multi-dimensional one, about surface design rather than change in shape, but also being about inner and deep surfaces as well as outer surfaces for public presentation, and thus being a carrier for private as well as public discourses. This examination also demonstrates that whilst fashion may be intimately bound up with the forces of society and also politics, it is also a force which resists outside control, and develops because of the signification with which the embodied wearers endow it.

Key words : Japanese clothing, fashion history, trousers.

Ⅰ. Introduction

This paper introduces a particular stage in Japanese fashion history, where East met West, and the sartorial presentations of self were significant not so much as self-expression, but as performances of gendered roles, of nationalism and of modernism, and were greatly influenced by the discourses of the nation state. Some of the outcomes of these sartorial performances are, with hindsight, very ironic, and demonstrate that whilst sartorial behaviour can be controlled to a certain extent, the meanings that people attribute to their clothing, and the way that they express themselves, is far less easily controllable. Whilst the communication of accurate messages through the use of clothing is very debatable (Barnard, 2007), everybody can understand the meanings of the various uniforms of authority figures within their culture. These uniformed sartorial performances would help to shape the national identity of Japan in the 20th century. Native dress would remain useful, not only as clothing, but for expressive purposes, and the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries were marked by the most extraordinary period of mixing and matching of East and West in sartorial presentations of selves.

Ⅱ. Development in the Meiji Period

The Meiji period in Japan, 1868-1911, corresponds to the Victorian period in England. The newly

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formed government, forced to open its doors to the outside world, wanted to lead Japan into becoming a competitive and industrialised nation, which could compete with other, in particular Western, industrialised nations. The groundwork for this had been laid down in the Edo period, 350 years of relative peace and isolation. The extent of the isolation is disputed by Screech amongst others (Screech, 2002). This peaceful period enabled Japan to concentrate on agricultural, economic and cultural development, there were good roads, and literacy levels were high (Morris Suzuki, 1994). In the Meiji period, in order to be taken seriously by other nations, Japan had not only to be, but to appear to the West as a civilized nation, and this meant going into trousers. Dalby (1993) describes the process, which started from the Emperor, followed by the forces, and then the instruments of the law and state all going into trousers. The Emperor was paraded around Japan in a general's uniform, and was expected to entertain foreign guests in this attire. In the text, *The Making of Modern Japan*, in the photographs of the key figures in the Meiji government, and the men sent on diplomatic and fact finding missions to the West, all but one, appear in suits (Jansen, 2000). Japan was gendering itself a masculine state, and the Emperor publicly declared the kimono effeminate, in the Chinese style (Dalby, 1993, p66). This diplomatic manoeuvre, from kimono to tailored clothing was no simple matter, as tailors, and wool for the uniforms, were not readily available. It was ironic on two levels. Firstly because the building of an Eastern nation was not taking place in their own native clothing, but in the attire of the West, and secondly, because it was the most conservative members of the society that were advocating this radical sartorial transformation.

Modernity was not the dominant tendency and it was not performed by traditionally avant-garde sections of the populace: the adoption of suits was a state instituted fashion amongst the political and bureaucratic elite, normally a very sartorially conservative group (Slade, 2009, p42).

There were only a few tailors in Japan, mainly catering to the foreign community in Yokohama and Kobe. All the wool for the suits and uniforms had to be imported from Europe. Of course, suits and uniforms were very expensive, but gradually businessmen followed the example of their superiors and went into suits for work. Those not rich enough to buy a suit could still appear modern by cutting off their top-knot and wearing a bowler hat, or buying a pair of shoes or a scarf. For several generations men led a sartorial double life, remaining in kimono at home, and going into trousers for work.

Women in the new order were not the builders of the nation, but the keepers of the home. It was a traditional and strongly gendered role. Real change in women's lives was not going to be felt until the Taisho period. Ironically women's first expression of any change in their role was a revival of the Kamakura costume that had freed women from the debilitating layers they had worn in the Heian period court. Kamakura was a military regime, and women had been expected to be more active than they had been in the Heian period. The hakama consisted of a pleated and belted pair of baggy trousers. Worn by the samurai, they had also been worn by women in the court of the middle-ages. This re-adoption of an ancient garment leads us to ask what it was that was considered to be progressive about it. As the hakama marked the difference between the completely inactive and housebound court lifestyle and the active one of the Kamakura samurai wife, we can assume that it signified the active and progressive lifestyle to the Meiji period woman. It was worn by the Meiji Empress, Haruko, and her ladies in waiting. So women also also 'went into trousers', which appeared as progressive and enlightened. (Liddell, 1989). Meiji prints by Umezo Kunitoshi, Adachi Ginkou and Utagawa Hiroshige III show the clothing of the day. Whilst the women are in kimono, and sometimes hakama, with black boots, the men are in military uniform, suits of kimono with western accessories such as bowler hats and coats.

<Fig. 1> Print from Handmade Book by Adachi Ginkou Showing the Sartorial Mix of the Meiji Period.

Until the 1920s the kimono and hakama was girls' school uniform. The signifying qualities of the hakama for women remain today and now it is the preferred outfit of the college or university girl at her graduation. The Meiji government built an event hall and ballroom, The Rokumeikan, a venue specifically for entertaining foreign dignitaries, (designed by the British architect, Josiah Condor), and for the performance of Western music and dance. Here Japan's elite experimented with the sartorial forms of the West, and in 1886, the Empress Haruko, appearing in a Western dress, publicly encouraged women to go into Western clothes, using convoluted logic, by saying that western clothes were two-part, blouse and skirt, and thus were the natural descendent of Japan's ancient court dress of kosode and hakama (Dalby, 1993, p81). However, at this time only the elite or politicians' wives turned to Western clothing.

Perhaps western clothing was not popular because the style of western dress in Victorian times was very unnatural with its accentuated bust and hips and the s-shaped line. It was repressive rather than modern, but as the male-dominated Meiji government were adopting the Victorian ideal "ryosai kenbo", good wife, wise mother, as the official role of women in the family, it was not out of keeping with official discourse. "…the imported women's fashions of the 1870s were a profound reaction against modernity and were

<Fig. 2> Contemporary Photograph Showing Girls in Hakama at Their University Graduation.

consequently immoderately ornamental, anatomically perfidious and formally arbitrary." (Slade, 2009, p41). Whilst, for a short time, there was a fascination with the trappings of western clothing, parasols, boots and white blouses which were worn under kimono, apart from those who were politically connected and had to entertain the foreign dignitaries, the Victorian clothing had little to offer the Japanese woman. The novelty of the adoption of Western dress soon wore off, and with the Sino-Japanese war looming ahead followed by war with Russia, discourses of nationalism returned, and with it, the kimono for almost all women. Woman, shut out of the business of building the nation state, and whose role was defined as being a homemaker, had little compulsion to change her clothes and remained in kimono for much longer than did her male counterpart. Whilst the suit could be seen as progressive for the male, the Western clothing available to the female, whilst being in keeping with the national discourse, could not be seen as progressive.

"The process by which kimono and the women who put it on have become symbols of tradition in modern Japan has been deliberate. There was first direct state involvement in the crucial Meiji period, and then the role of the kimono experts and entrepreneurs in producing this model of traditional femininity, which is clearly distinct from the model of Western rationality imposed on Japanese men" (Goldstein-Gidoni, 1999, p366).

Ⅲ. Development in the Taisho Period

Whilst the Meiji period had been marked by a mixing of the elements of East and West, the sartorial messages became clarified in the Taisho period. There was a crystalisation of "wa", Japanese and "yo", Western. The Western became associated with modernism, and the Japanese with tradition. This was the time when many of the reforms of the Meiji period, and the affects of modernisation really began to be felt in people's daily lives. The widespread use of radio and magazines meant that women had more information than had previously been available to them, and the opening up of department stores was also a big change. It was possible for women to go into Tokyo, watch a film or go to a café. The great European art movements, art nouveau and art deco, originally inspired largely by the Japanese prints and art-works shown at the great exhibitions at the end of the nineteenth century in Europe, were beginning to affect Tokyo. In the 1920s, partly because of the influence of Japanese arts on the arts and crafts of the West, the silhouette of Western fashion was straight, and much closer to the kimono line than it had been previously. The kimono sleeve was popular in the West, and kimono-like dresses were designed in reaction to the corset and bustle of the Victorian age. Dalby (1993) observes that while the lines of the clothing in the East and West were more similar than they had ever been, idealogically they were drawing farther apart. Rather than go into western clothing though, most women were content to nativize the influences of these European art movements into their kimono. New chemical dyes and imported were used in the production of kimono, as were the new designs of the art movements.

The kimono of the early 20th century demonstrate the strong influence of art nouveau, with its bright colours and extravagantly twisting flower and plant motifs. Art deco, with its emphasis on the surface and pattern, was a movement particularly suited to the kimono, where the fashion variation is in the surface decoration and not in the silhouette (Van Assche, 2005). Modern looking stripes, diagonals and polka dots in stunningly bright colours were a radical and exciting addition to the more usual and traditional plant designs seen on kimono. However, there was no quick change for women from kimono to Western clothing and Kon Wajiro, who documented the life of everyday people found that, even in 1929, in a survey of people walking in Ginza, the majority of women were still wearing kimono (Van Assche, 2005).

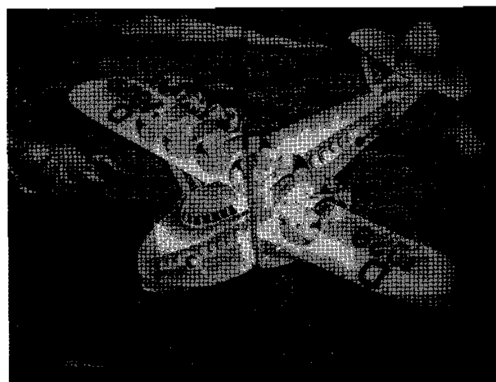
In the popular imagination, the wearing of western clothes was associated with the figure of the "moga", or modern girl. She was descended from the modern woman, and in reality she was more of a media creation than a real woman. This modern working-girl was seen as a progressive, promiscuous, playful consumer, and she was potentially politically powerful. She was in direct contrast to the role of the "ryosai kenbo" good wife and wise mother, in the Victorian image, which the Meiji government had endorsed as the ideal model for womanhood. The moga cut her hair short and could work in an office or a café. As she had her own money, and was by definition urban, she was supposed to be a consumer. She was also seen as being selfish and a less moral woman than her kimonoed sisters. Tanizaki Junichiro's novel, *Naomi*, is about a man's love for such a moga, and her increasingly immoral behaviour is associated with her love of Western clothes and the trappings of Western society. Women, however, were finally being offered new roles and expressions of be-

ing feminine at this time, and the changes brought by modernity affected their lives in many ways. Rather than offering something Western, new forms of clothing were sold as being essentially modern. Part of the modern experience was consumption. The development of department stores around Nihonbashi bridge and the Ginza area, such as Mitsukoshi and Shirokiya, enabled women to see Western clothing and accessories. They originally catered to the very wealthy, but had a democratizing effect as anyone could enter the shops and see the goods. The great Kanto earthquake of 1923 flattened much of Tokyo, and Ginza and the downtown area of Tokyo was rebuilt in concrete.

Sartorial modernism in Japan could be realised in different ways. In the public and male space, it meant going into trousers. This, however, was not the only option. There were other ways in which modernity could be expressed. In order to understand these manifestations, it is important to remember the multiple aspects of clothing.

Clothing is part of material culture and has a double face. It is at one and the same time public and private, material and symbolic, always caught between the lived experience and providing an incredible tool with which to study culture and history (Paulicelli & Clark, 2009, p3).

The Japanese clothing of 1930s and 40s is particularly fascinating in pattern and motifs. These garments do not just reflect the art movements of the West, but they reveal and produce in startlingly detailed images, the preoccupation with modernity and the desired new lifestyle of the population at this time. They are particularly interesting because they are garments that place them as part of a discourse that could only have been produced in this location at this time. Because of this, though many of them are inferior quality, cheap and mass-produced fabrics, they are very important for their embodiment of the history of the time. Part of change that modernization brought about was transportation and speed and therefore images of vehicles are very common. Planes, cars, motorbikes and trains are regularly seen in the male garments of the time.



<Fig. 3> A Men's Haori (Jacket) Lining, Showing a Realistic Portrayal of an Aeroplane.

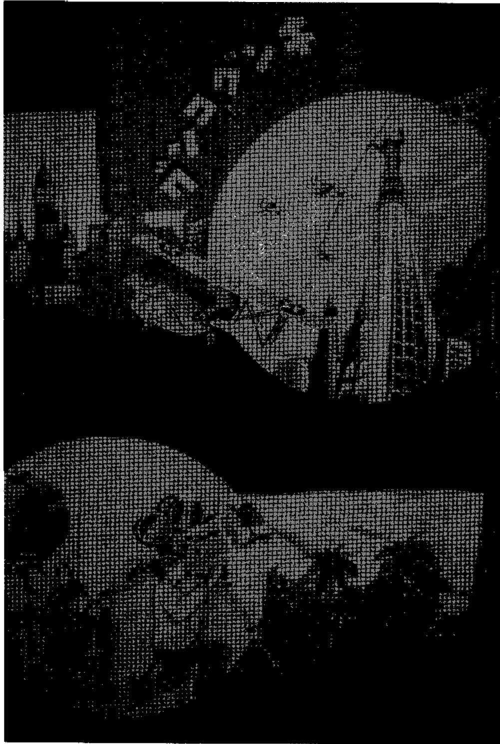
Cityscapes appeared in addition to natural images, particularly that of New York, which was of great fascination to the Japanese, and was seen through films. Images connected with film were also popular also lenses and apparatus for seeing, such as binoculars and telescopes, which have long been an interest of the Japanese (Screech, 2002).

The desire for leisure and sports is also depicted in these private images. Horse racing had been introduced in the Meiji period, and baseball was also a popular sport. Drinking of sake is also depicted on some garments.

Not only are there images of the desired modern lifestyle, but as the Pacific War came closer, the discourses on Japanese clothing were about war, and about building a patriotic spirit. The market was full of propaganda textiles as the whole nation as a collective rose to try and defeat the foreign foe. The modernist images and desire for the American cityscape and Hollywood are suppressed by the mobilization of the whole country for the war effort.

A large proportion of these intensely modern garments are, surprisingly, hidden on the "nagajuuban", underwear or linings of men's "haori" kimono jackets. Whilst the popular assumption about Japan is that presentation of self is of utmost importance, why would these garments have the designs hidden on the inside?

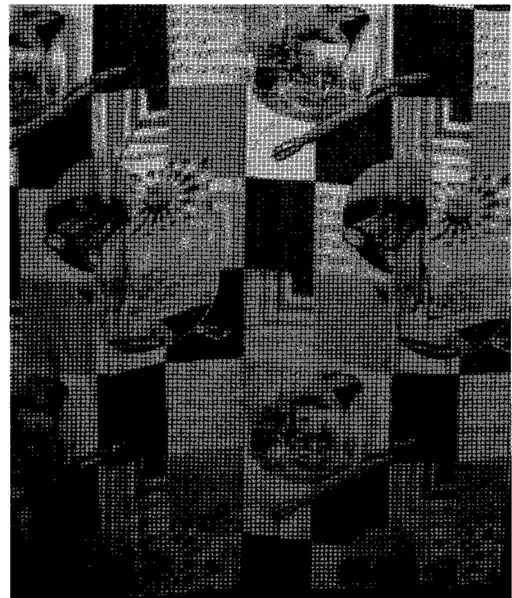
Going into trousers was a part of the public



<Fig. 4> Sleeve of Men's Juuban (Underwear), Showing the Making of the Film, King Kong. Notice the Reversal of the Name of the Company, RKO, to Fit with Traditional Japanese Writing. We can also see the New York Skyline, Aeroplanes and the Cameras involved in the Production of the Film.

<Fig. 5> Haori Lining Showing a Baseball Game. The English Words, Whilst being written in the Roman Alphabet, have been nativized to the Japanese Sound System. Ball is Boru and Strike is Sutoraiku.

<Fig. 6> Nagajuuban Showing a Device for Transmitting Messages, on a Background of Diagonal Lines Resembling Radio Waves.



<Fig. 7> A Wartime Textile. Nagajuuban, Showing a Warship, Bomb, Binoculars, the National Flag and a Patriotic Song.

face of clothing and also created a national identity. We must now consider the private aspects. But in order to understand this phenomenon better, we can turn to Rosenberger's (1995) collection of texts on the Japanese self, which is always a multiple self, seen in relationships and as a part of society. This is even expressed in the Japanese word for self, *jibun*, literally self

part, implying that there are other parts. The traditional Western concept of a bounded self, an essence with no relation to culture or society, nature or other beings would be an anathema to Japanese. This western notion of self has also been challenged in "About Face" (Kondo, 1997 p.37). In Rosenberger's own study, *Tree in Summer, Tree in Winter*, she describes how power must be bound in societies. The male, as the most powerful force, going outward, like a tree in summer, must be tightly bound in public and formal situations. "While this tight binding affects both men and women, men seem to be most tightly bound into continual hierarchy, from household to school to workplace" (Rosenberger, 1995, p74). Rosenberger shows that this is manifested in language and the indulgence of higher status people but is also expressed in sartorial forms. "People are visibly bound in such formal contexts with tightly wrapped kimono, or well-buttoned Western wear-the higher the status, the tighter the wrap…. "(Rosenberger, 1995, p74). She goes on to describe what happens in an informal, interior, or *uchi*, situation.

In contrast, in inner contexts (*uchi*) of spontaneity and intimacy, people are loosely bound much like the tree in winter…..

In relaxed evenings at home or in parties after work, the bounds of hierarchy and status gradually decrease. People loosen almost everything: their *ki* energies, their clothes, and their seating arrangements. Language becomes more informal and childlike with shorter endings, …. (Rosenberger, 1995, p74)

It is only in such private situations that men are permitted to be unbound in any way, and thus it is that men's wear, since the Edo period, has had almost no figurative decoration on it at all. Just as in the West, men's clothing has come to be about seriousness and has given up the right to be decorative. However, the Japanese man has not given it up as fully as his Western counterpart. On this inner wear can be found the most interesting, detailed and expressive images in the kimono world. It is only in the unbound world where these can safely be shown. They are not a public self but a private self, reserved only for the intimate acquaintance or even for the wearer alone. The designs were called omoshiroi gara, which means interesting or entertaining designs. Discourses of war or propaganda textiles were common from the Meiji period through to the end of the 2nd world war. The expression of one's love for country for a man, was not a waving flag, but was hidden in the folds of one's kimono near to the heart, and revealed only at intimate moments. Kashiwagi in Atkins writes:

Individual men displaying their haori linings with war-promoting designs can be seen as showing off or presenting their own personal messages in front of their intimate acquaintances. The *zashiki-gei* or parlor performance, is a private performance (*gei*) that takes place before a select group of friends in a small room, even a very small room, such as the four-and-a-half mat room (270×270cm or 8.8 feet square), that is standard for the tea ceremony (Atkins, 2005, p178).

These meetings were almost certainly political or among business associates and geisha were present to serve and to entertain the men. To take off clothing or reveal underwear, of course, gives messages about sexual relations or intimacy between the people present, so these messages were intended for a very limited and select audience. The wartime textiles produced in the 30s and 40s as under garments provide a fascinating look at the lives, thoughts and preoccupations of the Japanese people at that particular time. Thus, whilst often being of inferior quality cloth, they are a very important as historical records. On the face of it, a man's job or role in life is to work, and the self-presentation of the worker was accomplished through the dark and sombre kimono, and from the Meiji period, the business suit. However, in the private arena, the world inside the kimono, the back, or *ura*, in the kimono or haori lining, or in the underwear could be found a whole world of expressions patriotism and play, of longed for pleasures, entertainments and sexual desires. These garments fulfil a very specific function as a place for the discourse of modernity. Ironically, these discourses

are not found in the western, modern clothing. The discourses of modernity are found on native clothing. The proliferation of these garments indicate that the change into western clothing has never been complete, even for men, and the making of such garments was quite common until the middle of the 20th century.

Ⅳ. Conclusion

Japanese sartorial behaviours in the 19th and early 20th century reveal the complex relationships between an Eastern nation and Western clothing. The ironies in the relationship are many. The building of the Japanese nation had to take place in Western trousers, women adopted ancient trousers as a sign of change, the initial Western clothing adopted by the Japanese woman was the decidedly non-modern corset and bustle of the Victorian period, and the time when kimono and Western dress were closest in shape, they were farthest apart in ideology. The contemporary discourses of the time were not afforded space in the imported Western clothing, and therefore modernity was expressed not on the new clothing but on the traditional, native clothing.

This extraordinary case, whereby the ruling government made the decision to go into western clothing, making the conservative elements of society into the leaders of the new styles, was a political decision that shaped the identity of Japan, aligning it with western nations, in taking on a masculine identity by going into trousers. However, ironically, this clothing history reveals that though the state can control sartorial behaviour through sumptuary laws or other means, the signifying meanings that people give to their clothing are much less easy to control.

Japanese clothing, though considered a traditional clothing system, clearly has been continually changing to meet the needs and to express the hearts of its wearers throughout its history. Developments in technology, laws resulting in changes in taste, topical events, national issues and popular preoccupations of the day constantly affect dress. Fashionable change is therefore not confined to the clothing of European nations, and from these images it is possible to deduce that fashionable change need not be only about silhouette or shape, but can also be concerned with design, colour, pattern, and their position, too.

Another implication of the hidden messages in kimono, is that fashion is about more than just the surface. The kimono system is overt, and can be learnt from a wide variety of sources, but the inside is not considered any less important than the outer surface, even though it will not be seen by the general public. The Japanese are typically assumed to take much pride in the surface presentation, appearance and the form of things, but the kimono has depth and the interior is an important, though private aspect. The fashion system appears as multi-layered, capable of expressing private messages to selected audiences in realms not considered public.

There is nothing random about the system. Rosenberger's theory that those who are more tightly bound socially are given more license in private, helps us to understand this, for it is on the underwear and innerwear of the male, who is highly bound by the social system, where we find the most interesting and detailed messages. Neither are the messages themselves random, but reflect both public discourses from Japanese society, valourization of a noble past, war or technology, as well as private worlds of desire, entertainment and pleasure.

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