WAFUKU: AN EXPLORATION OF HISTORIC JAPANESE APPAREL AND 
THE FUTURE OF THE KIMONO FORM

By

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Thesis Summary

This thesis is an exploration of historical Japanese dress for women, especially focusing on the kimono. It will delve into the comparisons between Western and Japanese dress (respectively yōfuku and wafuku), especially focusing on form and silhouette. It will conclude with an examination of the current status of the kimono, what led to its demise, but also what recent revitalization efforts have been made in Japan. The companion creative portion is a collection of modern clothing that is inspired by elements of these historic garments, showing that these design elements are timeless. I desire for this project to be a celebration of Japan’s past and present, while captivating the unique beauty of the culture.
Introduction

Despite living in a time of increasing globalization, countries still preserve a national dress to maintain an individual identity, even if it is only worn for special occasions (Condra, 2013, p. ix). Universally known is Japan’s Kimono. Commonly seen at Japanese weddings, coming-of-age ceremonies, and funerals, the kimono resides in tansu (kimono dressers) otherwise. However, this was not always the case. The evolution of a garment that is worn everyday by both men and women, to an item so specialized to be kept to notable occasions is a remarkable shift. The preservation of the kimono as a quintessentially Japanese item that requires understanding and expertise to wear in the face of the rapidly modernizing country is truly a clash between old and new.

Anthropologically, clothing can communicate an abundance of information about a culture. Turner said that clothing is “literally on the boundary between the internal self and the outside social world” (as cited in Valk, 2017, p. 20). Clothing tends to reflect what is happening historically, which holds true for Japanese clothing. I was intrigued to discover the amount of scholarly research about clothing and, specifically, the kimono. Works by Liza Dalby, a woman who spent a year in Japan training as a Geisha and is a leading scholar in this space, were a tremendous resource.

Traditional Dress in Japan

In the Meiji period, from 1868 to 1912 (Dalby, 1993, p. 10; Asian Art Museum, 1997, p. 148), new varieties of wafuku (literally “Japanese clothing”) were developed to fit new social occasions for women, becoming more specialized by level of formality (Dalby, 1993, 96). The
Kimono in its modern form is an over-stylized version of the Meiji period garment that has become a symbol of Japanese-ness (Assmann, 2008, p. 371).

A simplified summary of the structure of the kimono is as follows. Traditionally, kimonos are made from one piece of silk fabric. There are no sizes for kimono, so for women, the fabric is a standard 14 inches wide and 12 ½ yards long. This fabric is purchased on a roll, called a tanmono. None of this material is wasted in the construction of the garment. Traditionally, kimonos were taken apart and resewn together for every washing (Dalby, 1993, 70). The main parts of the kimono are the robe itself, the han eri (undercollar), eri (collar), obi (wide decorative belt), obiage (obi scarf tucked in the top of the obi), obijime (obi tie belt), ohashori (extra length tucked into a fold), tabi (socks), and geta or zōri (shoes). Additionally items added are the haori (jacket) or hakama (pants).

![Figure 1: Parts of a kimono (Dalby, 1993, p. 166)](image)

There are many components of a kimono and the process of getting dressed is truly an art only mastered by few. The complicated system of ties and knots are required to keep it fastened
and in place. There are schools for dressing and the education is called *kitsuke*, where participants are taught about the kimono and manners that go along with wearing it. Nowadays, kimonos are worn by women for ceremonial occasions, like the coming-of-age ceremony (at age twenty), weddings, and funerals (Goldstein-Gidoni, 1999, p. 351). Kimonos are separated into two categories: *haregi* and *fudangi*.

![Figure 2: Hierarchy of Dress Choice (Dalby, 1993, p. 171)](image)

The category of *haregi* is comprised of ceremonial and formal kimonos. *Fudangi* is casual. The categories are differentiated by the type of fiber, patterns and crests, color, and footwear, among other details (Dalby, 1993, p. 172-174). Apart from kimonos is the category of other *wafuku* items called *noragi*. This clothing was worn for work and by peasants of rural Japan.

Types of *haregi* kimono are differentiated by length of sleeve, decoration, number of crests, color, material, and placement of the *obijime* or tie of the obi. One of the most well-known is the *furisode*, literally translating to “swinging sleeves” (Goldstein-Gidoni, 1999, p. 356) which is worn by unmarried girls attending their coming-of-age ceremony. This kimono has long flowing sleeves that extend to the hem of the kimono. This illustration by Liza Dalby
indicates how apparent one’s age can be when one is wearing a kimono properly. Note that the adult male’s sleeve is the shortest, leaving them the most unencumbered. All un-married females, no matter the formality of the occasion, have very long sleeves comparatively.

Figure 3: Sleeve Length (Dalby, 1993, p. 196)

Social rank is one of the factors that can be identified when looking at a kimono. Level of formality and different occasions beg for completely different ensembles and elements. “Delineation of rank was probably the most important social function of clothing in premodern Japan. Ironically, the modern kimono has almost completely lost the ability to express distinctions of rank…kimono has come to express a unified Japanese-ness rather than social divisions” (Dalby, 1993, p. 8). When the markers of class began to fade in society, the clothing mirrored this as well, by reducing the number of crests, for example. Societal change and evolution is more noticeable when using concrete evidence, like clothing, rather than observing actions by people, which are harder to study in the future by researchers.
Mode Shift

The term *wafuku* (和服) was only introduced as a counterpart to the word *yōfuku* (洋服), a new word needed to describe the clothing from the Western world. These were both coined in the Meiji Era, which spans from 1868 to 1912 (Dalby, 1993, p. 10; Asian Art Museum, 1997, p. 148). This harsh line linguistically mirrored the new sharp line between “ethnic” clothing and the new, shiny Western garb. In the late Meiji era, men wore *yōfuku* for their day-to-day business while women remained in their kimonos. Perhaps businessmen felt they needed to dress in this new fashion in order to keep up with the rapidly advancing Western world.

The kimono had its last days as a regular everyday garment in the years leading up to WWI, which lead to a demographic shift to a growing middle class. The Great Kantō earthquake of 1923 had not only a profound physical effect on the country, but a major cultural impact as well. The kimono was criticized for having impractical long sleeves and hems that caused people harm when trying to escape (Valk, 2017, p. 5). The catastrophe required women to rebuild their lives, and with it, their wardrobes. The shift to *yōfuku* was logical, as the Western clothing was viewed as more practical and less expensive (Dalby, 1993, p. 125).

When examining what the trends for clothing were in the 1920s in the Western world, the overall silhouette was streamlined and resembled the overall straight shape of the kimono, without emphasis on the curves of the body, so it is no surprise that Japanese women found the transition into *yōfuku* more natural (Dalby, 1993, p. 128).

Women and Beauty
Form

Contrary to typical Western silhouettes, which emphasize the curves of a woman’s body, the optimal appearance of a woman wearing a kimono is a straight cylindrical tube. There are correctional pads added to achieve this look. The pads are added to equalize the smallest part of the body to the fullest. These are called hosei, meaning “correction” (Goldstein-Gidon, 1999, p. 361). This is greatly different from the usual Western beauty ideal to show off the thinness of the waist.

Western silhouettes can drastically change from decade to decade to fit what the ideal “beauty” form is for a woman’s body. In the 20th century, we witnessed the S-curve corset of the turn of the century, the hourglass of the 50s, the upside pyramid of the 80s, among others (Dalby, 1993, p. 18). However, this variety of shapes is not seen in Japan’s history. The form of the kimono has remained relatively unchanged. Parts of the kimono have been altered, elaborated, and changed, but the overall look is the same (Dalby, 1993, p. 18). The cut and shape of the robe is the same for all wearers and then elements were added on, revealing information about age, class, season, occasion, and personal taste (Dalby, 1993, p. 12-13). While the direction of fastening for Western clothes is dictated by gender, the sides of the kimono are always crossed right side over left for everyone, and this is only reversed when laying someone to rest (Dalby, 1993, p. 170).

Valk says that “the kimono is, paradoxically, both rigid and fluid in terms of what it is as a material item…its fluidity in terms of what it can express through its patterns combines…with the uncompromising, unchanging nature of its shape”(Valk, 2017, p. 21-22). This paradox is unlike anything in Western wear. The form remains stagnant while creativity is infinite for color and pattern.
**Feminism**

With such constraints of the body comes the argument that the kimono is innately non-feminist. The body is tightly confined to a swath of material that makes motion difficult. Vocabulary used during the dressing process are words meaning “holding out” and “endurance” (respectively, *gambaru* and *gamman*). In the Japanese culture, a woman’s strength is seen as part of her femininity.

An empowering move for 1887, the Meiji empress stated to her female subjects that “...[Western wear] allows for freedom of movement. It is thus entirely appropriate that we adopt Western-style tailoring” (Dalby, 1993, p. 81-82). In 1985, writer Kondō Tomie was quoted with “the soul of a woman who wears kimono is spiritually in a man’s shadow as she walks behind him, suppressing any trace of her own ego. Since such women are rare these days, it is probably useless to hope to find anyone who truly loves to wear kimono” (as cited in Dalby, 1993, p. 111).

However, Japanese women do find calmness and internal joy when they put on a kimono, which is a feeling that cannot quite be put into words to a Westerner (Goldstein-Gidoni, 1999, p. 354; Hall, 2015, p. 71).

**Transformation**

Norio Yamanaka, an esteemed kimono instructor, explained why the kimono has endured; “after the war many things entered [Japan] from America...because of this, it became necessary to save something Japanese, and thus kimono has gradually become a national costume (*minzoku ishō*)” (as cited in Goldstein-Gidoni, 1999, p. 354). However, in 2006, author
Atsuko Tanaka said that “our standards for lifestyle, morality and beauty have changed immensely since then. It is an impossible task to bring into our age an item of clothing that belongs to an era when women were largely confined to the home” (as cited in Valk, 2017, p. 6). The kimono is different from our typical everyday Western clothing in the fact that it is expensive, requires skill and knowledge to put on, and requires special care after being worn (Valk, 2017, p. 11).

Demise

A large factor in the demise of the kimono has been the lack of passing on of the tradition to offspring. Women who grew up in the 1960s and 70s owned the most kimonos compared to other generations but “they were the ones who truly distanced themselves from [the garment]” (Valk, 2017, p. 12). Their lack of knowledge about the kimono and disinterest in it resulted in few teaching their daughters. Kimono makers today frequently cite the lack of new wearers as the main issue of the declining industry (Hall, 2015, p. 63). They also say that much of the artistry will vanish when the current workers retire or pass away. This ties to the demographic crisis that has been occurring in Japan for about a decade. The population is shrinking much faster than it is growing, thus straining the economy. As said by author Manami Okazaki “the current generation has a huge responsibility on their shoulders to ensure that the world of kimonos lasts for another era” (as cited in Valk, 2017, p. 30).

“The social and cultural mores surrounding an item of material culture like the kimono and the consumption thereof are fundamentally connected to political and economic environments and fluctuations” (Valk, 2017, p. 15). In Japan, the extravagant spending of the 1980s was interrupted by bubble bursting in 1991. As a result, no one thought it was imperative
to continue to purchase exorbitant items like traditional kimono, especially as the item was no longer mandatory for much of life (Valk, 2017, p. 15).

**Resurrection**

The separation women have felt from learning about the kimono as they have grown up has helped to have it have a resurgence in popularity. An entire industry has emerged around teaching Japanese women about the kimono, how to dress, how to walk, how to fold them, and more. The garment now represents the essence of the Japanese culture (Assmann, 2008, p. 362). Vintage clothing shopping is a very popular practice today in the United States and this holds true for Japan as well, as young people have become more and more aware of the sustainability practices that must be adopted in order to protect the planet. With this comes the desire to find unique clothing pieces that no one else has, especially with the prevailing spread of fast fashion. Kimonos are like snowflakes, in that it is rare to find the exact same design and colors used on two different garments. The combination of wafuku and yōfuku in one look is an interesting and stylish fashion being explored by Japanese women today. Fashion magazines and designers are also experimenting with the combination of traditional and modern looks. Additionally, used kimonos are much cheaper than what a new one costs so experimentation is easier on the budget.
Examination of My Clothing Pieces

I have always been fascinated by clothing design and the timelessness of classic elements of clothing. The Japanese kimono has endured so many centuries that early on in my exploration, I realized there must be something to it that makes it so long lasting. I believe that the simplicity of the design with the use of straight lines rather than complicated curves forms the basis to why Japanese design is so timeless.

I decided to create three distinct looks that could be worn by an everyday woman in today’s society. My process began with research of pictures of historic garments that inspired my sketches. Shopping for fabric helped to pull the color scheme together. I used myself as a model and was influenced by my own tastes in fabrics and color, within the parameters set by history. Japan favors blue and white heavily, so I decided to design the collection in those colors as well. I mainly drafted my own patterns and incorporated a few commercial patterns depending on the piece. For several of the pieces, I created muslins to test the fit and look before using the actual fabric. Making my own designs from conception to completion was exhilarating because it showed me that I could truly create any design that I had in my head.

The first look is a top and skirt, paired with an obi-like belt. The skirt fabric is woven with crisscrossing strands of lighter blue thread, reflecting the sashiko look and technique. The top has the quintessential crossover, right side over left, and is made of a silk charmeuse. The sleeves have the traditional rectangular shape, but not as long as they should be for an unmarried woman my age! The obi is a rich blue-flowered lycra that is sewn in the commonly seen taiko-musubi (drum bow) method.
The second look includes a tunic, top, and pants. The tunic is inspired by peasant wear, or noragi. Those who made their living in rural Japan farming couldn’t afford the extravagant kimono so they made do with what they had. The pants have a print that is a popular sashiko pattern. I decided to play with the technique by going over some of the stars with white sashiko thread to make the design stand out even more. The pants also have a wide silhouette that mirrors the look of the hakama pants.
The third look is a jumpsuit. The top has crossover sides with side cutouts for a modern element. The fabric is part linen, a traditional fiber, woven with viscose for shimmer. The pant part of the jumpsuit is a soft blue material. They are tied together with a hand-woven obi, graciously made by my mother. This demonstrates how the obi can be worn in combination with a modern silhouette such as a jumpsuit.
Being able to go to New York City to purchase the materials for this project was phenomenal because of the range of choices the city’s fashion district afforded me. I made my decisions by fiber type, color, ease of handling, texture, print, and price. I was offered an insight into the world of being a clothing designer and I think it is a fascinating career choice. I hope to continue to make clothing pieces and am eternally grateful to have had this opportunity to work on this project.

Conclusion

Through my research, I can conclude that the kimono is not going anywhere anytime soon. The garment has gone through change as an item worn as a commonplace, everyday garment to a fashionable and unique item that stands out. As globalization is a reality, it is important to save traditions and items that are a window to the past. Japan will forever be a driving force in fashion, among other aspects of society, with the extravagant streets of Tokyo’s Harajuku district, but fashion is cyclical so elements of the kimono are still apparent in many clothing on runways today.

Reflection

I was fortunate to be able to travel to New York City when I did. The dates of my trip were March 11 through 14. This was when the COVID-19 crisis was just beginning to impact the United States in major ways. All of the fabric stores I had wanted to visit were still open but many of the “New York” activities, like going to see a Broadway show, were no longer possible.
Within those few days, the world completely changed for me. It was announced that Spring Break was extended an additional week and that classes would be going online for at least the following two. This was later extended to the entire spring semester. As a senior, this was devastating news, since I had done so many things as an undergraduate without even knowing that they were for the last time. Graduation was postponed and the Thesis Symposium was cancelled. As someone with a creative project, it would not be easy to consult with my director about my garments. It has benefited me since I am at home with my sewing room and more time to work on pieces, but of course, this has come with a lot of sacrifice.

Living through this crisis has proved to be a strange and unusual time in my life that I believe will alter public activity for years to come. It has been essential for me to come to terms with the fact that we are all, the entire globe, going through this together, and others have it much worse than I.
References


Appendix A: Original Sketches and Fabric Swatches
Top: 2-2.5 yds
Bottom: 4-5 yds

Tunic: 5
Top: 3
Bottoms: 3

Fabric samples shown: