

THE POLITICS OF DRESS:
THE KIMONO IN RELATION TO JAPANESE SOCIETY AND WESTERN
FASHION

A THESIS

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By

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READER APPROVAL

This thesis project, written by Yumi Nguyen, meets the required guidelines for partial fulfillment of the Bachelor of the Arts Degree in Asian Studies at Colorado College.

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On my honor, I have not received unauthorized assistance on this thesis. I have fully upheld the HONOR CODE of Colorado College.

YUMI NGUYEN

DEDICATION

お母さん

For helping me achieve my dreams and shaping me into the person I am today.

I love you Mama.

裕美

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PREFACE

Since before I could remember, fashion design and fashion history have both been of great interest to me. For the past few years I have been thinking about the importance of design, not only in terms of outer appearance, but also in terms of what the hidden or apparent meanings might be, in textile designs. As an Art Studio and Asian Studies double major, both of my senior theses focused on fashion. My studies at Colorado College have largely involved Japan because my mother was born and raised in Japan, and my first language was Japanese. Growing up in New Zealand, I have not had many opportunities to extend my knowledge of Japanese history, and I wanted to gain more academic experience in the subject. I am grateful for the opportunity to further my knowledge about the Japanese culture through the Asian Studies department at Colorado College.

INTRODUCTION

My thesis focuses on the traditional Japanese kimono and the influences of this clothing form on Japanese society and fashion, and Western fashion. I address the following questions: How has the kimono affected Japanese society, both in terms of form and meaning? How have kimono design and aesthetics influenced contemporary haute couture designers in Japan? How have these contemporary Japanese designers changed perspectives on Western fashion perspectives? And finally, how has the evolution of the kimono contributed to consumer culture and social capital in Japan today?

The evolution of Japanese fashion and its influence on the international design market deserves far more recognition than it has been given. Although there have been studies written about the influence of contemporary Japanese fashion designers, one finds only minimal academic sources or research on the subject of the influence of the kimono on fashion around the world. Exhibitions organized by leading Japanese institutions, such as the Kyoto Costume Institute, have contributed to an understanding of Japan's impact on western art and design, and I hope this type of growth continues. This topic has significance to society because of the impact of the kimono on both Japanese and Western fashion.

The transformation of the kimono (着物)¹ and the *kosode* (小袖)² throughout the centuries culminated in revolutionary new forms in modern Japanese fashion. The increasing importance of luxury goods has led to new functions for the kimono. From early times, striving for social status was a large part of Japanese society. A well-designed kimono has long been a symbol of prestige in Japan – one reason that Japan evolved into a fashion hub. During the Tokugawa period (1603-1868CE), sumptuary laws included the regulation of clothing dependent on class. In the second half of the Tokugawa period (about 1725-1868CE), the lower status merchant class (the *chōnin*) had grown far wealthier than the higher-ranked samurai. Despite the merchant's abilities to purchase far more luxurious clothing, the law maintained the superiority of the samurai class. As the economic power of the merchants grew, the restrictions against them weakened, and those who could afford to wore luxurious items. The Meiji Restoration (1868-1912) abolished the office of the Shogun (military General and Head of state) and completely remade the new society of Japan. In economic terms, the Meiji Period was very influential, as Japan saw an increase in military and trade contacts with the outside world, which helped foster growth. It was clear that the kimono had much more meaning than just being an article of clothing during the Meiji Period. The kimono was a sign of social class and status, and it played a large part in identifying the role that fashion would play in the present and future of Japan.

¹ A traditional Japanese garment that has a literal meaning of 'thing worn' in Japanese.

² Basic Japanese garment for men and women, worn both as an undergarment and overgarment. The literal meaning is 'small sleeve'.

After World War II (1945 to present), four Japanese designers-- Hanae Mori, Issey Miyake, Rei Kawakubo, and Yohji Yamamoto-- have been highly influential in international fashion by changing the direction of avant-garde designs and showing the world that fashion is not all about perfection. Many of their designs have been influenced by their upbringing during the years that surrounded the war. Their works are characterized by the use of monochromatic tones combined with a rustic and edgy look that portrayed survival and struggle. This international evolution of Japanese haute couture³ has evoked a thirst for the consumption of luxury goods and affordable fashion in modern day Japan. This has elevated Japan to become the second most significant nation in terms of their monetary consumption of luxury goods, behind the United States, with Japan spending between \$15 billion to \$20 billion per year on luxuries.

Consumer fashion has been on an upward rise for the past few decades, with no immediate signs of decline. The aesthetics of Japanese fashion design created a pathway for Westerners to gain a fresh perspective on design and new potentials for the future. The biggest shock in the fashion industry was that the Western notion of fashion aesthetics had never been challenged until Kawakubo and Yamamoto presented their completely different designs and ideas. Kawakubo never works with what is familiar or what is defined as beauty in Western tradition. Their designs continued to influence people around the world, including designers of many different nations.

This thesis will argue that social status and social class in Japanese society have been heavily influenced and displayed through the kimono. The kimono is a symbolic piece of art that has resonated with many centuries of meaning, thought, and creation

³ Exclusive custom-fitted clothing, a type of fashion that is made by hand from start to finish and made from high quality and expensive fabrics.

amongst the people of Japan and has played a crucial role in shaping the modern day society. The kimono has influenced contemporary designers in Japan who have broken fashion conventions and introduced an avant-garde outlook into the haute couture industry. Not only have these designers suggested new dimensions for high fashion, they have influenced and inspired Western designers to find beauty in things that are not always immaculate and perfect.

CHAPTER ONE: VIEW THROUGH THE KIMONO

The Evolution of the Kimono

The kimono has been an evolving article of clothing for centuries. Throughout my research I discuss the kimono's evolution in terms of style, design and meaning. During the Nara Period (710-794CE), Chinese Tang-dynasty taste and style were linked to the origins of Japanese clothing culture because of the cultural and trade contracts between the two countries. It was not until the Heian period (794-1185) that an independent Japanese style began to emerge, less influenced by Chinese style in terms of draping and cut. The complex dress of the Heian elite suggested class identification through form and color combinations.⁴ This long period characterized by a distinct clothing style shifted in the Kamakura period (1185-1333), when military power prevailed in society, leading to more austere aesthetics. Aesthetics from the Kamakura period and the Heian period were reflected in Japanese dress and it was the start of a phenomenon that the Japanese civilization would start to identify itself with, the kimono.

The kimono is an internationally recognized term for traditional Japanese clothing; however, many people are unaware that this 'tradition' is actually a modern

⁴ As Carlo Marco Belfanti says in "Was fashion a European invention?" *Journal of Global History, Vol. 3, Issue. 3*, (London: London School of Economics and Political Science, 2008), 435.

version of the late nineteenth century *kosode* (see Fig.1).⁵ The *kosode* was originally an undergarment for the Japanese elite that became the primary garment for both men and women in Japan, which eventually evolved into the kimono (see Fig.2), literally meaning ‘thing worn’. The kimono is generally viewed as embodying the traditional cultural values of Japan and Japanese feminine beauty and it is presently recognizable as Japan’s native dress around the world.

While the kimono is now universally connected to Japan as their traditional clothing form, the *kosode* established itself as the basic garment for both males and females and has continued to evolve since the sixteenth century. The *kosode* is made from a single piece of cloth, through minimal essential cutting and stitching; the *kosode* is made in this way to ensure there was no wasted material, which made the *kosode* cheap to produce. Stitching, draping, and folding were just one of the few techniques that were used to fit the *kosode* to the wearer.⁶

During the Momoyama period (1573-1615), the Japanese developed sophisticated skills for the dyeing and decoration of fabrics; from this time period forward, Japan became one of the textile leaders of the world. The *kosode* was the primary clothing style used at this time – this expanse of fabric was decorated with refined weaving, dyeing and embroidery. Clientele would range from merchants to the feudal lords (*daimyo*), allowing for a wide variety of finished products. These clothing trends carried through to the

⁵ Elizabeth Kramer, ‘Not So Japan-Easy’: The British Reception of Japanese Dress in the Late Nineteenth Century. (UK: Pasold Research Fund Ltd, 2013), 5.

⁶ Belfanti, “Was fashion a European invention?” 435.

Tokugawa period (1615-1867), or Edo period, a time in which Japan was internally stable under the leadership of the Tokugawa Shogunate.⁷

Throughout the two-and-a-half centuries of the Edo period, the Shogunate⁸ prevented dangers from external forces and progressively minimized contact with the outside world, with the exception of limited trade with the Dutch, Koreans, and Chinese.⁹ The Tokugawa created a new hierarchical social order with the samurai on top, followed by the farmers and craftsmen, and lastly the merchants.¹⁰ From the Edo Period, the Daimyo¹¹ and their families were obligated to reside in the city of Edo (today Tokyo), which made the new capital an important consumer center for many industries. Craft, commercial and financial activity rapidly multiplied in order to satisfy demands for luxury items that started from the need to represent status amongst the Japanese aristocracy, which was a new concept during this time. Meanwhile, the merchants were still confined to the bottom of the Tokugawa social hierarchy and they were unable to make such lavish purchases. Although they could not display their monetary status through their belongings, they were able to find their place in society as a key part of the economic success of the country.¹² The new spirit of consumerism within Japanese society inaugurated competition for every kind of good including furnishings, artwork, and above all, clothing. The evolution behind the consumer society of Japan is a key

⁷ Ibid., 436.

⁸ The Shogunate were the hereditary military governors of Japan from 1192 to 1867.

⁹ Belfanti, "Was fashion a European invention?" 436.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ The Daimyo were subordinate to the Shogun, and were the most powerful feudal lords from the 10th century to the mid 19th century.

¹² Belfanti, "Was fashion a European invention?" 436.

component to my thesis argument that the purchasing of higher-end goods results in the growth of social capital.

This sense of social capital was seen during the Tokugawa period. The Japanese displayed a desire to exhibit status to others to show where they stand in society. Wealth was shown through good taste and belongings, resulting in the *kosode* becoming a key part of consumer culture in Japan. The style of the kimono did not undergo many changes throughout the centuries – other than variations in the width of the sash (*obi*, see Fig.3) and sleeve length. Sleeve length was particularly significant, as married women wore shorter sleeves as a sign of being unavailable. Clothing during this time was a strong indication and signal to others of social and marital status.

Another fundamental concern is the design of the decorative motif on the fabric of a kimono; these motifs were used to evaluate one's aesthetic and social values. The desire for social status pushed people towards novelty, and the need for new clothing and new original designs. Former distinctions of social rank were disregarded as those who could afford what they wanted began to get carried away by their desire for social status. The end of the Edo Period saw the removal of sumptuary laws (laws regulating luxury goods by class) reinforcing the social hierarchy. As the prior sumptuary laws were abolished, people who could afford to do so began to start living their lives in a new, more flexible way.

Sumptuary Laws

Sumptuary laws during the Edo period were linked to the idea that luxury items and expenditures correlated with higher status. There were four reasons offered during this time, to discourage lavish expenditures among townsmen: the merchant would be out of place to dress in fine silks; such spending destroys family finances; extravagant tastes violate sumptuary laws; and exceeding one's station brings divine punishment.¹³ The benefits of these sumptuary laws were to encourage frugality, to preserve the socio-political order, and to satisfy the ethical-religious system. Upstart merchants who wore conspicuous clothes disrupted their superiors and eroded the privileged status of the elite.¹⁴ This arrogance could have a negative effect on the morale and discipline of the samurai class. The government therefore prescribed that consumption should be correlated precisely with status.¹⁵ This need was the principal reason for the sumptuary laws on clothing that was directed at the townsmen.¹⁶

Prior to 1683, the government had hardly spoken to the townsmen about clothing. The authorities started regulating the townsmen because they started wearing clothes above their station, which jeopardized the status of those above them. At the same time, the textile industry was growing, and techniques of weaving such as dyeing, intricate patterning and labor-consuming techniques became more widespread. The objective of

¹³ Donald H. Shively, "Sumptuary Regulation and Status in Early Tokugawa Japan", *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 25. (MA: Harvard-Yenching Institute, 1964-1965), 125.

¹⁴ Shively, "Sumptuary Regulation and Status in Early Tokugawa Japan," 126.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

much of the European as well as Japanese sumptuary legislation was to curb changes in consumption that had the effect of blurring social lines.¹⁷

The Desire for Social Status

The rise of fashion in the early modern period represents a turning point in the history of human societies, in that it introduced a new system of values. Fashion has the potential to condition behavior, both in regard to individual choices and in regard to large societies. Fashion can also be considered a system of rules, where sanctions are applied by expressions of judgment. There are constant changes in styles, and wealth is linked to the power of individuals to follow changes without institutional restrictions such as one might see with school uniforms. The developing world of fashion has contributed to the rise of social capital through consumption and display. This concept resonates with both the kimono and clothing as a broad spectrum.

With the notion that fashion has a powerful presence, Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries emerged increasingly as a fashion culture. Travellers' tales contribute to the belief that the West had the notion of fashion before the East. In the diary of Jean Chardin, who visited Persia in the second half of the seventeenth century, Chardin said, "Dress in the East is not subject to fashion; it is always made in the same way and... the Persians... do not vary the colors, shades, and types of material any more than the style."¹⁸ This was in fact not the case as clothing display between the West and the East appear considerable, even given their differing social hierarchies. However, the economic and social motivations that underlay the wish

¹⁷ Ibid., 136.

¹⁸ Shively, "Sumptuary Regulation and Status in Early Tokugawa Japan," 420.

to acquire and display luxury goods in European societies were no different from the aspirations that fed similar forms of consumption in China and Japan. This observation may be seen in the increasing number of haute couture designers and in the development and growth of shopping arcades and malls throughout the world.

CHAPTER TWO: CLOTHING FORM AND TEXTILE HISTORY

Japanese and Western Style Trajectories

Another aspect of the quality and status of a kimono was judged on the fabric used, whether it was silk, cotton, or linen. The fabric type played a big role in the eyes of onlookers, and this is just one of many reasons why the kimono is relevant to social capital. Before the 1860s, the Japanese wore a variety of kimonos that were made of silk, mixed silk and cotton, or just cotton or linen. The upper class wore the *kosode* between the 8th and 12th centuries, which was an undergarment, turned into an outer-garment, which fundamentally was the inspiration and stepping stone to the founding of the kimono. The basic kimono form and style was set by the 14th century, and it was inspired through the European process described by Koda and Martin where underwear became outerwear.¹⁹ Until the end of the 15th century, linen was the main fiber being used in textiles; however, the growing cotton industry reduced the use of linen because of costs and production level. The silk industry developed from the end of the 16th century and remained a fabric for the rich. Until the end of the Meiji Restoration,²⁰ sumptuary regulations restricted the use of silk to samurais and noble classes (less than 10% of the

¹⁹ Toby Slade, *Japanese Fashion: A Cultural History*. (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2009), 53.

²⁰ The Meiji restoration is the renewal and reform as a chain of events that restored imperial rule to Japan under Emperor Meiji in 1868.

population), while other classes (merchants and farmers) usually violated these regulations by using silk lining for their kimonos, subtly demonstrating growing wealth and refinement.²¹ During the first part of the Meiji period, the Japanese government was focused on its policy of civilization and enlightenment (*bunmei kaika*), which implied that the West was superior—in material cultures, military might and technology.²² A main concern that Japan had was to become like the West to improve its status in the world.

We must not forget about the influence that the West also had, on Japanese society and fashion. The Meiji Restoration of 1868 used the West as a model for political, economic, and cultural development; part of this model was the aspiration to modernity. Among the first Japanese to adopt Western clothing were the officers and men of some of the Shogunate army and navy during the early 1800s. The production of these military uniforms was very difficult; the fabrics had to be imported, and Japanese tailors had to be extensively trained to create Western-style suits.²³ Japanese fashion history concerning the period of the Meiji Restoration clearly revealed the gradual Westernization of Japanese clothes. Until the end of the 15th Century, linen had been the most popular fiber, but from that point on the growing cotton industry increasingly restricted the use of linen. The silk industry developed from the end of the 16th Century, yet silk always remained a

²¹ Slade, *Japanese Fashion: A Cultural History*, 53.

²² Annie Van Assche and Stefano Ember, *Fashioning Kimono: Dress and Modernity in Early Twentieth-century Japan*, (Milan: 5 Continents, 2005), 22.

²³ Keiichirō Nakagawa and Henry Rosovsky. “The Case of the Dying Kimono: The Influence of Changing Fashions on the Development of the Japanese Woolen Industry.” (MA: The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1963), 61.

luxury item restricted to the rich, and sumptuary regulations limited its use to the samurai and noble classes.²⁴

The members of the new government who chose to be seen in Western clothing reflected these policies. In dress, the changes began with the Emperor and Empress appearing in Western clothes during the Meiji Restoration (1868-1912) in public, showing the high regard of Japan accorded to the West. In 1871 Emperor Meiji of Japan issued a public announcement that he himself, his Court and his officials would wear European dress.²⁵ The Meiji Restoration gave Japan a strong central government, committed to abolishing “feudalism” and eager for Westernization and economic development. These policies were reflected in the clothes in which the new government chose to be seen wearing. When the Duke of Edinburgh visited Japan in 1869, the Imperial Court decided to receive him in formal Western dress, an indication of economic development and status shown through the globalization of dress forms.²⁶ It took some time for the Empress to come to terms with her husband’s decision, but in 1886 the Empress followed suit. These developments from the royal family threatened to upset the cultural identity of the Japanese society because at this time it was not a social norm. While the kimono status was considered somewhat lower than Western clothing during this time, it was a good indicator of the importance of dress and how clothing type and quality resonates with status.

²⁴ Nakagawa and Rosovsky, “The Case of the Dying Kimono: The Influence of Changing Fashions on the Development of the Japanese Woolen Industry,” 60.

²⁵ Kramer, ‘Not So Japan-Easy’: The British Reception of Japanese Dress in the Late Nineteenth Century, 3.

²⁶ Nakagawa and Rosovsky, “The Case of the Dying Kimono: The Influence of Changing Fashions on the Development of the Japanese Woolen Industry,” 62

The difference between the kimono and European clothing can be seen in clothing construction, form and decoration. Westerners often thought of the kimono as signifying the national, racial and cultural identity of its Japanese wearer; in contrast, the appearance of Japanese people in European clothing upset this visual marker of hierarchy by disturbing and questioning the images of Japanese authoritative power.²⁷ Once shifts were made by the Imperial family, upper class Japanese were next to change over to Western dress, followed by anyone who could afford to do so.

About thirty years after the restoration, Western dress was a symbol of social dignity and progressiveness, and in addition, it was usually a good indication of public employment.²⁸ Public employment was a sign of social class standing. In 1883, the *Rokumeikan* (Deer Cry Pavilion)²⁹ was built to show visitors that Japan was modern, and was used for the purpose of entertaining foreign dignitaries.³⁰ All Japanese guests were required to wear Western attire, and it was not long before the *Rokumeikan* style (see Fig.4) emerged. For men, this included long waistcoats, top hats, bow ties and a walking cane. For women, *Rokumeikan* dresses were made in France with Japanese silks, and then exported to Japan. Many dresses were long and bustled with corseted waistlines, with the Japanese dressing in Parisian style. And during this time span, the Paris fashion community looked to the kimono for inspiration.

²⁷ Kramer, 'Not So Japan-Easy': The British Reception of Japanese Dress in the Late Nineteenth Century, 5.

²⁸ Nakagawa and Rosovsky, "The Case of the Dying Kimono: The Influence of Changing Fashions on the Development of the Japanese Woolen Industry," 63.

²⁹ The Deer Cry Pavilion is a large two-story building in Tokyo that was completed in 1883. It became a controversial symbol of Westernization in the Meiji Period.

³⁰ Van, Assche and Ember, *Fashioning Kimono: Dress and Modernity in Early Twentieth-century Japan*, 22.

When European and American styles changed, and new fashion trends were emerging, the first Japanese women to wear Western clothing were unaware of these processes. These first Japanese women continued to wear the same outfits, while trends were changing throughout the West and certain trends were thought to be outdated. Others would begin to mismatch Japanese and Western clothing, such as a young woman wearing a lace-collar blouse underneath a traditional kimono.³¹ This style became referred to as the modern Meiji look.

Most Japanese women continued to wear the kimono during the Meiji period, despite the government's push to have all of the Japanese people wear Western attire. After all, the kimono was better suited for the Japanese lifestyle, which required shoes to be removed before entering the house and sitting on the tatami floor³² in a particular manner. The wrap-style kimono allowed for body movement and easy adjusting, making it easier to sit down and stand up.³³

The evolution of the kimono has aided the change of thought and design towards mainstream Western fashion. The real challenge of Western clothing was that it forced the artist and the viewer to consider the figure underneath the garment. In contrast, the kimono wraps the body in smooth, straight lines, effectively eliminating the figure underneath; the close-fitting bodice and bustle of Western clothing reduced the figure to a series of angles and curves.³⁴ The West promoted an S-curve fashion silhouette in the late 19th century, much different from the straight, long kimono. The kimono emphasized a

³¹ Ibid., 23.

³² Traditional flooring in Japanese style rooms, and made with rice straw.

³³ Van, Assche and Ember, *Fashioning Kimono: Dress and Modernity in Early Twentieth-century Japan*, 23.

³⁴ Slade, *Japanese Fashion: A Cultural History*, 104.

long torso, by wearing a high obi, while the Western design emphasized the waist by cutting the female figure in half. Although Japanese women were not as comfortable showing bare skin as were their Western counterparts, they would alter the neckline by sewing additional fabric onto it or wearing a high-collared blouse underneath.³⁵

Although there are large differences between Japanese and Western traditional fashion notions, both cultures have always had the opportunity to break those conventions. It is the Japanese designers who first broke fashion norms and introduced these designs into the haute couture fashion industry. With the wave of cultural influence that accompanied the reopening of Japan after WWII, designers faced a choice between adapting old forms and motifs now reified as tradition, or using the new Western techniques and patterns identified with progress.³⁶ Style was associated with either Japanese or Western modes. Japanese citizens faced a choice about the way they would choose to be dressed in at a time when Japan was going through a fundamental stage of self-examination.³⁷

The vast majority of the Japanese continued to dress in their own style, and the few that adapted to 'modern dress' would usually change into the more comfortable kimono when they returned home. In the Meiji period, Western dress was not comfortable for the Japanese interior design, and it was impractical until the trend of European furniture hit the homes of Japan.³⁸ The distance at which Japan keeps foreign influence is also clear in the modern usage of the Katakana alphabet used exclusively for

³⁵ Van, Assche and Ember. *Fashioning Kimono: Dress and Modernity in Early Twentieth-century Japan*, 25.

³⁶ Slade, *Japanese Fashion: A Cultural History*, 49.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 56.

foreign words, which are not allowed to be absorbed into the Japanese language; foreign and indigenous are immediately distinguished.³⁹

Moreover, the great earthquake of 1923 was a disaster that almost completely destroyed Tokyo and Yokohama and became something of a turning point in Japanese fashion history.⁴⁰ Millions of households lost all of their possessions, including their clothes, and many of these victims replaced their clothing with Western-style clothing.⁴¹ The shift to Western-style clothing came from the kimono being proved dangerous during the quake because its long sleeves and train prevented rapid movement.⁴² Another incident that proved the kimono dangerous was when there was a fire at a department store in Tokyo, and as women at this time did not wear underwear, being modest citizens, they did not want to jump and risk their private parts being seen. Because of this reason, many women died in the fire. Until the 1930s, the majority of the Japanese continued to wear kimono, and Western clothes were relatively restricted for certain classes when worn outside of ones home.⁴³ Through the 1930s, Japanese women were still often confined to their homes, eliminating a large potential market for more public display.⁴⁴ During this time, it was difficult for the fashion industry to grow in Japan because of the restrictions that were laid on women and clothing.

³⁹ Ibid., 59.

⁴⁰ Nakagawa and Rosovsky, "The Case of the Dying Kimono: The Influence of Changing Fashions on the Development of the Japanese Woolen Industry," 65.

⁴¹ Ibid., 66.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

The Japanese Textile Industry

The growth of the Japanese textile industry was critical to the development and evolution of the kimono. The textile industry changed the kimono from being a basic piece of clothing to an elaborate display for status. During the early stages of fabric production in Japan, aesthetic choices, the final stages of production, and supervision of those processes were the responsibility of higher-ranking females, giving these females a lot of power.⁴⁵ The provision or withholding of textiles was a weapon, parallel to sexual favors that women could use to hold male autonomy in check.⁴⁶ The predominance of women in cloth production and distribution in many parts of the world is linked to the widespread symbolic systems in which cloth evokes female power.⁴⁷

Women had the power of organizing gifts in the form of clothing to those of higher rank, and that kimono was a form of currency.⁴⁸ It is interesting that clothing was used as a form of currency, whereas today, we use currency to purchase clothing; this is another form of status that the kimono beheld in Japanese society. The question arises about how clothing and textiles, in particular the kimono became a form of monetary means. The end of the 9th Century saw the state had stopped minting coins, and by the tenth, rice, woven fabrics and silk were used as units of account and media of exchange.⁴⁹ The role of women in the production of cloth wealth often gives them “a larger say in distribution than one might expect,” an area of influence all the more significant, and

⁴⁵ Nakagawa and Rosovsky, “The Case of the Dying Kimono: The Influence of Changing Fashions on the Development of the Japanese Woolen Industry,” 600.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 601.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 603.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

perhaps more intricately embedded in the Heian context.⁵⁰ The superior-inferior division occurs according to gender: the male “owns” the clothing assets, while the female (inferior in status to her male relatives) “possesses” the cloth, and neither can act alone.⁵¹ Beyond aesthetic appeal, Heian discourse is drawn to clothing because of its paradoxical ability to express both difference in social identity and interdependence in material exchanges and ritual negotiations.⁵²

In the early years of the 20th century, about thirty years after the Meiji Restoration, Western dress became a symbol of social dignity. In the first half of the 20th century, at least for some occasions, the majority of the Japanese population wore Western clothing. But the kimono remained the dominant dress in Japan until shortly after WWII (during the war it was regulation for all women to wear loose women’s farmer trousers called ‘*mompei*’).⁵³ During the 1930s, the silk industry already felt the negative impact of the war, as the government recycled metal looms and other textile equipment into weapons.⁵⁴ The war destroyed many families’ wardrobes, leaving the kimono as a symbol of Japan before the war. After the war, a great deal of cotton was imported to Japan, and Japanese women soon learned to sew western-style garments with a paper pattern and sewing machine.⁵⁵

Although there was a vast increase in cotton exports to Japan, the increase in the standard of living resulted in a greater demand for traditional goods, which stabilized the

⁵⁰ Ibid., 608.

⁵¹ Ibid., 609.

⁵² Nakagawa and Rosovsky, “The Case of the Dying Kimono: The Influence of Changing Fashions on the Development of the Japanese Woolen Industry,” 613.

⁵³ Van, Assche and Ember. *Fashioning Kimono: Dress and Modernity in Early Twentieth-century Japan*, 28.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

economy and allowed the producers of traditional goods, such as textiles, not to find themselves out-of work.⁵⁶ Industrialization began in Japan, but the new large-scale factories produced fabrics that were too wide for the kimono. While they could accommodate the increased consumption of cotton cloth for other purposes, the limitations of these industries enabled the continuation of the traditional industry that produced materials for the kimono.⁵⁷ The consumer preference for traditional goods meant that the country did not spend its foreign currency on consumer goods during the early stages of industrialization in the 1920s. This was important for Japan, almost a century behind England when it began to industrialize, with a lower per capita income than that of Western nations.⁵⁸

Haute couture in Japan effectively began after WWII, and fashion designers often worked with textile specialists to create their own textiles, which would help them realize their designs. This was the beginning of the haute couture journey of Japanese fashion. Most fashion houses control the entire textile production process from beginning to end, which helps them pursue avant-garde designs for their upcoming collections. Japan has been a leader of cotton and silk production for centuries, and the textile industry was one of the first crafts to be industrialized.⁵⁹ Textiles became one of the biggest industries in Japan by the end of the 1800s and, as mentioned earlier, throughout the 20th century, former kimono producers and traditional Japanese factories successfully transitioned to

⁵⁶ Slade, *Japanese Fashion: A Cultural History*, 59.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Louise Mitchell, *The Cutting Edge: Fashion from Japan*. (Sydney, N.S.W.: Powerhouse, 2005), 15.

the production of Western-style fabrics.⁶⁰ In the past, factories would be self-sufficient in a variety of traditions such as spinning, dyeing, and weaving, and in patterning methods, embroidery, manipulating, shaping and finishing fabrics.⁶¹ Nowadays, factories specialize in one particular area of technique, rather than catering to every designer's need.⁶²

The textile manufacturing system that is now used throughout Japan has enabled Japanese fashion to expand its horizons in the world of fashion due to the production of an astonishing variety of fabrics.⁶³ Japan is now the leading producer of technologically advanced fabrics and the larger factories are able to maintain investments of these new textiles and allow for customization.⁶⁴ The discovery and experimentation with polyester led to a groundbreaking application to fashion. Lightweight, easy-care, stretch polyester fabric can be permanently pleated and can accommodate any body movement. The discovery of polyester was the catalyst for Issey Miyake's 'Pleats Please' range, developed in conjunction with textile designer Mikiko Minagawa, which is still an ongoing concept today (2014).⁶⁵ As polyester is a thermoplastic, it is possible to reshape the fabric at a certain temperature as it breaks down the molecular structure and turns it into fluid.⁶⁶ With this concept, folds, pleats, and crumpled textures are baked into the fabric using a variety of ancient Japanese textile techniques (Issey Miyake's pleating, see Fig.5).⁶⁷ Not only do these techniques create clothing, they solidify alliances, facilitate

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Mitchell, *The Cutting Edge: Fashion from Japan*, 16.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

transition within status, and institutionalize the differences.⁶⁸ At the time of discovery, these techniques set aside the elite designers from the amateur designers and often expressed uniqueness rather than mainstream.

Japanese Aesthetics

Clothing design has always had a large place in the heart of Japanese society. Other than the Tokugawa period, there was one other era in earlier Japanese history where women's clothing design was of utmost importance.⁶⁹ During the Fujiwara (Heian) era (794-1185), dress was only of concern to the aristocracy, whose outlook on life was almost entirely based on courtly aesthetics.⁷⁰ These refined court aesthetics were found in expressive calligraphy, painting, poetry, music, in human relationships and in dress.⁷¹ Women played an important role in history during this time, as their writing in their diaries allowed for glimpses of their extravagant lives that dictated the fashions of the day.⁷² For formal occasions, women would wear many contrasting layers with long trains; for informal occasions they wore simple designs with elegant motifs such as blossoms, birds or butterflies.⁷³ Women of the Tokugawa period had tendencies to wear much more elaborate kimono patterns than the simple designs described by Lady

⁶⁸ Carole Cavanaugh, "Text and Textile: Unweaving the Female Subject in Heian Writing," (Winter: 1996), 599.

⁶⁹ Pauline Simmons, "Artist of the Tokugawa Period", *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin, New Series*. Vol. 14, No.6 (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1956), 136.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

Murasaki in *The Tale of Genji*.⁷⁴ Very few craftsmen had the ability to execute the brush strokes on these custom kimonos.⁷⁵ These refined special aesthetics have given more meaning and spectacle to what could rather be a regular plain kimono.

Although the kimono has a very special history within Japanese culture, the wearing of the kimono in everyday life has diminished in present-day Japan; it is still worn on formal occasions such as weddings, funerals and tea ceremonies. Two main reasons for the decline in kimono wearing are because the majority of Japanese households own Western furniture, and the impracticality of wearing a kimono for the active daily lives of modern-day society is inconvenient. The kimono can be purchased at a cheap price, and the Japanese can tell the difference between a cheap kimono and a kimono of high quality. The price is usually not conducive to the amount of times one might wear the kimono and it is not practical for the daily lives of the typical working Japanese. The great thing about the kimono is that the history it holds, and the cultural beauty it bestows is far more important than its practicality for present society. These designs hold meaning, and they portray an undeniable status that affects every household in present-day Japan.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

CHAPTER THREE: JAPANESE HAUTE COUTURE

International Influence

Japanese fashion did not become internationally recognized until Hanae Mori's (b. 1926) (see fig.7) appearance in Paris in 1970, followed by Issey Miyake (b. 1938) (see fig.8), Yohji Yamamoto (b. 1943) (see fig.9) in the 1970s, and Rei Kawakubo (b.1942) (see fig.10) of Comme des Garçons in 1981.⁷⁶ These designers were part of a generation that was born just before or during WWII and capitalized on the great social changes of the late 1960s and the growing influence of ready-to-wear clothing. The fashion industry has been instrumental to the Japanese economy with the continuous growth of consumption of designer goods leading it to be the second highest in the world.

The first Japanese designer to gain international recognition was Hanae Mori, who went to Paris in 1961, and presented her first overseas collection in New York in 1965. In 1977 she became the first Asian to be admitted to the most exclusive fashion organization in the world, the Paris-based *Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture*.⁷⁷ Unlike the other Japanese designers mentioned, so far Mori is more of a classicist and follows conventions of Western Dress in silhouette and construction. However, she did utilize native design by creating kimono-inspired clothing and used traditional motifs such as butterflies and

⁷⁶ Yuniya Kawamura, "Japanese Teens as Producers of Street Fashion." (NY: F.I.T, 2006), 784.

⁷⁷ Patricia Mears, "Index for Volumes 11 and 12." *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* 12.1. (New York: Berg Publishers, 2008), 97.

Japanese landscape (see fig.11).⁷⁸

Born in Hiroshima in 1938, Issey Miyake witnessed the devastation that followed the dropping of an atomic bomb on his hometown. This traumatic experience during his youth had a large influence on his design philosophy. Miyake is recognized internationally not only for his clothing design, but for being one of the first fashion designers to document his work and creative process through a series of publications which include his first book, *Issey Miyake: East Meets West (1978)*.⁷⁹ Following the success of Mori and Miyake, Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto presented their first collections in Paris to an international audience in the early 1980s. Although most of their press coverage was negative, the media acknowledged that Kawakubo and Yamamoto were creating truly new designs.⁸⁰

The impact of Japanese fashion on the international scene began in the years after WWII, hence this influence has been short, but powerful. The years that followed WWII was not the only time that Japanese fashion was influential in the West. During the mid 19th Century when Japan opened its trade with Europe, the European market was flooded with a large amount of Japanese decorative goods, which came to be called Japonisme.⁸¹ Japonisme can be defined as the Western assimilation of basic Japanese aesthetics, which was influential in architecture, painting (see fig.12), decorative arts in the second half of the 1800s, but also in fashion; this can be seen in the use of Japanese motifs in exported textiles from Japan. While these were influential in past times, runway shows (see fig.13) presented by Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto in the 1980s brought a lot of

⁷⁸ Ibid., 97.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 99.

⁸¹ Mitchell, *The Cutting Edge: Fashion from Japan*, 12.

recognition to Japanese fashion. The Japanese influence was not only seen in the motifs, but also the cut of garments such as the opera coats in the 1990s that were reminiscent of kimonos.⁸² Kawakubo and Yamamoto's garment designs were characterized by intentional flaws, a monochrome palette, disproportions, drapery, asymmetry and gender-neutral styling (see fig.14) which were all previously unorthodox in the fashion industry.⁸³

Contrary to the immaculately groomed and perfect models (see fig.15) and fitted garments shown in *Vogue*,⁸⁴ the Japanese designs and runway models appeared unpolished.⁸⁵ These fashion imperfections were not only new to the international fashion industry, but they were also new to the eyes of the Japanese. The designs by Kawakubo and Yamamoto showed signs of Japanese aesthetics, citing the kimono and the aesthetic of *wabi-sabi*,⁸⁶ which is a Japanese view that beauty is imperfect, impermanent or incomplete.⁸⁷ The initial reactions and responses to their designs were hostile and condescending, but within a few years, their styles became influential within mainstream fashion. The art critic Deyan Sudjic recalled "Japanese fashion in the eighties provided a new way of looking at fabric, texture, cut and image. It questioned the artifice of tailoring and couture, literally deconstructing garments". Sudjic continues: continued to say, "Japan in the eighties was a shot in the arm of fashion, a revelation that it could be more

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ An American fashion magazine that is published monthly in 23 national regional editions by Condé Nast. *Vogue* means 'in style' in French.

⁸⁵ Mitchell, *The Cutting Edge: Fashion from Japan*, 12.

⁸⁶ The Japanese view or aesthetic that is centered on the acceptance of transience and imperfection.

⁸⁷ Mitchell, *The Cutting Edge: Fashion from Japan*, 12.

than sex, show business and commerce”.⁸⁸

Hanae Mori

As mentioned earlier, Hanae Mori has had a very prestigious fashion career. She is not only respected in the fashion capital of Paris and France, but also in Japan, where she was the first woman to have a career in fashion, and has been widely regarded as an icon of liberation. Her fashion house, which opened in Japan in 1951, had grown into a \$500 million international business by the 1990s.

After graduating from Tokyo Women’s Christian University, Mori spent time attending a dressmaking school. Subsequently opening her fashion house, she created hundreds of costumes for Japanese movies. In 1965 she successfully became the first Japanese citizen to present her work in Paris and showed her “East Meets West” collection. Twelve years later she opened an haute couture showroom in Paris. Following her tradition of creating costumes, she designed three consecutive stewardess uniforms for Japan Air Lines (JAL) from 1967 to 1988. While Mori has retired from the runway, she still owns a few boutiques in Tokyo and continues to have an active perfume line.

Hanae Mori is a designer who uses Japanese aesthetics such as the butterfly, which has become her signature design. The difference between Mori and the next three designers discussed in this section is that she uses Japanese aesthetics such as layering and motifs, but produces garments that use Western tailoring. Mori is a designer that creates a Japanese and Western hybrid design and has been influential within Japan and internationally because of her use of both design techniques.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

Issey Miyake

Issey Miyake is one of the first Japanese designers to gain international recognition, and one of the first to establish an avant-garde, Japanese-Western hybrid fashion. Miyake's career started blossoming around the time Japan was undergoing cultural and economic changes after WWII, and his collections correspond to the recovery of the nation. With the Japanese nation needing rebuilding and restructuring, opportunities rose for new names to become prominent in many fields.

Issey Miyake grew up in Hiroshima during the war, where he relinquished a thirst for optimism after realizing that everything else in life was small compared to that of survival. For Miyake, every tomorrow is a gift. Miyake saw the atomic bomb drop with his own eyes as he was riding his bicycle to school. He lost his mother and most of his family in the tragic war. His father was a soldier and his mother needed to learn how to survive without him if he were to pass away. One example of this thirst for survival was when Miyake had nothing to wear to an autumn harvest celebration; she cut up festival flags and made him a suit.⁸⁹ While his mother had a creative side, Miyake always thought that he might become a painter.

Before graduating as a graphic designer from Tama Art University in Tokyo, Miyake would borrow books and try to copy French fashion sketches.⁹⁰ After his studies, Miyake spent time as an apprentice in Paris with Hubert de Givenchy and he also apprenticed with Geoffrey Beene on Seventh Avenue in New York before launching the

⁸⁹ Jay Cocks and Sandra Burton, "*THE MAN WHO'S CHANGING CLOTHES. Designer Issey Miyake makes fashion for tomorrow*". *Time Magazine*, (New York: Time Inc. 1985), 79.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 80.

Miyake Design Studio in Tokyo in 1970.⁹¹ His clothes were put on the market almost immediately in New York City at Bloomingdales and two of Tokyo's most prestigious department stores. He was frightened to even think about becoming a fashion designer in Japan as it was not considered to be a man's job, and it was not respected at the time. He later set up the Miyake Design Studio in Tokyo with textile designer Mikiko Minagawa and a team that set its sights on Japanese tradition, one of the main design concepts of his line, *A piece of cloth* (see Fig.16) in 1970.⁹² *A piece of cloth* explored traditional textiles and clothing techniques such as wrapping and layering which were inspired by the kimono, rather than Western clothing. Miyake was interested in designing garments that seem to have been made from a single piece of cloth, with no visible seams or fastenings, hence the name of the collection. *A piece of cloth* would be a showcase of garments reduced to its simplest elements, essentially a rectangular shape with sleeves attached.

Not only did Miyake learn the way of cutting and wrapping clothes from the kimono, he was able to create sleeves that did not have constrictions. He used this free-flowing concept as his central idea of creating space between the body and cloth, allowing for the creation of new shapes and forms in clothing.⁹³ Tailoring in the Western culture eliminates the space between the body and the garment, with fabrics being cut to the shape of the body and sewn. The kimono design wraps the body and leaves the surplus hanging; the dimensions are always unchanging. A universal approach can be demonstrated in the kimono, disposing of barriers such as gender, age or body shape.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Mitchell, *The Cutting Edge: Fashion from Japan*, 13.

⁹³ Cocks and Burton "The Man Who's Changing Clothes," 78.

This can be seen in his collection of fall/winter, 1983/1984, an oversized or ‘one-size-fits-all’ outfit providing an example of an anti-structural look built up in layers to create volume and form (see fig.17)⁹⁴. Miyake has said: “I am interested in the space between the body and the clothes so that the body can feel entirely at ease. Because each person’s body shape is different, this space creates an individual form. It also gives the wearer freedom of movement for body and spirit”.⁹⁵ This sense of body movement was further explored in his 1995 spring/summer collection ‘Pleats Please’. Pleated clothes are made of fabric with folds, which has the potential to move and change form with the wearer’s body movements.

Miyake was unconventional in his method of fabric pleating, and was innovative by reversing the order of tasks. Instead of pleating the fabric first, he would cut and assemble garments two-and-a-half to eight times its proper size; fold, iron, and then place it in the press to create the permanent pleats.⁹⁶The most stunning of Miyake’s pleated garments is the *Minaret* dress, featured in his spring/summer 1995 collection. The lantern-shape dress can be appreciated in its unworn folded state, a flat circular form (see fig. 18) or appreciated when encased by a body and swaying movements (see fig. 19).

Issey Miyake has shown that the space between a garment and the body, its flexibility tied with newfound fabrics, can take on a sculptural quality through the simplicity of its cut, and organic forms. Miyake said: “I learned about the space between the body and the fabric from traditional kimono”. By introducing large, loose-fitting

⁹⁴ Mitchell, *The Cutting Edge: Fashion from Japan*, 65.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 69.

garments, Miyake destroyed and reinterpreted Western conventions by suggesting different ways of wearing clothing.⁹⁷

Throughout the years, Miyake worked on his textile and fabric exploration by collaborating with people in other professions or industries, such as weavers, artists, poets, photographers and choreographers. Miyake has compared his work to that of the West and expressed that “my very disadvantage, my lack of Western heritage, would also be my advantage. I was free of Western tradition or convention. There was no other way for me to go but forward.”⁹⁸ He approaches textiles and fabrics in a sophisticated and experienced manner, as well as taking traditional concepts such as the Japanese tea ceremony into account. Two central concepts for the tea ceremony are *wabi* and *sabi*. *Wabi* suggests the use of a humble material for a higher purpose and *sabi* conveys the mystery and allure acquired by an object that has been well worn.⁹⁹

Miyake is known for challenging traditional expectations in the fashion industry. He says, “I know many people resist or reject my clothing, because it’s not a package that’s already formed, like European clothing.” He continues to say, “Without the wearer’s ingenuity, my clothing isn’t clothing. These are clothes where room is left for wearers to make things their own. That may need courage at first, but once you get the trick, it’s not difficult”.¹⁰⁰ And this trick is often noted as being simplistic. His clothes are thought of as universal, not just in their impact but also within the variety of different

⁹⁷ Van, Assche and Ember, *Fashioning Kimono: Dress and Modernity in Early Twentieth-century Japan*, 24.

⁹⁸ Cocks and Burton, “*The Man Who’s Changing Clothes*”. *Designer Issey Miyake makes fashion for tomorrow*,” 78.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 77.

body shapes they form with movement making it astounding. His work defies trends and style; they are not “fashion” but made in the true spirit of a creative artist.

Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto

The impact of the early designs by Kawakubo and Yamamoto are now part of fashion history. Yet their creative talent, responding to the quickly changing world of fashion, has kept up with the challenge. The rise and fall of trends seem to parallel their work, such as the recent trend towards voluminous and layered fashions that have been appearing in contemporary fashion runways in the past two decades (1990s-2000s).

In the first half of the 1980s, Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo were on a similar wavelength when they showcased their designs together in Paris. In earlier years, Yamamoto completed a law degree at the prestigious Keio University before pursuing fashion studies at the internationally recognized Bunka College of Fashion in Tokyo.¹⁰¹ In addition to his studies at Bunka, Yamamoto spent his time learning about clothing construction with his seamstress mother.¹⁰² Kawakubo and Yamamoto presented breakthrough collections in Paris in 1981, and the following year saw every major newspaper in Europe and the United States allocating large portions of their fashion pages to these Japanese designers. 1983 saw Kawakubo and Yamamoto present the world with unorthodox fashion characteristics such as pale-face, no make-up models who walked the catwalk with stern expressions.¹⁰³ Many of their designs had distinguishing

¹⁰¹ Mitchell, *The Cutting Edge: Fashion from Japan*, 13.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 20.

features that included deliberate holes, crinkled fabrics, irregular hemlines, loose-fitting layers, and the French early on referred to the look as “Le Destroy”.¹⁰⁴

Their innovative designs defied human body shape and looked as if they had come out of a war zone. Many of their designs were hit with harsh criticisms by the fashion world and press, but there was also a positive reaction to their work. These Japanese designers showed a new approach to fashion and showed the way to a whole new way of beauty. While the fashion industry allows for endless judgment, reviews will always be mixed for years to come, but needless to say, the fashion industry cannot ignore the work of Kawakubo and Yamamoto. These Japanese designs caused a sensation because nobody had ever seen designs like this – they suggested the opposite spectrum from that of Western fashion.

Although Kawakubo and Yamamoto are often discussed as a duo, as for many years they had a shared aesthetic vision, they also show stark differences in their personal design. When Kawakubo first started working with Yamamoto, Kawakubo had to rely on a loyal and skilled staff of assistant designers, drapers and patternmakers to assist her in the actual work of the design because Yamamoto did not have any formal fashion training. Over those years she was always somehow able to transform her unwavering visions into finished garments.¹⁰⁵ From the beginning, Kawakubo declared “We must break away from conventional forms of dress for the new woman of today. We need a new strong image, not to revisit the past”.¹⁰⁶ By contrast, Yamamoto’s revisions of historical Western dress have been evident in his collections, especially since the mid-

¹⁰⁴ Mears, *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* 12.1, 99.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

1990s, place people in awe of him, with today's avant-garde.¹⁰⁷ Regardless, he still continues to rebel against conventional design and often combines recognizable historic elements with unorthodox materials to create today's avant-garde designs.

Kawakubo and Yamamoto have made an impact on Japanese and Western fashion because they have made an impact on the redefining of fashion. Fashion does not have to be perfect. They have redefined beauty and shown that it can be found in imperfection. Their unorthodox designs and fashion bravery allowed other designers from Japan and the world to think outside the box and share new designs.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE JAPANESE INFLUENCE TODAY

East Meets West

It has been said that the West would not have achieved the modern deconstruction of tailored clothing in men's and women's wear without the form of Japanese dress. While the West has been concerned with clothing fitting correctly on the body, the Japanese were concerned with layering and the expression of the body, posing an option for those who wanted to break the conventional mechanics of clothing etiquette and work with both the visible and underlying body beneath the garment.¹⁰⁸ The biggest difference between the West and Japan is apparent in their assumptions about 'street' wear and couture. The West assumes that these spheres contrast with each other, but the Japanese realize their differences and yet reconcile the two.¹⁰⁹

One of the biggest transformations in the history of fashion lies within the 19th Century, with the innovation of ready-to-wear apparel that allowed people of all economic stations to afford clothing that made an impression.¹¹⁰ This new form of consumption minimized the traditional and sumptuary form of high fashion that was prominent in the West. In 1972, Kenzo told Bernadine Morris of the *New York Times*,

¹⁰⁸ Richard Martin, *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 8, No. 3. "Our Kimono Mind: Reflections on 'Japanese Design: A Survey Since 1950,'" (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 215.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

‘Fashion is not for the few—it is for all the people’.¹¹¹ This cultural redefinition saw an understanding of a new more vast audience, and posited an unbreakable bond between ordinary clothing and fashion.

How did Japanese designers offer creative and innovative solutions and options between the 1970s and 1990s? Japanese designers used the old concept of the kimono and applied it to both formal and informal situations, such as the *yukata*. Unlike the kimono, the *yukata* is usually worn during the hot summer months as more casualwear or after having a bath. The most significant influence the Japanese designers had on the West since the 1970s was not only due to their inventiveness but also due to their very different aesthetics.¹¹² As in every culture, but particularly in the West, fashion has been associated with special occasions or individual rites of passage. The West associated high-end clothing with specific functions such as sports, and formal wear.¹¹³ In the West, daywear is customarily conservative, whereas eveningwear is primarily exorbitant and fancy. When the West was looking for design flexibility, Japanese design was often used as a model. The West felt restrained by the principle of differentiations by gender, class, value, and particularly specific occasions.¹¹⁴ The new generation of designers of the 21st Century, have been led into new arenas by designers such as Mori, Kawakubo, Miyake and Yamamoto. They learned to to detach themselves from social norms and create new intellectual designs and radical aesthetics.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Ibid., 216.

¹¹² Martin, *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 8, No. 3. “Our Kimono Mind: Reflections on ‘Japanese Design: A Survey Since 1950,’” 216.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

Consumer Fashion

Japanese society is marked by the high consumption of fashion-related goods. Through the ages, Japan has been known to dress conservatively, but much of this has changed in the past two decades, and especially in the past ten years. The consumption of goods such as fashionable clothing plays an increasingly important role in the daily lives of the Japanese, especially those who are presently in the younger generation. These consumer goods allow individuals to create their own personal style and identity by enabling them to separate themselves from past traditions.

Japanese society is famous for its conformity, resulting reified family, social and economic systems. However, this link to past values and daily life has been changing considerably among the younger generation. Japanese beliefs such as selfless devotion to employers, respect for seniors and perseverance, are beginning to weaken.¹¹⁶ The fashion of today's younger generation exhibits a very different ideology. Between the 1940s and 1970s, the Japanese culture was known for its group identity and conservativeness. This key concept has been diminishing with the fashion culture shifting towards the importance of individual style and identity. The Japanese nowadays are wanting to redefine what fashion is, what is fashionable by creating new trends and aesthetics rather than sticking to the mainstream.

¹¹⁶ Kawamura, "Japanese Teens as Producers of Street Fashion," 787.

Western Influence in Japan

While Japanese fashion has had an influential impact around the world, we must not dismiss the influences that other parts of the world have made to clothing throughout the ages in Japan. When the Japanese Emperor and Empress adopted European dress as regular attendees for grand openings such as railways and hospitals, this showed their view of Japan in the modern age. When the Empress addressed the public with her views on Western dress, she elaborated that the Western combination of top or jacket and a skirt was similar to the ancient Japanese dress. Further she explained that the kimono was out-of-date, shift away from the inappropriate to the demands of modern life.¹¹⁷ While the lack of kimono can be seen as a weakening of authoritative power, the social reformer Fukuzawa Yukichi explained that when Japanese delegations travelled abroad, they were seen as a spectacle. Fukuzawa argued that wearing European style clothing presented Japan in an equal place with the ‘civilized’ nations of the West at a time when Japan needed to detach itself from the struggling East.¹¹⁸ This new order of European dress allowed for a revised and unified government in Japan. This strategy was extended to the population at large, as Western-style uniforms were adopted for newly formed professions such as the police, army and postal workers.¹¹⁹

Western clothing had a large impact on Japanese society during the war years, but it did not stop the Japanese from still creating original ideas and designs. These Japanese designs were intentional and challenged every notion of Western decoration and fashion. The lack of bright colors can be tied in with *sumi-e* (traditional Japanese ink drawings);

¹¹⁷ Kramer, ‘Not So Japan-Easy’: The British Reception of Japanese Dress in the Late Nineteenth Century, 10.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 7.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 10.

the use of monochromatic tones ignored the beauty that was usually associated with fashion in the West.¹²⁰ Another element of Japanese aesthetic is the misshapen designs such as baggy, intentional holes (see Fig.6), shapeless dresses which many were considered to be asymmetric. Their designs showed a fair and universal approach that eliminated the barriers of gender, age or body shape just as a kimono does.¹²¹ Japanese designers broke conventions and social norms, with their avant-garde designs and influenced designers from all corners of the world to keep reaching for the potential that fashion will always have.

¹²⁰ Mitchell, *The Cutting Edge: Fashion from Japan*, 22.

¹²¹ Ibid.

CONCLUSION

Japanese designers have given new life to fashion, giving the wearer an introspective and contemplative view of life. Designer individuality and consumer allegiance in Japan have combined for a strong designer personality. We are now seeing this in the West where ready-to-wear is expanding within large luxury brands such as Marc Jacobs who created 'Marc by Marc Jacobs' and Zac Posen's affordable line 'ZAC Zac Posen' rather than restricting them to Haute Couture.

Both traditional and contemporary Japanese fashion has approached the human body differently than the West. Western culture tailors clothing to the shape of the human body, accentuating body parts such as a women's hips or waist, whereas layering and distortion or abstraction of the human body have been prevalent in Japanese design, particularly in Issey Miyake's work.¹²² Miyake and Kawakubo's work served as a revelation to the West, eliciting a wider and different way of thinking when considering the body and the garment. The body can carry the garment organically and secure its own expression beyond the shape of the body. This new approach allows the designer, the wearer, and the viewer to create their own silhouette. Transitions to a one-size-fits-all attitude had been unknown in high fashion. In the past two decades, high fashion has shifted away from facades of perfection; designers such as Martin Margiela of Belgium and John Galliano of England have broken the couture norm.

¹²² Martin, "Our Kimono Mind: Reflections on 'Japanese Design: A Survey Since 1950,'" 219.

My thesis research has shown that the design concepts, and the cultural practices linked to the kimono, have influenced both Japanese and Western fashion. Design concepts have been adopted from the kimono both overtly and subtly in contemporary fashion design in Japan and around the world. For centuries in Japan, the quality and appearance of the kimono have represented social status among both the poor and the elite. In the past, the more elaborately embroidered, colorful silk kimono was the most elite, while plain cotton kimonos were for the merchants and the poor. These rigid separations have now broken down. The industrialization of the textile industry pushed the exploration and potential of fashion in Japan.

Today, we can see a need in the Japanese population for presenting themselves in a prestigious manner whether they are financially stable or not, and this is possibly linked to practice of kimono display as seen in the Tokugawa period. Today in the West, particularly in Europe and the United States, we see this same desire for social status by the purchasing of luxury vehicles. The high monetary value of the kimono still exists today, with a high-end woman's kimono easily exceeding US\$20,000. This cost is a large reason why many Japanese do not own their own kimono, and either buy a second-hand kimono or rent an expensive one for special occasions.

My research opens up further questions about the effects of the kimono and Japanese fashion on social societies and the globalization of fashion. In the future I would like to further explore the lives of the designers I have mentioned and spend more time researching their design concepts. I would also like to research Western influence on

Japanese design, and how both East and West have crossed paths to create hybrid designs.

I conclude that Japanese fashion has been highly influenced due to the presence that the kimono has had throughout the centuries in Japanese culture. The kimono has largely changed the consumer culture in Japan through the social display of luxury goods that correlates with social status and social capital that was previously displayed through the acquirement of a beautiful kimono. Not only has the kimono affected haute couture fashion in Japan, it has also made a large impact on the fashion industry all over the world through contemporary Japanese designers such as Issey Miyake, Rei Kawakubo, Yohji Yamamoto and Hanae Mori. These four designers have created world-renowned fashion collections that showed that fashion cannot be defined as European only.

I have found that the beautiful thing about fashion is that it relentlessly moves through the cycles of each season, each and every year, and moves on to new designs, aesthetics, trends and forms of brilliance. The world has created fashion, and Japan has penetrated the ethereal sphere.

APPENDIX I: IMAGES

FIGURE 1

*Kosode*

FIGURE 2



Kimono

FIGURE 3

*Obi*

FIGURE 4



Rokumeikan Fashion Style in Japan

FIGURE 5



Pleating by Issey Miyake

FIGURE 6



Comme des Garçons, 1990

FIGURE 7



Hanae Mori

FIGURE 8



Issey Miyake

FIGURE 9



Yohji Yamamoto

FIGURE 10



Rei Kawakubo

FIGURE 11



A MOVING WORK OF ART.

Created by Hanae Mori of Japan, only for Harrods. A unique evening dress
a drift with waves of pure silk chiffon in geranium. A picture of fluttering birds across a Japanese
landscape. £360. International Room, First Floor.

Harrods

Knightsbridge, London SW1X 7XL, 01 730 1234

Hanae Mori, 1981

FIGURE 12



Guy Rose (American artist, 1867-1925) Blue Kimono

FIGURE 13



Runway show

FIGURE 14



Comme des Garçons 1980s

FIGURE 15



Vogue Model 1980s

FIGURE 16



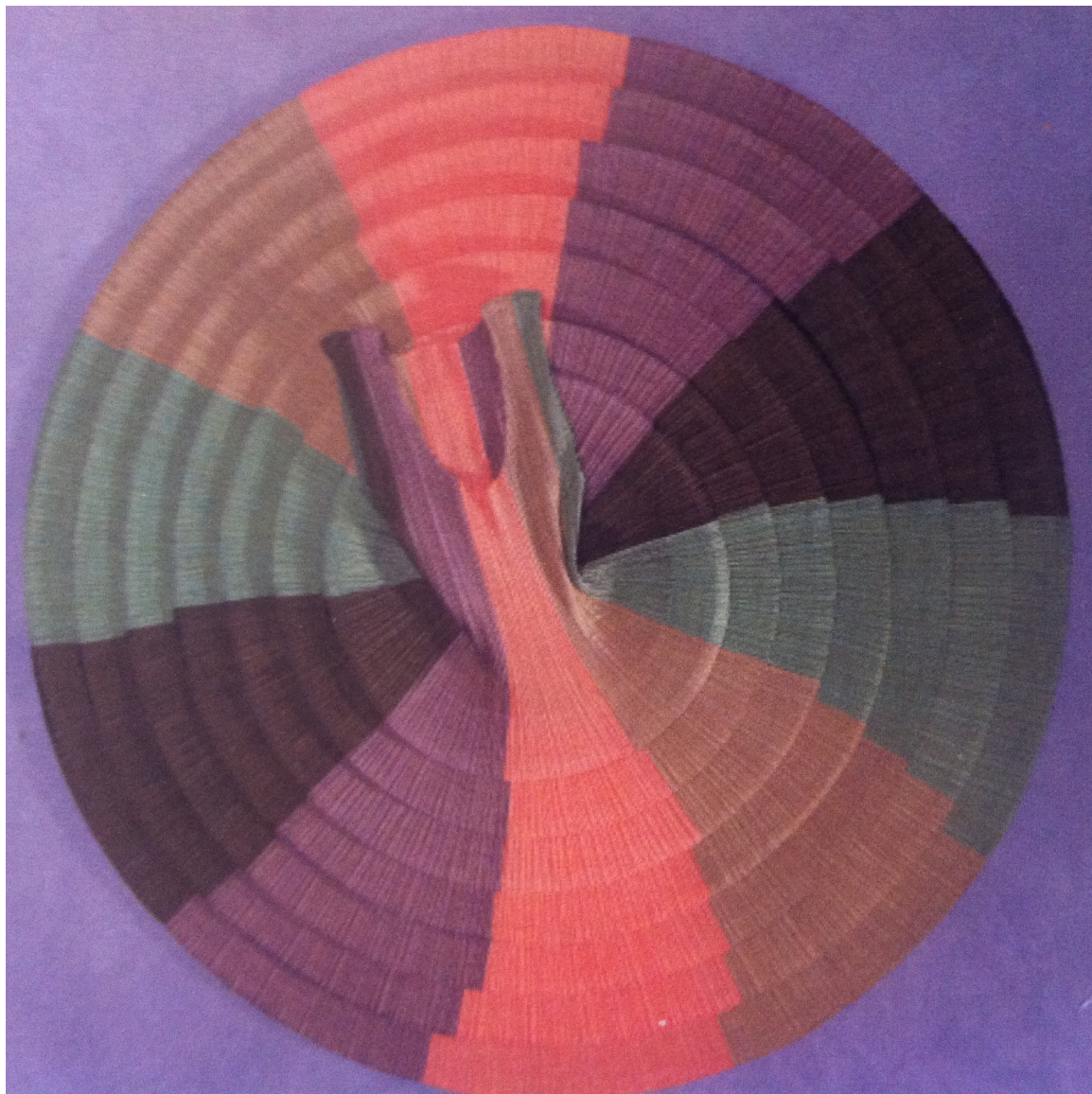
‘A piece of cloth’ collection by Issey Miyake

FIGURE 17



Issey Miyake fall/winter 1983/1984

FIGURE 18



Issey Miyake, Minaret Dress, Pleats Please

FIGURE 19



Issey Miyake, Minaret Dress, Pleats Please

APPENDIX II: JAPANESE HISTORICAL PERIODS

Nara (710-794)

Heian (794-1185)

Kamakura (1185-1333)

Muromachi (1336-1573) Ashikaga Emporer

Azuchi-Momoyama (1568-1603) Warring period; Oda Nobunga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi

Edo (1603-1868) Tokugawa Shogunate

Meiji (1868-1912)

Taishō (1912-1926)

Shōwa (1926-1989)

Heisei (1989-present, 2014)

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