



Review : The Social Life of Kimono: Japanese Fashion Past and Present

『The Social Life of Kimono: Japanese Fashion Past and Present』

Author : Sheila Cliffe (2017, March, Bloomsbury)

Review by Joy Hendry

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Two main themes run through Sheila Cliffe's delightful and comprehensive feast of kimono cultural knowledge. In the first, she sets out to dispel the idea that wearing a kimono is a relatively unchanging Japanese "tradition", bound by strict rules and regulations, and therefore in opposition to the choice of other garments – in Japan and elsewhere – that follow "fashion". In the second, and addressing scholars in particular, she aims to show that the evidently lively subject of fashion theory should not be seen as an exclusive product of the West, particularly France and other parts of Europe. As an anthropologist, I would not have thought either argument necessary, but most of my colleagues who have written on the subject of kimono come under fire for apparently perpetuating the first misunderstanding, and there is a long list of fashionistas who seem to assume (or at least support) the second notion.

Cliffe offers a detailed exposition of Japan's "dynamic, evolving history" in relation to the making, owning and wearing of garments now described as kimono (which simply means a thing to wear), emphasising that, through hundreds of years of records, they have followed all sorts of what she argues are fashions, just like those found elsewhere. Even more interesting, however, are her descriptions of ways in which this form of apparel carries meaning and tells stories about its owners – which, again, has changed as a reflection of the characteristics of historical periods, most notably during the overwhelming adoption of Western clothes in the past 150 years in Japan. The kimono's use of colours, its reflections of the seasons and its deployment in the expression of erotic interest were three major ways in which these garments differed from Western expectations of clothing some 1,000 years ago; more recently, there is some subtle sharing of meaning in the choices made by avid kimono-wearers, some of whom are introduced to us as individuals in one chapter, complete with their wardrobes.

Another chapter of this book – which would seem to fit Cliffe's description of a "mook", for its magazine-like abundance of high-quality colour photographs – details ways in which pattern books and print publications have disseminated the fashions current at various times. The reader is led into books, mooks and popular magazines that have continued to play such a role through periods when kimono did seem to be reserved for ceremonial and other special occasions, and beyond, into the world of new social media used to express what Cliffe describes as a kimono renaissance of street

fashion, and foreign export. Many kimono wearers in other countries have never been to Japan and may be guilty of perpetuating the rule-based tradition notion, whereas Japanese street wearers are happy to break any and all of the rules, creating new meaning in a dress form that they find preferable to Western imports.

What then remains of this wrapped, wearing thing that marks it as special, Japanese and fashionable rather than traditional? I can only recommend that you read Cliffe's volume for, in addition to its wonderful historical sweep, it offers immense and often personal detail about the intricate stages of the processes of making, finishing and accessorising a kimono. There are many books on the kimono – this one is the achievement of a true aficionado.

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