

When Technology Meets Tradition*

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This paper considers the obvious, and less obvious aspects of what happens when tradition meets technology. Of the more obvious aspects of this phenomenon are changes in the method of production, marketing and distribution of goods. Whilst these changes are relatively easy to see and to document, there are other changes, which affect both the signification of, and our relationships to, the material culture in question. This paper explores the relationships between traditional Japanese clothing, the Japanese clothing business and new technologies which shape and change wearers' relationships to, and appropriation of traditional Japanese clothing.

Keywords: Tradition, technology, fashion, material culture, relationships, clothing.

Technology and Production

There is a tendency to think of kimono as being only about tradition, a clichéd image of a beautiful Japanese woman. I intend to unwrap that cliché, demonstrating the interesting ways in which kimono interacts with technology. Technical advance in the world of kimono is nothing new. In fact, in Japan, one of the first industries to come to an advanced stage of production was the textile industry. Not only that, but the treasures in the store house at Nara, also reveal that textiles were comparatively advanced way back in the Nara period (710-794). During the Edo period (1603-1868), Morris-Suzuki describes how, in the eighteenth century, the power of urban guilds was breaking down, leading to the spread of the tall loom into the countryside, where it replaced the more primitive back-strap loom and helped lead to the development of weaving centres, such as Kiryu.⁽¹⁾ She also reports that the government encouraged the development of sericulture, with loans to farmers and the publication of a guide book.⁽²⁾ Interestingly enough, technology in Tokugawa-ruled Japan, unlike in Europe,

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Keywords : Kimono, culture, production, technology, marketing, internet

was not so much about labour saving devices, which might put people out of work, but about an increase in quality. Thus Morris-Suzuki reports that whilst a water-powered silk throwing machine was introduced in Kiryu about sixty years after it was put into production in the UK by Thomas Lombe, helping to develop Kiryu, the technology was slow to spread in Japan, as was automatic machinery for silk reeling.⁽³⁾ Instead, Japanese farmers concentrated on selective silk moth breeding, and developed many different cross-breeds. They also worked on improving the care of the silk worms. Though this was more labour intensive, it contributed to the export of much fine quality silk in the 19th century. According to Morris-Suzuki, more than 100 texts on silk farming were written in the Tokugawa period, many of them by farmers.⁽⁴⁾

Development of technology is usually, but not always, driven by a desire for profit. There are other factors, however, which can also lead to technical innovations. The Edo period is known for its sumptuary laws, for example the prohibition of trading or wearing silk, and it was in an effort to avoid these draconian laws, that dyers trying to imitate the fine tie-dyeing, (*sou shibori*), technique, first invented the technique of *yuzen* dyeing.⁽⁵⁾ Ostensibly the resist paste, (*itchin nori*) was created by Yusensai, the Kyoto fan maker, but this is an unproven legend. Suffice to say that it became the most popular method of decorating formal kimono, and remains so, to this day. Increasingly strict sumptuary laws in late Edo also led to what could be considered to be the first example in Japan of a street fashion, led by the people, and moving down-up rather than from the wealthy, downwards.

The Tokugawa period saw the development of the cotton industry and indigo dyeing. Originally popular for its insect repelling properties, indigo was the colour for country and commoners' textiles. When silk was forbidden by law to the common people, they developed the fashion for indigo and white stencil dyed kimono. They sometimes lined their cotton kimono with silk, or had the linings hand painted,⁽⁶⁾ in order to avoid the eyes of the government, but understatement became the fashion statement of the day. Eventually this "iki" or chic style, would be copied by the samurai and upper classes, too. Iki became a lasting concept in Japanese style, and even today it remains *iki* not to reveal all one's colours on the outside. Dalby states that "derivative *iki*"⁽⁷⁾ is a principle right through Japanese society, and that whilst it is discrete, it causes havoc in international relations. Kuki Shuzo attempted to unravel *iki* principles in "The Structure of Iki" in the 1930s, but it remains a hard concept to define, concerned more with attitude than with chic, or style alone.

With the arrival of the jacquard weaving loom, from France, at the end of the 19th century, governmental sponsorship of large silk factories and the introduction of new chemical dyes and dyeing techniques, the textile industry became a key industry in the modernization of Japan, as it had been for Britain in Britain's industrial revolution. These new techniques and production methods led to the first cheap, mass-produced silk kimono. It was called *meisen* and was cheaply produced, being factory made and employing direct dyeing methods, rather

than laborious hand-weaving ikat techniques. Thus whilst Japan had an on and off love affair with Western clothing throughout the Meiji period, the meisen kimono remained the official school uniform for girls until the 1920s. It was also considered high-fashion for urban women, as the new dyeing techniques meant that bright and bold designs of increased complexity, could be produced relatively easily. In contrast to the dull blues, lavender and greys of the Meiji period, there was an explosion of design and colour in the Taisho period. Jackson describes how the Montgomery collection of early 20th century kimono reveal the influence of art nouveau and art deco in their patterning, European art movements which were originally influenced by the art, especially the prints, of Japan, which were seen in the great exhibitions in Europe during the mid to late 19th century.⁽⁸⁾ Interestingly, she also describes the way that modernist discourses were revealed, not through the patterns on Western clothing, but on the native clothing, where one can find images of sky-scrapers, war planes, and automobiles. Not only were kimono being produced in new ways, but they were celebrating that modernity in the images on the cloth. This celebration of technology, and especially of war technology is also revealed in Atkins, *Propaganda Textiles*, (2005).⁽⁹⁾

So when did kimono turn from being associated with technology and innovation, to being considered traditional and old-fashioned, having little or no relevance to today's methods of production or discourses about fashion? Dalby dates this from the Taisho period, but I suggest that it is perhaps since the rise of the kimono school that change in the world of kimono has become somewhat stunted, and the kimono has come to represent something rather cultured, and separated from everyday life. Dalby states that:

Kimono was becoming more and more representative of tradition. From Taisho on, youfuku continued to change, while kimono froze into the set tableaux we see today.⁽¹⁰⁾
(1993 p129)

In the words of Goldstein-Gidoni:

... the kimono that is wrapped around the female body has become a national symbol of traditionality and so perfectly completes the images of Japaneseness, which is opposed to Westernness. Wrapped in this symbol of traditional Japaneseness, the Japanese woman herself has gained a symbolic role, as her kimono-clad image has become one of the "eternal" images of unique Japaneseness.⁽¹¹⁾

Clearly the kimono, in the Western mind, had become an anachronistic and strongly gendered cliché of Japanese beauty. However, Dalby's statement worried me, as a kimono wearer, even when it was published in 1993.

Although the kimono world may have appeared rather stagnant at that particular point in

time, (the kimono industry saw a big drop after the bursting of the economic bubble in the 1980s), I could see, even then, what is referred to in the trend hunting industry as some “weak signals,” of a change in trend in the kimono world. The overall sales figures, however, paint a picture which apparently supports the conclusion of Dalby and Goldstein-Gidoni.

According to the figures released in the white paper of the Kansai Bureau of Economics, Trade and Industry, researched by Yano Research Institute, the figures of kimono sales in billions of yen, had dropped from almost 14,000, billion yen in 1993 to about 4,000 billion yen in 2008⁽¹²⁾. The white paper revealed problems at all levels of the business. The turnaround times are far too long, there are too many layers of middle-men, making the distribution process unwieldy, and kimono stores have depended on traditional family faithfulness and ties. They are geared to selling to women in their 50s and they have not examined the needs of the market. They are also notorious for a style of hard selling, which discourages the uninitiated from entering the shops at all. Customers have lost faith in the shops, and say that they have no way of telling if a 3 million yen kimono is worth 3 million yen. However, Yano Research Institute found that 80% of women said they were interested in kimono, and this was corroborated in an interview with Nakamura Kenichi of Tansu Ya, a large kimono recycle chain of stores, who conducted his own survey⁽¹³⁾. Whilst 80% of women confessed to being interested in kimono, most had not bought or worn one within the past year. These figures suggest that the problem is not with the actual garment itself, but with the kimono industry as such.

The reality is that technology in the production of kimono has never stopped developing. Japan continues to experiment with developing its silk production, though the industry has shrunk vastly. There are organizations such as the Dainippon Silk Foundation,⁽¹⁴⁾ which oversees the research of the Silk Science Research Institute and the Institute of Sericulture, and the Japanese Society of Silk Science and Technology,⁽¹⁵⁾ which also researches into silk production. According to the *Daily Yomiuri*, (Jan 21, 2009), the Dainippon Silk Foundation was offering generous financial aid to people who would start silk farms in Nagano. For 80 years, from 1860, silk was Japan's biggest export. Now silk is imported from Brazil and China, there are only 1,100 silk farmers left in Japan, and their average age is 67. According to the same paper, (November 7, 2008), the number of households producing silk has dropped from 2.2 million to 1,100, and production at its peak was 40,000 tons, but now stands at 100 tons. Nagano was an important centre for silk production. Experiments such as making silk worms that produce longer thread, cocoons which reflect light, and coloured cocoons are taking place, and the *Daily Yomiuri* has reported on several companies which aim to promote Japanese produced silk, such as Japonica, from Nagano (February 16, 2009), Sanko silk, which has developed worms which make a thinner thread, making a very fine quality cloth for kimono, and Platina Boy, which uses only male cocoons for a finer and longer thread (January 28, 2009). By branding these products the producers hope that customers will pay more for the

domestically produced, fine quality silk, rather than opting for cheaper silk produced in China or Brazil.

Whilst being hand-made in the popular imagination, so that the kimono has come to be associated with tradition, there are now many kimono lines that are prêt-a-porter, made in polyester, and washable. Bushoan company brought out their first kimono brand, (prêt-a-porter) in 1977.⁽¹⁶⁾ Toray company,⁽¹⁷⁾ who specialize in man-made fibres have developed Ceo α , a polyester fibre, from which they produce a range of summer kimono, *yukata*. The fabric is washable, has better wicking qualities than cotton, and drapes in a natural and pleasing way. Cheap, machine-sewn *yukata* are mass-produced in Chinese factories, and much handiwork, such as embroidery, tie-dyeing and even hand sewing of kimono is now outsourced to countries such as Vietnam, China or Korea, wherever the workmanship is of good quality and the labour is cheaper than in Japan. Whilst a good quality kimono might be 100% produced in Japan, there is a good chance that a cheaper one may use the materials or labour of other countries. Whilst in reality this kind of relationship is nothing new, the cross-cultural connection is perhaps more noticeable than in the past, when Japanese may have rightly assumed that their kimono was Japanese.

Another aspect of technology is that the world of home computers and digital printing has advanced very much. This has meant that it is now possible for creative people to design and have printed their own kimono and obi. In this situation the consumers themselves are becoming the producers, which is a big change as it is no longer necessary to have designs dictated, and choose from what is available, but it is possible to tailor make your own unique design.

Technology, Marketing, Consumption.

Technology does not just affect the way in which a product is produced. Technology has also affected the way in which kimono is marketed and also consumed by the general public. Whilst the kimono market in general is in a poor state, there are some companies which have managed to vastly expand their businesses, thanks to new marketing strategies and also to internet technology. "Kimono Ichiba" was a large kimono dealer in Kyoto, which had seven buildings, each with its own manager.⁽¹⁸⁾ The company went bankrupt in the year 2000. Kimono Ichiba then decided to start again as an internet business in 2001. It retained the seven buildings, each with its own character and manager, and it has gone from strength to strength. Sales have quadrupled over the ten years it has been operating and it runs on a very small number of staff. Without the huge burden of overheads involved in running and staffing all the buildings, it had been turned into a highly successful online enterprise. Many shops which do have a physical presence also make an online one, with staff blogs, and online shopping available. This increases the customer base, and ensures wide availability as location

of the physical store is no longer a problem. Fans follow the blogs of their favourite antique or recycle stores, or look for new items from their favourite online businesses.

Whilst going online is one way to market one's goods, another way is to create a brand or a boutique style store, which is noticeably different from the traditional stores. Bushoan stores resemble other boutiques. The stores are plain and dark with modern interiors, and the customer can browse the racks of *pret-a-porter* kimono easily. According to the data collected by the white paper of the Kansai Bureau of Economics, Trade and Industry, the image of traditional kimono stores is a serious problem in the kimono business. They are unfriendly and so difficult to enter or browse in, they have no transparency about pricing and are renowned for a hard style of selling. They also cater to older clientele with large budgets who are interested in formal wear. In the past, with fixed customers, they did not have to be concerned with marketing. However, the demographics of the market are changing, and the new consumer is a much younger, working woman, who wants value for money. She is urban, computer-savvy and fashion aware. This kind of consumer's needs are not catered for in the traditional kimono store. She is more likely to go to a shop selling *prêt-a-porter* or recycled kimono, or go and look online for her kimono. Yahoo and Rakuten are two of the biggest online sellers of kimono. On any day there are 165,000 women's kimono for sale and 30,000 men's kimono for sale on Yahoo's auction site. This means not only a huge amount of choice, but also that one can buy without the interference of shop staff or unwanted advice, and can shop within one's own budget with no outside pressure. Whilst those who need advice might still go to a physical store, there is no need to do that for a busy working woman. She can shop at night in the comfort of her own living room, pay by credit card, and have the kimono delivered to her doorstep at her own convenience. Technology has made the consumer far more autonomous and has given her far more choices than she ever had available before.

Our Changing Relationship to Kimono Culture.

So far, this paper has demonstrated that there are many ways in which technology has affected the production, marketing and consumption of Japanese traditional clothing. However, there is an even more important way in which technology is changing this item of material culture, kimono. Culture is about objects, but not only about the objects which people make, but it is about sets of meanings and values, which are shared amongst a society. Material culture studies look at the relationships between objects and people, how people make things, and things make people, how meanings are produced or contested and how representation can change the meanings of things. According to Storey:

As Williams makes very clear, 'The natural world exists whether anyone signifies it or not; (1979:67). But what is also absolutely the case is that the material (or the natural)

world exists for us—and only ever exists for us—layered and articulated in signification.⁽¹⁹⁾

In other words, we experience our world through all the meanings that are given to it. This is the politics of signification. Things are ‘made to mean’ something. Storey continues by saying:

The second conclusion we can draw from seeing culture as a realised signifying system concerns the potential for struggle over meaning. Given that different meanings can be ascribed to the same ‘sign’ (that is, anything that can be made to signify), meaning-making (that is, the making of culture) is, therefore, always a potential site of struggle.⁽²⁰⁾

This is far more than differences in semantics, or of one class having power over another class. Differences in signification help us organize behaviour, and define normality for us. They become material in that they organize our practices.

The kimono and the wearing of kimono is a deeply signifying practice. It is ‘made to mean’ in many complex ways. At the most basic level of all, if it is wrapped right side over left, instead of left over right, this would signify that the wearer is dead. The signifying system in kimono is complex, so complex that one has had to take a course of lessons to learn how to wear it. Length and the construction of the underneath of the sleeve indicate male or femaleness. Roundness at the corner of the sleeve indicate gender too, with squarer being more masculine, and a big round curve being feminine, and possibly young, too. Formality is signified by dyeing over weaving, and also by the use of up to five family crests. As a general rule, a design near the hem indicates more formality than an all-over repeated design, so the placement of the design also carries signification. The obi is also a signifying element. Increased width, length and quality of fabric indicating more formality than shortness and narrowness. A very narrow obi is for a man. Of course, as meanings are always contested, this signifying system is the system that is in place today, and the garment and its signification looked very different in the Edo period, or even in the Meiji period. Edo prints reveal to us a great variety of ways of tying the obi, and also that some women wore their kimono in a very loose and sloppy way. Though we might have a history of how the obi was tied, through visual records, we do not necessarily know the signification, if there was any, of all of the various knots.

Who has the power to dictate the signification in kimono? This is an important question. As we have seen, meanings are contested. In the Edo period, the government limited the common classes to wear cotton, not silk, but it was the people themselves who made a fashion of understatement. Whilst the government may have believed that cotton equalled commoner, the people believed that cotton stripes equalled style. Thus meanings evolve and signification changes.

Today, however, there is a strange situation, where people are largely not wearing kimono for everyday, and thus the natural development has largely stopped. After the war, since women have mostly been in Western dress, the dressing school, (*kitsuke gakuin*) has largely replaced the mother, aunt or grandmother, who helped you dress in the morning. What is the result of this?

Firstly the schools opened up a way for people to learn to wear kimono, who had no one around them to teach them to do so. In this way they have certainly carried out an important work in the maintenance of kimono wearing. Each kimono school, however, has developed its own system of teaching and learning, and in doing so, has invented wrong and right ways of doing things. What was once a perfectly natural process became a rule-governed process. In some senses they laid claim to the knowledge, which they perpetuated through their lessons, textbooks, and also in published materials, kimono “how to do” type of books. This ensures that people will have access to similar knowledge and will wear their kimono in similar ways. This greatly reduces the potential for creative expression in the dressing process and standardizes the look that can be obtained. A third aspect of what happens to this institutionalized knowledge is that it becomes the property of a certain group of people. Only those who take the classes can get certified as teachers, and only those who have a certain level of wealth and time, can go to dressing, *kitsuke* classes. Thus knowledge that once belonged to everyone has become a class-based phenomenon, which belongs to a few people who have the specialist knowledge. Storey writes of a similar phenomenon happening to opera in 19th century Britain. It had been a popular entertainment for all, but through various discourses, publications and funding issues, the middle-classes managed to turn it into a high-art, understood only by those “in the know.” They rewrote the rules of opera going.⁽²¹⁾ Another point to note is that this knowledge, as it is systematized and reproduced through the literature of *kitsuke* organizations, is that it is resistant to change. *Kitsuke* schools are the grammarians of the kimono world. The *Daily Yomiuri* reported on November 9, 2006, that there was a rush of women wanting to take the test set up by the All Japan Kimono Promoting Association. The 10,000 text-books were all sold out, and they had to increase the test centers from two to five. This kind of test will ensure that that kimono organization will retain some of its hegemony in the near future.

Kimono and the Internet

As previously mentioned, the internet has changed the way that women shop for kimono. It has increased the options not only in terms of the number of items available, but also of the style of shopping. The internet, however, has far greater potential and meaning than just being a rather large kimono department store. The internet is a site for communication and the building of communities, and also has potential as an educational tool. Though the internet

does have its critics, Bauman, for example, says:

Fun they may be, these virtual communities, but they create only an illusion of intimacy, a pretense of community.⁽²²⁾

There can be no doubt, however, about the potential of this tool, to reach a large number of people and to explode the geographical and time differences that have previously made world-wide communications a much more complex proposition. To think of it as one technology is really rather misleading, as there are so many different ways in which it can be used.

As a part of my research, I have been recording change over time, regarding kimono activities on the internet. Basically I started off by looking at kimono websites, and I divided them into those that are selling, and those that are blog or diary types of sites. These groups are not mutually exclusive, as many online shops also have a kind of staff profile or blog or diary type entry, which means that their fans can follow online and see what products they would like or are recommended by the staff. I used the safari search engine and did a search using the following phrase, 着物ブログ (Kimono blog). In October 2008, this produced 2,820,000 hits, which increased to 4,410,000 in December of 2009. This increased again to 4,750,000 hits in August 2010. That means that there are almost 5 million people blogging about kimono. That is a lot of kimono talk. The majority of these blogs are written by women. These women are computer savvy, and have enough time to write a blog. They may be young housewives, or working women, but clearly it is not only old women who are interested in kimono.

Another use of internet technology is for networking. Some blog sites function as networking sites, and facebook and mixi are popular English and Japanese networking sites. These sites are actually huge gatherings, where time and space are of no consequence, and they offer a democratic space for dialogue on any number of topics. Whilst they might provide only a semblance of community, they should not be dismissed as unreal or fake. Many a meaningful relationship has been forged through such networking. It should not be assumed that they start or end online, either. The networking site is an effective noticeboard for events happening in the physical world and people meet up and go to various places in Tokyo, visit museums, go walking etc. "Casual Kimono" is one such group within mixi and it has 3,227 members, as of August 18, 2010. An informant also described to me how he became more able to express himself in real relationships, through contacting people online, and getting used to conversing with them in cyberspace, first.

Another type of group is a fandom. In order to be a fan, all you have to do is click on the 'like' button. There is no commitment and no obligation to look or read or post messages oneself, so it is a group in the loosest sense of the word. On September 5, 2009, I discovered the kimono fandom on facebook. It was started in February 2009, by Patrizia Crimi. At that point in time there were 400 fans, and none of the postings came from Japan. There was little

information and few postings on the site. I decided to try and post regular updates from Japan on the site, to see what would happen. The fandom began to grow by about 50 fans per week, reaching 1,000 fans on November 5, and 2,697 on May 14, 2010. The rate of growth is steady and at the time of writing, (23 November, 2010), it has 3,888 fans. I was asked to become an administrator of the group, in May 2010, giving me some editorial rights over it. The group has no activities as such, but people ask questions about where they can buy kimono, what kind of obi goes with *yukata*, etc. They also post pictures of themselves in kimono. Some of those who post are from the few Japanese members, some are from Japanese who live overseas, but the majority are of people from other countries, who like to wear kimono. I can post a link to an exhibition in Tokyo, and find out about a kimono fashion show in Ohio. These people share their stories, blogs links, and swap information about informative websites, so although it is an unstructured space, it does not mean that what happens there is insignificant.

Youtube is proving to be a very useful site for kimono wearers. Here you can learn to put on your kimono underwear, and kimono and tie your obi in any number of styles, from youtube videos. You can watch a geisha or a bride being dressed. You can watch *maiko* dancing in Kyoto. If you want to learn to tie a new style of obi, try checking on youtube. For most people it is easier to learn from a video, than from looking at a series of pictures in a book. Some of these movies have the dialogue in English.⁽²³⁾ There are literally hundreds of these kinds of videos available for free, in one's own home. In fact, I discovered that many of the women I have "met" in cyberspace, on the facebook kimono fandom, have never been to Japan, but have learned to wear kimono with the aid of their computers and online videos. This is a very significant development in the dissemination of kimono knowledge. It is now available without attending a course at a *kitsuke gakuin*. This kind of learning is very important. It is free, democratic and the learning experience can be tailored to one's own needs. There is no need to learn to wear any kind of kimono or obi style with which you are not comfortable. You are free to learn exactly the information that will be useful to you.

So to summarize what someone who is interested in kimono can do with the internet, firstly it is possible shop in the peace and quiet of one's own home, bypassing the kimono shop and the conventional route for purchasing a kimono. Secondly one can blog or follow blogs learning about a person or a shop and their kimono experiences. Thirdly, one can network, meeting in cyberspace for discussion, or becoming part of a group with a physical presence and enjoying kimono groups. Fourthly, one can bypass the kimono school and learn to wear kimono in one's own home, using the internet.

Conclusion

I believe that it is this ability of the internet to be an educational tool and a forum for

sharing information that is the most significant interaction between kimono and technology now. The reason is that kimono schools effectively held the hegemony on kimono information. Until the web started to be used in this way, the kimono schools were able to control, effectively police, the information available. The internet has put an end to this hegemony. The kimono schools' hegemony is contested, and could be construed by some people as actually becoming unnecessary. They will soon be unable to maintain their authority. The information on how to wear kimono has already begun to leak out. Kimono dressing is becoming public property, (which is natural for a clothing item.) The kimono schools will have to reinvent themselves in some other kind of role, possibly in education in schools, for example, in order to survive.

There are those who will see this as a very bad thing. Kimono will change and people might wear it, without understanding the rules. However, we have to ask ourselves whose rules they are. They are signifying conventions, which, I have demonstrated, change naturally over time, throughout history, in any case. The kimono knowledge produced and promoted by the kimono schools is not permanent kimono knowledge, as signification is always shifting and subject to change. Kimono should not belong to a few authoritative and rule-governed people in some large organizations, (which are connected with kimono-selling businesses, too). Kimono belong to the people who wear them and appropriate them for their own needs. Kimono belong to the people. Kimono wearers are rediscovering the expressive power of kimono, and are enjoying the sartorial possibilities for expression which it affords. Just as the creative people of the city of *Edo*, found ways to get around the sumptuary laws and the governors of their day, so women and men are beginning to learn from each other, not from official institutions, they are beginning to take kimono back into their own hands, and onto the streets in what appears to be the beginning of a kimono renaissance. Today's kimono renaissance, once it has become stronger, has the potential to go beyond *Edo*, beyond Japan, and to the ends of the internetted world. The results of this renaissance are as yet unknown, but we can certainly expect, if today's trends continue, to see more variety in the use of accessories, the mixing of the use of Western and Japanese elements, more non-Japanese kimono wearers, and change in the signifying details of the kimono system itself.

Endnotes

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