



Japanese Fabrics and the Evolution of the Kimono

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FABRIC weaving and dyeing techniques have a long history in Japan and have been integral to the development of a unique fashion culture epitomized by the kimono. We spoke with Nagasaki Iwao, a Professor in the Department of Textile and Clothing at Kyoritsu Women's University, about the historical characteristics of Japanese fabrics and clothing.

When does the history of Japanese fabrics begin?

We don't know exactly when fabrics were first made in Japan, but we assume that fabrics were initially created for use as clothing to protect the body and later came to be used for a variety of purposes. It is thought that during the Jomon period (from 10,000 BCE until the start of the Yayoi period), the main raw material for making fabric was hemp. In the Yayoi period (10th century BCE-300 CE), silk came to be used, drawing on silk making techniques introduced from mainland China and the Korean peninsula.

As fabric weaving skills developed, the materials and techniques used for making clothes came to reflect the wearer's social class. In the seventh and eighth centuries, for example, ornate *mon-orimono* figured silken garments came to be worn by the aristocracy. These robes, with their extremely long hemlines and wide sleeves, were adopted to represent authority, influenced by the

court attire in China. *Junihitoe*, the formal court dress of women at this time comprising multiple layers of colorful mon-orimono, is representative of this style. On the other hand, common folk mainly wore clothing made from hemp, until cotton became common in the seventeenth century.

During the Muromachi period (1336-1573), the wearing of silk *kosode*, garments with cylindrical sleeves with small openings, precursor to the modern kimono, became common among women in the samurai class. And in the Edo period (1603-1867), kimono fashion blossomed, based on the *kosode*.

Why did the wearing of colorful kimono become so widespread in the Edo period?

One important reason is that Edo-period society was peaceful for around 300 years and people's lifestyles improved. Not just the aristocracy and the samurai class, but also ordinary people became able to dress fashionably depending on their financial strength. In particular, the splendor of women's kimono increased through improvements in dyeing techniques such as plant dyeing with indigo. From the latter half of the seventeenth century, *yuzenzome* dyeing was devised as a way to hand-draw patterns onto fabrics. Using this method, it became possible to express scenery and other complex designs, and the variety of figured patterns increased. Kimono and their designs played a very large role even in the

Japonism that came into fashion in Europe from the end of the nineteenth century through the start of the twentieth century. In the Meiji period (1868-1912), visitors to Japan bought Edo-period kimono, *noh*ⁱ costumes, and other dyed and woven textiles in large quantities and took them back to their home countries. These then became the collections at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and the Museo d'Arte Orientale in Venice where I am involved in research and classification, and their high value as works of art is recognized.

Beginning in the Meiji period, western-style clothing became common as modernization progressed in Japan, and opportunities to wear kimono decreased for Japanese people. However, in the last ten years or so, new ways of wearing kimono, such as wearing them directly over western-style clothing, have been proposed, and more and more young people think that kimono are interesting.

What kinds of differences are there between traditional western-style clothing and kimono?

Western-style clothing is cut and sewn three-dimensionally to match the body's curves, but kimono are cut and sewn flat without regard to the body's curves. For western-style clothing, it has been important to accentuate the body's silhouette through clothing; for example, women shaped their bodies by squeezing them with corsets when wearing dresses. But in Japan, importance has been placed on the beauty of the worn kimono itself rather than the silhouette of the body, and so fabrics were refined to be more beautiful, which led to the development of sophisticated techniques in weaving and dyeing.

As Japan is blessed with abundant nature, kimono are quite often defined by the plant motifs in their figured patterns. They also feature designs based on scenes from literature such as *The Tale of Genji* or *The Tales of Ise*. Such complex designs are not commonly found in western-style clothing.

Furoshiki wrapping cloths have gained attention in recent years for their use as alternatives to disposable shopping bags. Tell us about the origins of furoshiki.

Fabrics have been used to wrap objects in Japan since the distant past. Wrapping an object in cloth makes it easier to carry, but it is thought that it also had the religious significance of keeping a valuable item clean and pure. Even today, it can be said that wrapping gifts in furoshiki is a holdover from this. The word "furoshiki" ("furo" means "bath" and "shiki" means "to spread") dates from the Edo period (1603-1867), when people started using wrapping cloths to carry a change of clothes and prevent their belongings from getting mixed up with those of other bathers in communal bathhouses. All wrapping cloths later came to be called furoshiki.

In what fields might Japanese fabric manufacturers make a contribution to life in the future?

Using Japan's advanced fabric-manufacturing techniques, we can surely contribute to the medical and welfare fields by creating clothing for people with sensitive skin or eczema, for example, or by creating comfortable clothing that can be put on and taken off easily, using kimono-making techniques, for elderly people or the infirm. Japan has long made fabrics using natural dyes and fibers. In recent years, natural materials have been gaining attention for many reasons, including their natural colors, gentle textures, and minimal environmental burden. Understanding the needs of modern-day society to protect the environment, I think we can apply the traditional dyeing and weaving techniques of Japan not just to kimono but also to a variety of uses, including western-style clothing and interior design. ▮

Interview by SAWAJI OSAMU

ⁱ Noh is a form of musical and dance drama that has been performed in Japan for over 650 years.