

## Textile industry in Imperial Japan and Western influence on Japanese clothing

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### Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to show how clothing industry affected everyday life of Japanese citizens and how the fashion was changing on the clash of XIX and XX century.

In following chapters I will mention the important historical and social aspect regarding the beginning of Meiji period 明治時代 (1868–1912) and first half of the Showa period 昭和時代 (1926–1989). This is necessary in order to fully understand the political, economic and most importantly social life in Japan. Next, starting with presenting the case of Japanese textile industry, I will focus on impacts that West had on Japanese economy and industry regarding the selection of manufactured textile materials and also methods of production. Then I will show the influence of Western culture in Japanese fashion, pointing out the main events that led to adapting Western style by Japanese people. Because of the complexity of this issue, I also added a short chapter about other sources of inspiration regarding Japanese fashion. At the very end, before my final conclusions, I will shortly describe the change in military uniform of the Japanese Army in XX century.

Keywords: Textile Industry, Western Influence, Japanese Fashion, Japanese Clothing.

### Abstrakt:

#### Przemysł tekstylny w imperialnej Japonii oraz wpływ Zachodu na japoński ubiór

Niniejszy artykuł skupia się na wpływie, jaki miał Zachód na japońską gospodarkę i przemysł tekstylny w zakresie wyboru produkowanych materiałów tekstylnych, a także metod produkcji, co doprowadziło do zmiany wielu trendów w japońskiej modzie. Pokazuje również wpływ zachodniej kultury na japoński ubiór, wskazując główne wydarzenia, które doprowadziły do adaptacji zachodniego stylu przez Japończyków. Wyjaśniono ekonomiczne aspekty japońskiego przemysłu tekstylnego, a także ich rolę w zachodzących zmianach w sferze społecznej. Głównym celem tego artykułu jest pokazanie, w jaki sposób przemysł tekstylny wpłynął na codzienne życie Japończyków i jak zmieniła się japońska moda, w kontekście problematyki globalizacji w czasach imperialnej Japonii w XIX i XX wieku.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Japonia, przemysł tekstylny, wpływ Zachodu, japońska moda, japoński ubiór

I chose this topic because of a few following reasons. I was interested in the process of globalization in the time of Imperial Japan, that is XIX/XX century. More specifically, how this process affected everyday life of people living in Japan. While doing some research before choosing this topic, I came across the very interesting article written by N. Cambridge, called *High Teas, High Collars and High Rise Buildings in a 'High-Context Culture: The Semiotics of Japan's Project of Modernity* (Cambridge, 2016), to which I will also make several references in this paper. He introduced me to some specific changes in way of dressing that occurred in Japan in XX century. After that, I tried to proceed with further research and I found many sources describing why those transformations took place. One by one, they led me to the source and root of transition of many fashion trends, which I found in the Japanese textile industry.

I think this topic is important because not only it describes the economic aspect of textile industry in Japan, but also shows what was the result in social sphere. In my opinion, there is no better way to present the people's actual mindset, than describing and most importantly understanding the way of living their everyday life, in this case, through clothing. It also shows how every aspect of living in certain society affects the daily life. I find it very interesting how everything is connected, although it may not seem like it in the beginning. Taking this topic as an example, we can notice that it is another type of cause and result process, waiting to be acknowledged.

The aim of this paper is to show how clothing industry affected everyday life of Japanese citizens and how the fashion was changing on the clash of XIX and XX century.

In following chapters I will mention the important historical and social aspects of the beginning of Meiji period 明治時代 (1868-1912) and first half of the Showa period 昭和時代 (1926-1989). Discussing those is necessary in order to fully understand the political, economic and most importantly social life in Japan. Next, presenting the case of Japanese textile industry, I will focus on impacts that the West had on Japanese economy and industry regarding the selection of manufactured textile materials and also methods of production. Then I will show the influence of Western culture on Japanese fashion, pointing out the main events that led to adapting Western style by Japanese people. Because of the complexity of this issue, I also added a short chapter about other sources of inspiration in Japanese fashion. At the very end, before my final conclusions, I will also shortly describe the change in military uniform of the Japanese Army in XX century.

## **1 Japan opens its borders to Western trade markets.**

Living by their own rule, Japan in the Tokugawa period 徳川時代 was considered as an isolated country. Japan surely carried on with the policy of closed society, especially towards European merchants, but it wasn't an entirely isolated nation. They still kept a close relations with Okinawa, Korea and China, providing Japan with goods, information, art, medicine, information and scientific update or solutions (Howell, 2008).

The situation started to change after Commodore Matthew Perry sailed into Tokyo harbor in 1853. Following orders given by the U.S. government, Perry tried to get a permit to trade and open Japanese ports to U.S. merchant fleet. The treaty was signed in 1854, allowing trade in two Japanese ports. At that time, almost every Western power was searching for new markets to sell their goods. Japan with poorly developed navy could not push the pressure away, eventually agreeing on terms set by arriving Western countries representatives. Following Perry's footsteps, Great Britain, Holland, Russia and France also succeeded in signing several agreements with Japanese government, which promised regular relations and trade (Asia for Educators, 2009).

## 2 Industry

Textile industry in Japan was developing since the beginning of modern era. Even before that, Japanese rulers had put strict laws regarding wearing especially silk. In 1841 reforms of Tempo Kaikaku, the fine silk usage was limited only for the Japanese nobility. The dark colored linens and cottons were available for those with lower social status, usually middle-class groups (Cambridge, 2016, 15).

The high level of demand of European countries also stimulated constantly rising income in Japanese textile industry. Various methods were used. Hemp and ramie were mostly grown within households, to be then spun and woven. But cotton and silk, which were more demanding, were produced on a larger scale. Cotton was mostly seeded in Osaka area, while raising silkworms found the perfect weather conditions in Japanese mountainous area. These four materials were the base of everyday clothing (Francks, 2015, 146). Not all of them had to be made with good quality silk or linen. For example, the popularization of *meisen* - an inexpensive kimono, which was considered a home-clothing, but then in 1920s was used as an uniform in schools in Tokyo. By the 1930s, even actresses were advertising *meisen*, spreading the trend throughout Japan. *Meisen* is considered to be first fashion garment, while being affordable to non-elites (Furmanovsky, 2015, 3).

Because of the high demand for silk in non-Asian countries, Japan focused even more on the silk production. In the XIX century, 40 percent of total export value was represented by a raw silk production. Textile industry not only stimulated Japan's economic growth, but also created plenty of job positions for the local people. Moreover, this huge development in textile industry gave Japan a very significant opportunity to be independent from Chinese or European imported goods. In just 10 years, the amount of cotton spindles rose from just 1 000 to 100 000. After few decades, Japan became a country with the biggest value of exporting silk (Sumikawa, 1999, 10).

The cultivation, spinning and weaving the textile materials within few decades turned into big manufacturing industry. Due to expanded production, the price of those materials gradually started falling on the Japanese local market. Home-produced hemp and ramie, mostly produced for everyday activities clothing, were still the most popular among lower and middle-class groups, but thanks to lower prices of high demanded materials, those groups also

started to purchase cotton and silk. With such high-quality textiles, they could produce traditional kimono or other piece of clothing dedicated for special occasions (Francks, 2015, 147).

In the beginning of Meiji period, due to the industrial and manufacturing development the industrial working class and salaried urban groups had risen. In 1872 the Japanese government opened their first modern factory called Tomioka Silk Mill. In this and later on many other factories, young girls and women were hired as a significant work force, leading to somewhat awareness of the female situation in Japan (Howell, 2008, 5).

Even the special regional Industrial Districts called *sanchi* were formed. In 1919, *sachi* produced about 81 percent of total output. Those enterprises were supposed to help to handle reaching the amount of production required by the bigger textiles manufacturing corporations. First step *sanchi* took on was a modernization in the producing section. They switched from cotton thread spun by hand to a thread spun with a machine. This change resulted in many opportunities in further technological development in textile industry by fastening and simplifying the production process (Francks, 2015, 208).

### **3 Change in everyday clothing of Japanese people**

Before I introduce the case of local people, regarding their way of dressing or their mindset towards fashion and trends in that period of time, I certainly have to at least shortly describe the structure and problem of Japanese society. Thanks to putting this issue into wider context, it will be easier to understand clearly the origin of Western influence in deep-rooted Japanese society and a few reasons why some events occurred in this way and not the other. It will also help the reader to notice the deep relations and connections to Japanese traditions and culture.

In the Tokugawa period 徳川時代, Japan's economy and political situation were set towards war. Mobilized by war, with a need of being always prepared for whatever might happen on the political scene, forced Japan to create many military institutions and focus on every aspect that came with it. Because of that, the social-status system was created, which basically sorted social groups according to their relationship with military institutions. The specific hierarchy was formed: samurai warriors as the most important ones, then outcastes as least important. The system also acknowledged and then rated function of each social group (Asia for Educators, 2009). But though their political and social power, the samurai class was not the majority of the Japanese society. Samurais, which were in the service of the shogun 将軍 and daimyo 大名 formed a group of approximately 6 percent of the Japanese population, outcastes about 3 percent and religious clerics - only 2 percent. The group that consisted the remaining 90 percent were regular middle class people - merchants, fishers, artisans etc., who also were put in their own hierarchy (Asia for Educators, 2009).

In the Meiji period we are already able to notice the influence of Western culture on Japanese way of dressing. In the beginning, kimono was still the most popular part of Japanese wardrobe, especially for formal occasions.

Men wore traditional waistcoats called *haori* and long loose trousers called *hakama*. After some time, seeing and constantly being in contact with European traders and travelers, Japanese people little by little started to add some new elements into their culture. For example, for men - wearing Western style hat to traditional outfit, and for women - mixing style by wearing kimono with Western type shoes. The last, we can still see for example at university graduation ceremonies (Cambridge, 2016, 15).

The Meiji Restoration's social hierarchy let the aristocracy be decisive and influential towards the middle and lower class groups. They started promoting Western style as the "uniform of civilization". In the beginning, the two styles were constantly mixing. For example, wearing Western white linen coat with family crest or floral accents, which was a feature typical for Japanese style. Also on formal occasions, men wore *wafuku* – traditional Japanese clothing - with pocket-watches or scarves (Checkland, 1989, 40). Significant change occurred in the beginning of the Showa period. Men's clothing became even more influenced by the Western culture. A business suit was standardized and played a significant role in Japanese companies. Also for working women, the uniform was designed in Western style. Starting from work place, Western clothing had been quickly adapted by women inside the Japanese households (Cambridge, 2016, 16).

Although we can notice some changes in the way of dressing, in the beginning of Meiji period, at that time they were not that significant. It is true that during the political changes issued in XIX and then XX century, women were engaged to participate in educational and economic life of their nation by for example working in factories or pursuing education (but only to some limited level) , but they still were not completely free of social expectations of Japanese society. Trying to harmonize their position of being a stayed home wife and belonging to working class individual, Japanese women still wore a regular kimono, but wrapped it more tightly around the body. Later on they also started to wear man's hakama , which in next few years had a strong input onto perception of woman's sexuality (Cambridge, 2016, 16).

In the 1910s and 1920s women's rights movement reached its first meaningful point. Girls and young women called "modern girls", created a new look for themselves. They wore simple dresses and bobbed hair, which made them be seen still as beautiful females but more aware of their sexuality. Although the efforts were surely worth trying, most Japanese women experienced a social change only after II World War, when in 1947 the constitution was established and women were given rights to vote (Howell, 2008, 8).

Because of the American occupation in Japan after World War II, Japanese people were the very first witnesses of the Western influence affecting their culture. That is why in the 1940s and 1950s women particularly fancied the American style. They dropped their *monpe* - loose shaped trousers, which were obligated to wear for war-related jobs, and fitted long or knee-length skirts with narrow waist tighten with wide belt. Through the American occupation, Japanese people were also introduced to European fashion world. For example to first works of Christian Dior (Japan Fact Sheet: Fashion, 2017, 2).

The clash of traditional and modern Japan were not only the case of geography but also the social context. Of course the political and social situation in United States or European countries were different from one in Japan. That is why Japanese people had, in my opinion, very profitable method of valuing what is worth taking up and what is useless in the context of Japanese culture. The social class most easy to take over the Western culture was the aristocratic class, charmed by the richness and consumptive lifestyle of European upper class. Best example would be the Rokumeikan, designed by English architect, where the aristocratic class threw masked parties, dressed in luxurious ball outfits (Cambridge, 2016, 13). Playing freely with colours, women dressed most discordant tones, which surprisingly at that point was publicly accepted. When it comes to *yofuku* - Western clothes, many colours, even when not suitable, were used as a sign of creativity and setting new trends (Gulick, 1903, 182).

In that period many books, or more specifically, guides regarding foreign etiquette and manners were published. Instead of kneeling as a form of respect, the standing bow was presented in the social circles as a new way of greeting. The main rule that Japanese people had to obey was to distinguish other person's social status and importance in community. The higher the status, the deeper the bow (Cambridge, 2016, 14).

The easiest and also the cheapest way to get the Western look was to change a hairstyle. From the traditional top knot for men it changed into cut called *zangiri*. On the other hand, in the case of women they had more styles to pick from. For example "*hisashi* (eaves), *mimi kakushi* (ear covering) or *soku hatsu* (chignon/pompadour)" (Esenbel, 1996, 115).

The really interesting part is that Western influence affected not only way of dressing but also Japanese language:

*Changes in sartorial practice were also accompanied by the entry of loan words into the lexicon: manto and zubon (both from the French) for sleeveless cloak and trousers respectively, seta for sweater, oba for overcoat and sebiro for business suit (Cambridge, 2016, 20-21).*

#### **4 Other influences**

Even from the chapter above, we can notice that many aspects of a Western lifestyle was recreated imitating mostly the American, French and English style. This applies to new technological solutions, methods of managing many sectors of industry or economics, but also to everyday life of Japanese people, including way of dressing or behavior. All of those aspects can be associated with upper class, educated people or public authority officials. As I mentioned in the first chapter, upper class in Japan in XIX century consists of about 6 percent of total population. The majority of middle or lower class citizens had to find another way to be familiarized with trends and fashion brought by the West.

In those times, when travelling for most of Japanese people was still out of reach, they found another source to be introduced and then updated on new trends in the Western world. Many of the foreign films, especially from United States, were shown in Japanese cinema in 1940s. Thanks to this simple yet effective way of sharing other works, people of every social class were able to see new conceptions and perspective on everyday life of European and American people. In result, Japanese people took on some parts of fashion seen in movies, for example young women started to wear red shoes like those seen in the English film "Sabrina", or the trend imitating the fashion of "the sun tribe" from film called "Season of Violence". Men were wearing shirts with flower design and even sunglasses, when women chose colorful dresses or pants (Japan Fact Sheet: Fashion, 2017, 2). This process of slowly combining the Western and Japanese style was most likely to be seen in bigger Japanese cities or other popular regions.

The Western influence not only affected the way of dressing in Japan, but also the home sphere. That would be for example windows, chairs and tables. That only proves that in XIX and XX century Japanese people were likely to adopt to new situation but also interested in new things that could help them improve their current situation or standard of life (Gulick, 1903, 77).

## 5 Military clothing in XX century

In previous chapters I was more focused on the civilians and the Western influence on their everyday life. This change was also noticed in the military field. The design of the Japanese soldier's uniform transformed throughout the years, adding or taking away some elements (like pockets, numbers of buttons or shape of the collar). At the first moment this may seem irrelevant but actually it is strongly connected to the political and economic situation within the country. Because my topic concerns the textile industry in Japan and its Western influence, I will focus more on the outlook of the uniforms and the main purpose of its change.

The new uniform of the Japanese Army called M98 was presented in 1938. The change of Army's uniforms was provided due to a huge demand of a comfortable uniform that would be easy to produce in short period of time. In first few years, the Military Department noticed, that it is impossible to replace every old uniform in such a short time. It was settled that the old dark yellow uniforms had to be worn until they would be completely worn out (Military Intelligence Service War Department, 1944, 21). I would like to quote the very detailed description of the new Japanese military uniform, which was published by the Military Intelligence Service War Department in the *Soldier's Guide to the Japanese Army*:

*In the new uniform there was a turn-down coat collar, which could be easily opened. (...)The coat for Noncommissioned officers and men is single-breasted with five buttons and four flap, ped pockets, the two breast pockets.. Trousers are styled like breeches and secured with tapes at waist and ankle. All except mounted troops (who wear leather boots or leather puttees) wear*

*wool wrap puttees and high pigskin or cowhide shoes. The marching shoe usually has unfinished leather on the outside, and may have either a leather hobnailed sole or a rubber sole with rubber cleats. Tabi (split-toe sneakers) are issued in all climates. A undershirts are usually gray or white, with single breast pockets. Caps are of wool with a chin strap (...). For winter, coat and trousers are of olive-drab wool. (Military Intelligence Service War Department, 1944, 23).*

As we can notice from the description, each element was serving some kind of practical purpose. For example the turn-down collar that could be opened was very convenient in times of fighting in summer or in the tropics. Also the usage of materials was not accidental. Leather as a strong fabric was meant for things that have to last longest (e.g. boots), and wool that gives out the heat on warm days but keeps the warmth in cold nights. This new uniform was carefully thought through from the military point of view, but also with a consideration of the economic level and textile industrial development in Japan.

## 6 Conclusions

For sorting things out and also to state my view on this topic, I will briefly summarize all the aspects discussed in the previous chapters.

After putting an end to *sakoku* - the Japanese isolation, the Western country came to Japanese ports, bringing their manufactured goods. By opening borders to American and European countries, a new ideology, culture, technology was brought to Japanese nation. This also created an opportunity to export high demanded textiles, which led to significant development in Japanese textile industry. Most common materials were hemp and ramie usually produced in private households, and more demanding to maintain - cotton and silk, which were produced in specific areas at farms or factories. Japanese factory itself had experience a huge change in their producing system. First, they hired girls and women as legal workers. Seen as working individuals and not only as typical housewives, for women it was just a beginning for upcoming social changes. Then they modernized the production process, introducing new machines, making the lines work faster, and what comes with it, making more money.

The uptake of Western style in clothing was carried on accordingly to the socio-political status of a certain groups. The upper class, meaning aristocracy, soldiers, officials and high educated people were the first ones to adopt the Western dress, which reassured their high position within Japanese nation and also on international scale. Also, the military and public authority officials took up uniforms made in Western style. With governmental control over schools, the uniform for their students was chosen by many high schools and universities (Cambridge, 2016, 20). Even until this day, some of the Japanese schools require the British sailor-suit for girls and a Prussian army-style uniform for boys. Due to seven years of American occupation period in Japan, the traditional kimono was replaced with Western style



clothing. Currently, the kimono is reserved for the special occasions, such as university graduation, weddings and festivals (Cambridge, 2016, 21).

In this paper I tried to describe the process of mixing and taking over some part of Western culture regarding way of dressing. As I hope I clearly presented in previous chapters, all the changes were happening not in just few years after the end of *sakoku*, but throughout few decades after opening Japanese borders to the West. Years after years, Japanese people took over some Western feature like a hairstyle, which was the cheapest way to show the Western trends, wearing Western hats, clothing etc. Even within representation of public authority, like army, police or post office, their uniforms were styled in the Western style.

The Western influence not only affected the way of dressing in Japan, but also the home sphere. That would be for example windows, lamps, chairs and tables. That only proves that in XIX and XX century Japanese people were likely to adopt to new situation but also interested in new things that could help them improve their current situation or standard of life (Gulick, 1903, 77).

What interest me the most is the question whether the Japanese people were so eager to assimilate to a new ideas and perspective brought by Europeans and Americans. How were they able to switch from traditional, patient and slower way of living to Western “rushing” while wearing German-made hand watch? The answer is certainly not unanimous. On one hand it is possible that they appreciated the Western manufactured goods and many technological solutions to improve in their own business. On the other hand, it is also most likely that Japanese people felt the pressure that in order to be considered as a great nation and be put in the same category as Western powers, they had to live by rules of the West. Or maybe both those aspects were constantly changing together with the mindset and social order, combining the Oriental mind with Occidental way of living (Gulick, 1903, 434).

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