

## Kimono and Colonialism

Rie Mori

The purpose of my study was to investigate how kimono were perceived in Taiwan and Korea during the Japanese colonial period from 1895 to 1945, and elucidate the multiple meanings of kimono under Japan's colonial rule. I considered the motivations of Taiwanese and Koreans who wore kimono during the colonial period and how others residing in the colonial territories interpreted their actions.

I define the use of the term 'kimono' and its consequent symbolic meaning according to its historical context. In my study, the word kimono indicates clothes that originated in modern Japan, such as nagagi, which means a "long garment" and is commonly called "kimono" today, as well as obi sashes, haori jackets, and monpe (a type of loose fitting trouser). These variously shaped garments were all referred to as "kimono" or as wafuku, in other words Japanese-style clothing, within Japan proper and its colonies. In this study, I focus on women in Japan, Taiwan, and Korea who wore kimono during and for some time after the Pacific War (1910-1945).

During the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal in December 2000, Park Yong-sim, who came to Japan from Korea with the prosecutors, was unable to eat or talk after she saw yukata provided in the hotel. Yukata reminded Park of the Japanese kimono, which she had been forced to wear in the comfort station. Park lost her words and was assailed by flashbacks. As a result, she was not able to enter the witness box, and a video was used to take her testimony.<sup>1</sup>

In current Japanese society, 'yukata' or kimono tend to be considered, in general, as something nostalgic and charming that plays a part in contemporary women's fashion. I used to see them that way too. However, reading about Park's flashback, I became acutely aware that the kimono may trigger a serious reaction in some individuals, and that the Japanese kimono is deeply involved in Japan's colonial control and war responsibilities. Therefore, I began to think that I ought to research what the Japanese kimono represented to the people whose lives were invaded and damaged by the Japanese state and the military.

### Nationalism and Kimono

The Diet Representative's League for the Promotion of Japanese Dress (wasô shinkô giin renmei) is supporting "the furtherance of Japanese clothing," for example, by wearing Japanese kimono to "welcome the Emperor's Majesty" at the opening reception for the annual National Diet session.

The 2006 Amendment to the Basic Education Law included the sentence, "Respect tradition and culture, and love our own nation and homeland." In the Government Curriculum Guidelines, which were announced in March 2008, the new requirement of "having a basic knowledge of Japanese clothing" was included in junior high schools' technical arts and home economics

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<sup>1</sup> Nishino Rumiko, "Shôgen ni dô mukiauka (How to face the testimony)", in Women's Active Museum on War & Peace eds. *Shôgen: Mirai he no kioku Ajia 'ianfu' shôgen-shû Minami/Kita/Zainichi Koria hen jô (Testimony: Memories for the Future-The Collected Testimonies of "Comfort Women" in Asia Vol. 1, South, North, and Zainichi Korea)* (Tokyo: Akashi shoten, 2006). Hereinafter all the testimonies used in this article are quoted from this book.

curriculum. Today, the Japanese clothing industry is actively collaborating with the home economics educational agencies, in order to find a means of introducing Japanese clothing into junior high school education.<sup>2</sup>

When asked why one chooses to wear a kimono, many kimono fans answer: “Because I am Japanese,” or “I can identify with Japan when I wear a kimono.” Where and how did this attitude or discourse begin, which aims to connect ‘Japan’ and the ‘kimono’ so intimately? I believe that it was the trend of Japonisme in the 19th century Western world that created the discourse of connecting ‘Japan’ and the ‘kimono,’ and that the discourse began to be used strategically by the Japanese during national mobilization.

During colonial times, Taiwanese women are thought to have worn kimono more frequently than Korean women. Taiwanese women who hoped to succeed in Japanese upper-class society dressed in kimono. Sociologist Hung Yuru writes that some Taiwanese women under Japan’s rule wore kimono as formal wear when they attended Japanese ceremonies and some wore kimono merely as a fashionable garment. But many highly educated women were not keen on wearing kimono because it had great political and cultural significance. Instead, according to Hung, they preferred to wear Chinese clothing.<sup>3</sup> Korean costume historian Yu Hee-kyung shows that the first Korean woman who wore kimono was Pe jeon-ja. Pe jeon-ja was the first Chosun governor, the adopted daughter of Japanese politician Ito Hirobumi, and a secret agent. But Yu Hee-kyung says that Korean women, due to their anti-Japanese sentiments, were not very supportive of wearing kimono.<sup>4</sup> Those who were forced to become “comfort women,” however, often were not given a choice of clothing. Keeping this in mind, this paper examines descriptions of the use and significance of kimono and monpe that have appeared in writings about Japan’s colonized territories.

### **Kimono in the testimonies of ‘comfort women’ for the Japanese military**

Around Japanese military bases, ‘comfort women’ from Korea and other places were forced to wear kimono. The aforementioned Park Yong-sim testified that, at the ‘Kinsui-rô,’ Nanjing, to which she was first taken, she was told by the landlord to change into Japanese clothing. When she resisted, she was forcibly deprived of her own clothing, and her name was changed into ‘Utamaru.’ Park Du-ri, who was taken to the comfort station in Changhua County of Taiwan, testified: “The landlord (of the comfort station) offered me nemaki (which is a kind of kimono to worn as sleepwear) and obi. Each of us had to acquire three or four kimono with different patterns to wear. The manager would buy cosmetics and other clothes for us if we paid him.” Similarly, in many testimonies, women recounted their experiences of being forced to change from chima-jeogori (Korean-style clothing) to kimono, adopt a Japanese name, and have their hair cut short, because “Japanese women have short hair”.

In another case, Song Shin-do was ordered to wear kimono at ‘Sekai-kan’ in the Wuchang District. She testified: “when I said I didn’t know how to wear the kimono, and didn’t need it, they said that I could wear a Western style one-piece dress. I thought it meant that I would be given a one-piece dress,

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<sup>2</sup> See *Gekkan Some to Ori (Monthly Dyeing and Weaving)*, August 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Hung Yuru, “Shokuminchi Taiwan no ‘Modan garu’ genshō to fasshon no seiji ka” in Itō Ruri, Sakamoto Hiroko, and Tani E. Barlow eds. *Modan garu to shokuminchi teki kindai* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2010), 273-277.

<sup>4</sup> Yu Hee-kyung and Park Kyung-ja, *Kankoku Fukushoku Bunkashi* (Tokyo: Genryūsha, 1983), 345.

but was told that I had to buy it myself.” This reveals how a Western style dress was chosen when Japanese-style kimono was not available or rejected by the women. Moon Pil-gi, who was in the comfort station in Manchuria, testified: “I was given a purple-colored one-piece dress, and was told to change my clothing. All ‘comfort women’ were wearing the same one-piece dress and had their hair short.” Kang Duk-kyung, who was in the comfort station in Japan, testified: “I have never worn a kimono. I wore a blouse and skirt.”

Moreover, in the battlefield where kimono couldn’t be prepared, makeshift clothes were being used. Kim Hak-soon testified that in the comfort station in China she was wearing “something like cotton underwear already worn by soldiers” or “clothes that Chinese people had left in their homes.” Hwang Geum-jou also mentioned that when she arrived at the comfort station in Jilin, she was given “monpe, haori, military socks, a hat, black running shoes, and a quilted overcoat and pants. After that, there was a time when I was provided with military sports wear, but soon there was no clothing supply, and I began picking up soldiers’ used clothes and wore them.”

These accounts show that ‘comfort women’ for the Japanese military wore kimono, even if the situation mean that they were not always available. They sometimes wore Western clothes and sometimes kimono, and in cases where neither of them were available, soldiers’ used clothes. It is significant that in all of these cases, the women who were forced to become ‘comfort women’ were made to adopt Japanese-style names and Japanese-style customs, and were denied their long hair and specific cultural dress, such as chima-jeogori. As my research reveals, the use of the term kimono, as well as the meaning of the garment itself as a signifier of national loyalty, underwent significant changes during the Pacific War. During this time, kimono as a symbol of nationalism and oppressive Japan came to be a fixture in Japan’s colonies and thus inseparably linked to nationalism in both Japan and Japan’s former colonies.

### **Kimono in Korea under Colonial Rule**

In Korean literature of the colonial period (1910-1945), contrasting ‘white clothing’ and ‘black clothing’ was used as a symbolic expression. While ‘white clothing’ represented traditional Korea or Koreans, ‘black clothing’ mainly referred to Western clothing that represented the modernized male or a Japanese or Western male. In some cases, literature referred to ‘black kimono’ and ‘blue long johns’ to signal the presence of Japanese peasants: “the land where the peasants had gone was now cultivated by unfamiliar farmers who wore black clothing. They worked with their face covered by a towel, wore blue long johns and held up the hem of their kimono.”<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, literature often represented Japanese females in kimono outfits. Interviews conducted with individuals who lived through the colonial period illustrated how these people remembered Japanese men as wearing ‘black clothing’ and Japanese women as wearing kimono.<sup>6</sup>

Until around the early 1940s, rather than being perceived as a symbol of Japanese nationalism, the kimono as portrayed in literature evoked the international atmosphere of Korea and Manchuria as cosmopolitan cities. In *Kohyang (Home)* by Hyong Jing-geon (1926), a man who had to leave home

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<sup>5</sup> Chang Hyok-ju, “Owareru hitobito,” in Omura Masuo and Hotei Toshihiro eds., *Kindai chōsen bungaku nihongo sakuin shū 1901-1938 Sōsaku hen* vol. 3 (Tokyo: Ryokuin shobō, 2004), 128.

<sup>6</sup> Okada Hiroki, “Hakui to *chima-jeogori*” in Suzuki Kiyofumi and Yamamoto Makoto eds., *Yosooi no jinruigaku* (Kyoto: Jinbun shoin, 1999), 83.

due to colonial rule and was wandering in Manchuria and Japan wore a kimono.<sup>7</sup> In *Muǽng* (Heartless) by Yi Kwang-su, a progressive Korean woman who was influenced by democracy and went to a music school in Japan was described as wearing a kimono.<sup>8</sup> In *Hantô no geijutsuka tachi* (Artists from the Korean Peninsula) by Kim Seong-min (1936) and other pieces, the author describes Korean women working at a café who had short hair and wore kimono.<sup>9</sup> In *Sinmon* (Patterns of the Heart) by Che Myong-ik (1940), there is “a white dancer who wore kimono” at a cabaret in Harbin.<sup>10</sup>

However, in the late colonial period towards 1945, a change seems to have occurred in representations of kimono. In the movie “*Kimi to boku* (You and me)” produced by the Press Section of the Korean Army, there is a scene in which Paek’hi, the sister of a Korean volunteer soldier, and Mitsue, the sister of a Japanese soldier, exchanged clothing.<sup>11</sup> In the scene, Mitsue helped Paek’hi to put on the kimono and said “it suits with you very well, Paek’hi-san. I wonder if you can come to my home as my brother’s bride.” Mitsue went on, “I wish more women here in Korea wore kimono.” In reply, Paek’hi said “Umm...but it is difficult to wear and people would feel shy about it.” Then Mitsue said “I wear Korean clothing without hesitation as it is very nice. We cannot do anything if you feel shy.” In their conversation, while the unity of Japan and Korea and the close relationship between Japanese and Koreans were promoted, we cannot see an equal relation in their exchange of kimono and Korean dress: Mitsue was outgoing and Paek’hi was passive; kimono was difficult to wear and Korean dress was easy.

In this period, scenes of Korean women in Korean dress and Japanese women in kimono sewing good-luck handkerchiefs (‘sennin bari’) and bidding farewell to the soldiers are prominently featured in literature, movies and drawings. In order to promote the image that colonial Korea and its ruler Japan worked together in carrying out the war, Korean dress and kimono were effectively used to convey unity. Therefore, when the kimono evolved from an innocent cultural item into a nationalistic symbol of ‘Japanese women’ or ‘the spirit of Japan’, it was imposed upon the people in colonized and occupied areas.

### **Monpe under Colonial Rule**

Monpe is considered to be a form of Japanese women’s wear that originated in clothing for agricultural laborers. Monpe is more convenient for physical work than nagagi, a type of kimono, because, like trousers, monpe, has divided legs for ease of movement. Monpe can be worn over nagagi because it is loose fitting. Older-style trousers worn by agricultural laborers are tighter, so they cannot be worn over nagagi but can be worn with short shirts. Nagagi and monpe were mainly urban

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<sup>7</sup> Hyohg Jing-geon, translated by Yang Ming-gi, “Kokyô”, in *Chôsen bungaku sen* vol. 1 (Tokyo: Sanyûsha shuppan, 1990), 74.

<sup>8</sup> Yi Kwang-su, “Mujô,” in Omura Masuo and Hotei Toshihiro eds., *Kindai chôsen bungaku nihongo sakuhin shû 1901-1938 Hyôron Zuihitsu hen*, vol.2 (Tokyo: Ryokuin shobô, 2004), 160. English translation is published as *Yi Kwang-Su and Modern Korean Literature: Mujông*. Ann Sung-Hi Lee, trans. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell East Asia Series, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Kim Seong-min, “Hantô no geijutsuka tachi,” in Omura Masuo and Hotei Toshihiro eds., *Kindai chôsen bungaku nihongo sakuhin shû 1901-1938 sôsaku hen*, vol.4 (Tokyo: Ryokuin shobô, 2004), 286.

<sup>10</sup> Che Myong-ik, “Shinmon,” in Omura Masuo and Hotei Toshihiro eds., *Kindai chôsen bungaku nihongo sakuhin shû 1939-1945 sôsaku hen*, vol.2 (Tokyo: Ryokuin shobô, 2001), 330.

<sup>11</sup> Ho Yong, “Kimi to boku,” in Omura Masuo and Hotei Toshihiro eds., *Kindai chôsen bungaku nihongo sakuhin shû 1939-1945 sôsaku hen*, vol. 6 (Tokyo: Ryokuin shobô, 2001), 400.

women's wear while short shirts and tight pants were rural women's wear. Monpe were devised so that women could easily undertake physical work while wearing nagagi.

During the last stage of the Pacific War (from 1941 to 1945) when Japanese cities were frequently under attack by the US Air Force, however, the Japanese government strongly recommended the wearing of monpe. Even today monpe remind many Japanese and Okinawan people of their lives during the Pacific War. For example, junior high school students wear monpe when they play the roles of Okinawan wartime students at school festivals. Taiwanese and Korean women were also encouraged to wear monpe under Japan's colonial rule. Therefore, monpe might remind Taiwanese and Korean women of Japan's rule rather than the war.

In Taiwan, women were encouraged to wear Japanese monpe during the last stages of the war (from 1941 to 1945). The Asahi Shimbun book entitled the Great Asian War and Taiwanese Youth included an image of a naval volunteer, his mother dressed in Chinese clothes and geta or Japanese sandals, and his wife dressed in kimono and monpe.<sup>12</sup> We can see that in Taiwan young women in pro-Japanese families wore kimono while old women wore Chinese clothes.

At the end of Japan's colonial rule in Korea, when strikes by the Allied Forces were anticipated, men were encouraged to wear the Japanese national uniform and women were encouraged to wear monpe, as was also the case in mainland Japan and Taiwan. There are testimonials of the period that attest to the difficulty of appearing in public places, such as administrative offices, without wearing monpe.

In the South Korean edition of the Asahi Shimbun for January 9, 1943, Korean leading novelist Yi Kwang-su whose Japanese name was Kayama Mitsuo wrote a column entitled "The New Beauty," which was the fourth installment of a series called Yakudô Hantô, which means The Dynamic Peninsula, namely Korea. The article praised the active appearance of Korean "wives" and "young ladies" who "were dressed in monpe," and who covered their heads with washcloths like Japanese women.<sup>13</sup>

However, in 1982 Yu Hee-kyung said in her book that monpe looked like traditional Korean women's underwear worn under chima, the traditional Korean skirt, so Korean people thought monpe were ugly and immodest. Yi Kwang-su's 'The new Beauty' is thought to express the complex sentiments of the Korean people.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Meaning of Kimono under Japan's Colonial Rule**

A few publications recommended that Japanese women wear Korean dress, but the main message was to urge Korean women to wear kimono. In Korea under Japanese rule, Japanese wearing Korean clothes and Koreans wearing kimono could not have been viewed as equals. Japanese would probably only have worn Korean clothes out of simple curiosity or for practical purposes. It should also be noted that men were encouraged to wear Western-style clothes, namely the national uniform, while women were encouraged to wear kimono, namely monpe. . Kimono is presumed to have become

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<sup>12</sup> Taiwan joseishi nyûmon hensan iinkai eds., *Taiwan joseishi nyûmon* (Kyoto: Jinbun shoin, 2008), 68.

<sup>13</sup> Yi Kwang-su, "Atarashiki bi," in Omura Masuo and Hotei Toshihiro eds., *Kindai chôsen bungaku nihongo sakuhin shû 1901-1938 Hyôron Zuihitsu hen*, vol.3 (Tokyo: Ryokuin shobô, 2004), 244.

<sup>14</sup> Yu Hee-kyung and Park Kyung-ja, *Kankoku Fukushoku Bunkashi* (Tokyo: Genryûsha, 1983), 346.

more feminine during this period, at a time when men were encouraged to wear Western-style uniform. Nevertheless, unlike the period in which the kimono was an exotic costume like Western-style and Chinese-style clothes, Koreans who wore kimono during the “Japan and Korea as One” period demonstrated assimilation with Japan. The fact that wearing kimono was encouraged or enforced during this period must be understood as a form of Japanese colonial rule. Thus, in the “Japan and Korea as One” campaign, the kimono was not placed on the same level as Western-, Chinese-, or Korean-style clothing, but was treated as superior to other forms of dress. Some even claimed that wearing kimono properly, as worn by people in mainland Japan, was somehow demonstrative of “Japaneseness” and deserved recognition. Again, kimono in this instance is not an expression of internationalism or urbanism as was the case in the previous period, but was a symbol of nationalism and the purity of the Japanese spirit. In this way, the meaning of the kimono was transformed in Korea during the colonial period.

The following passage in the preface of “Tenkanki no Chosen Bungaku,” Korean Literature in Transition, a critical essay by Choi Jae-seo, published in April, 1943, demonstrates this transformation of the meaning of kimono:

Since childhood, I liked the Japanese language, rooms, the politeness of the people, their vigorous academic curiosity, and, in particular, the literature of the Meiji period. And, I was able to get along with some of the Japanese people with whom I became acquainted without feeling any distance. In this way, I breathed Japan, and I grew up in Japan. However, I never consciously associated each of these things with Japan as a nation. In essence, it was a matter of taste and refinement.

It came as a shock, or sometimes even as an embarrassment, for me to have to shake off those things that I had acquired over such a long period of time, and to consciously associate them with Japan. However, I soon found out that it was a thorny path that all of my people would have to tread.

This passage indicates an individual’s anguish when forced to apply a national consciousness to Japanese things that had previously simply been enjoyed without association with Japan as a nation.<sup>15</sup> Kimono was one of those things.

## Conclusion

After Japan’s defeat in 1945, more people wore and sewed Western clothing under the occupation by the Allied Forces. On the other hand, the kimono was worn less frequently. A feminization of the kimono became more apparent. To the Allied occupation army, kimono were used, for example, as souvenirs, and became a stereotyped symbol of Japanese culture. Kimono as a symbol of nationalism and oppressive Japan was an image that was introduced into colonial Korea prior to post-war Japan, at a time when the image was inseparably linked with nationalism in the minds of Koreans.

The style of wearing and using Japanese kimono has changed with Japan’s political and

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<sup>15</sup> Choi Jae-seo, “Tenkanki no Chosen bungaku,” in Omura Masuo and Hotei Toshihiro eds., *Kindai chōsen bungaku nihongo sakuhin shū 1901-1938 Hyōron Zuihitsu hen*, vol.2 (Tokyo: Ryokuin shobō, 2004), 36-37.

economic transformation. In the future, I plan to carefully observe the meaning and use of the kimono within Asia.

*Partly translated by Naoko Ikeda and Risa Tokunaga*

*Revised by Terry Satsuki Milhaupt, Sarah Frederick*

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