

Selling “Japan” to the West: Kimono Culture in the Twentieth Century

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My presentation discusses kimono made exclusively for export, including kimono-shaped garments and kimono-related objects made as tourist art, souvenirs for foreigners, and those produced and consumed in foreign countries, as well as their visual representations. By demonstrating how these souvenirs and exports crossed national as well as cultural boundaries in many ways, this paper intends to propose a new theoretical framework to study material culture in the twentieth century. That is the framework to focus on international tourists as active agents--how historically and socio-culturally conditioned agents formed and circulated their cultural babble across certain regions, and how that circulation contributed to cultural production, i.e., kimono culture in the twentieth century in this case.

As a case study, the paper takes American GIs, who grew up in the early twentieth century and were later dispatched to the Asian-Pacific region, including Hawaii where the headquarters of the U.S. Pacific Fleet was located, and Japan after WWII. The paper first elucidates what kind of cross-cultural experience and understanding the GIs had with “Japanese goods” before being dispatched. Then, following their move, the paper examines aloha shirts in Hawaii and *suka-jan* and happy coats in Japan, each of which I summarize here.

Japanese Art Stores

For many Americans, the early twentieth century was when inexpensive Japanese handcrafts became increasingly available through mail order companies as well as at retail stores throughout the nation (Yamamori 2008:118). They were made both in and outside of Japan, but always exclusively for the foreign market.

Among these Japanese art stores, this presentation focuses on A. A. Vantine & Co. An analysis of its mail order catalogues reveals what kinds of kimono were sold in the United States and how, as well as what represented “Japan” to the majority of American people in the early twentieth century.

The Vantine’s catalogues show some of the most distinctive features of kimono made exclusively for foreign markets, including “Sleeves trimmed with fringe and tassels, well embroidered sash to match, with fringed end” (A. A. Vantine & Co. 192-?:43).

Besides what kinds of kimono to sell, an analysis of Vantine’s catalogues also reveals its distinctive ways to sell these kimono, which can be characterized by kimono’s association with or proximity to Chinese culture, to enforce Orientalism in visual (re)presentation. For example, the catalogues often show kimono and so-called “Mandarin coats,” originally for Chinese officials, next to each other, thus presenting them as alternatives to choose, in other words, something comparable--similar but distinguishable from each other.

It is worth noticing that such kimono’s association with or proximity to Chinese culture occurred not only at the sites of the foreign consumption but also that of production in Japan.

Takashimaya "Boeki-bu" bijutsu senshoku sakuhin no kiroku shashin-shu (Photo Albums of Exported Textiles Produced by Takashimaya) by Takashi Hirota shows kimono and Chinese Mandarin coats side by side (Hirota 2009:470). The albums also prove that the dragon motif was used not only for Chinese Mandarin coats but also for kimono with tassels (Hirota 2009:467-ㄱ 45-137, 470-ㄱ 45-195).

Aloha Shirts

While these kimono for export still retain a distinctive kimono-shape, aloha shirts, well-known souvenirs of Hawai'i, are not. Yet, at the beginning, they were made of textiles for kimono with distinctive Japanese designs and motifs. Throughout the 1930s, the early aloha shirts continued to be made of Japanese fabric, such as kabe crepe, a lot of which was manufactured in Kyoto. Servicemen during WWII were buying aloha shirts as quickly as they could get them. The most popular Japanese motifs after the war were the ones to inspire the Oriental exoticism, including dragon, tiger, carp, and traditional Japanese scenery and flowers, and architecture.

Suka-jan

What and how "Japanese art stores" sold in early 20th-century America, and the invention of the aloha shirt in Hawai'i prepared for Japanese invention of *suka-jan* right after WWII. The *suka-jan* was a jacket, typically sold as a souvenir for American GIs in post exchanges in U.S. bases all over occupied Japan. Like the case of the aloha shirts, the *suka-jan* followed wherever the GIs went.

The most attractive feature of the *suka-jan* is its elaborate embroideries, among which, the three most popular designs were eagle, tiger, and dragon. GIs' previous experience of "Japanese goods" must have preconditioned their demands for Japanese souvenirs to have these animals as symbols of Japan and the Orient, although the eagle is also a very well-known symbol for the U.S., and the U.S. Air Force.

Happy Coats: International Tourists, Circulation, and Material Culture

Seeing historical development of kimono-shaped garments, and kimono-related objects made as tourist art and souvenirs helps us understand rather peculiar existence of "happy coats," made exclusively for foreign tourists, coming to Japan today. That is, there exist kimono-shaped garments sold in Japan, but not to be worn by the Japanese. Some examples of happy coats with the design of dragon demonstrate that the same designs are shared by exported kimono, aloha shirts, *suka-jan*, and happy coats. In other words, one has to know what had been going on outside of Japan to understand why happy coats evolved to take this specific form, design, and material.

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