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KIMONO REVIVAL?

In skeptical quest of a boom

By MARTIN WEBB

Staff writer

"Why don't you write about the kimono boom?" they said, citing anecdotal evidence suggesting that the traditional gown of Japan was making a comeback. So, with several people at The Japan Times claiming they'd seen "a lot" of people wearing them recently, off I set to investigate.

Certainly, if there is suddenly a rush to dress up a la Edo Period, the victims of that craze have been assiduously avoiding my well-trained eyes. And so it was with a degree of skepticism that I set off on my quest.

The first stop on the trail of these retro-dressing fashionistas was an event space in Tokyo's stylish Daikanyama district, where kimono manufacturer Odasho was holding a junket to promote some new fabric designs they'd commissioned from a French artist.

Decidedly uncomfortable

Oddly enough, only a handful of attendees were attired in traditional garb -- although intrepid JT photographer Yoshiaki Miura managed to get a great shot of two pretty girls employed to look pretty in kimono while handing out canapes. There was also a fashion parade with a *yukata*-wearing DJ scheduled for later, but Miura-san and I decided to beat a discreet retreat.



Tokyo-based kimono "activist" Mamechiyo

YOSHIKI MIURA PHOTOS

Back at the office, a quick Google revealed that in the 1970s the domestic market for kimono was around 2 trillion yen per year, but that had shrunk to about 600 billion yen by 2000. However, an article buried in the online archives of this esteemed organ revealed that although the market for new kimono is shrinking fast, sales of used and reproduction kimono (the latter being new copies of old designs) ballooned to 34 billion yen in fiscal 2003 from 6 billion yen in fiscal 1999.



Pretty designs from kimono-maker Odasho

That latter little factoid got the old gray matter whirring, and quite fired me up to set off on my next step in quest of an "angle" on the resurgence of Japan's national costume. This led me to Harajuku, center of the street-fashion universe and home to a small secondhand kimono store I stumbled upon while exploring the backstreets many moons ago.

According to the shop manager, most of the old fabrics on sale are not bought to be worn, but to be turned into cushions, dresses or accessories. There wasn't a single kimono-clad customer to be seen.

But then, just as I was dejectedly heading back to the station, I spotted two women in yukata. They identified themselves as Sara Kumagaya, 22, and Mai Shinozaki, 21, both university students. If there was a kimono boom happening at the moment, they didn't seem to be aware of it.

"We wear Japanese clothes because they make us feel special and different," Shinozaki explained. "Nobody else we know wears them."

Without wishing to seem ungallant, that wasn't much help.

Having drawn a virtual blank in Harajuku, I resolved to track down the only kimono designer whose name was stored in my memory banks: Jotaro Saito.

Saito, 35, is unusual for a maker of Japanese-style clothes because he stages catwalk shows -- almost exclusively the preserve of Western-style attire.

The kimono boom?

"It started about a year ago," he said, helpfully, on the phone from his studio in Kyoto. "I don't think you'll see much of it in Tokyo, though, more in the provinces."

It's a good job Saito was at the end of a phone, because I might have hugged him otherwise.

"I think it's partly to do with Japanese people gradually exploring their roots and searching for identity. Many who have spent time overseas come back wanting to learn more about their own culture and traditions."

But are people really wearing kimono on a daily basis?

"What I'm trying to do is turn kimono from being a purely functional tool [for formal occasions that necessitate wearing one] into a fashion item," Saito explained, adding that many of his customers are well under 40.

"More and more young people are discovering that there are many ways to wear kimono -- that you can express yourself and have fun with them -- and they are incorporating kimono into their lifestyles," Saito concluded, his every syllable setting this k-boom hunter aquiver.

It seemed that Saito had some good answers, and I might have ended my quest for the truth there had I not received a hot tip from a colleague. This alerted me to the existence of kimono activist Mamechiyo, whose mission is to take kimono to the masses -- and never mind what the highly conservative world of traditional Japanese costume might think.

Speaking to me in the back room of her tiny store in Nishi-Ogikubo (best known for its antique shops), the immaculately attired Mamechiyo explained how the current vogue for kimono is a reaction to the frantic pace of modern life.

Understanding the difference

"The restricted movement it imposes forces you to slow down and think," she said. "You have to watch your sleeves when you go to pick things up, for example."

Like Saito, Mamechiyo pointed out that the key to the boom is in understanding the difference between kimono worn to weddings or the coming-of-age ceremony, and kimono for fashion. Formal kimono are worn for the benefit of others, so they have to conform to accepted standards as a mark of respect. But when you wear kimono on an everyday basis, you do it for yourself, and then you can do whatever you want.

"All the strict conventions of kimono are relatively recent inventions," she explained. "If you go back a bit further, people were wearing their *obi* tied at the front and all sorts of interesting things, so playing with kimono is part of the heritage."

Mamechiyo's kitsch creations -- Alice in Wonderland-themed kimono; flight attendant-themed kimono; houndstooth print fabrics; and obi with an embroidered piano keyboard -- might draw sneers from traditionalists, but they have struck a chord with a huge number of young women all over Japan.

But despite having signed a deal with a yukata manufacturer and having her designs on sale in

department stores across the nation this summer, this cutesy creator is wary of moving into mass production.

"We have a close relationship with our customers," she explained, showing me an album of Polaroid snaps of them wearing her designs outside the 2-year-old shop. "I don't want to lose that."

So, there *is* a kimono boom of sorts, it seems -- although it's not on the streets of Tokyo just yet.

But rest assured, I'll be keeping my eye out for tottering top-knotted ladies over the coming months.

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