

ABSTRACT

“The kimono is said to be dying,” reported American anthropologist Liza Dalby in the opening of her book *Kimono: fashioning culture*, “to be utterly too cumbersome for modern life, to be as elegantly anachronistic as the conservative old ladies or geisha who wear it.”¹ Despite its grim prognosis, the kimono continues to be worn on ceremonial occasions in its capacity as the national costume of Japan. However, how to wear a kimono has long since passed from the realm of common knowledge. While some choose to enroll in kimono dressing lessons (*kimono kitsuke*), the majority rely on kimono rental and dressing services for occasions such as coming of age day (*seijinshiki*) and graduation ceremonies. Recently the kimono rental chains of Kyoto have introduced a new type of rental possibility. In a package deal referred to as a “sightseeing rental,” customers can now be dressed in a kimono for the day whenever they’d like for a reasonable price. This it is not uncommon to see at local shrines and temples groups of young women sporting boldly patterned kimono and prom-queen like coiffures, men with dyed-hair and piercings wearing kimono with gothic accessories, kimono-clad couples, and even young women wrapped in the elaborate costume of an apprentice geisha. How has the kimono evolved from a dress that “modern young ladies are allegedly unable to tolerate”² to something that both women and men seek out not only for prescribed ceremonial occasions, but also for the purpose of having fun? Furthermore, why are these “sightseeing rentals” limited primarily limited to Kyoto? Answers to these questions shed light on the creative process through which national identities are conjured.

¹ Dalby, Liza. 2001 [1993]. *Kimono: Fashioning Culture*. Washington: University of Washington Press.

² Ibid

(Cos)playing Culture: Reimagining the Kimono in Modern-Day Kyoto

By Rachael Ann Ragalye

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Department of Sociology and Anthropology

South Hadley, MA 01075

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INTRODUCTION

The kimono proclaims itself the national costume of Japan and is duly recognized as such throughout the world. Yet today the kimono is said to be dying, to be utterly too cumbersome for modern life, to be as elegantly anachronistic as the conservative old ladies or geisha who wear it. Kimono is the garment men discarded a century ago in the name of modernity and efficiency but in which women continue to enfold themselves for formal and official occasions. Kimono is the soft silk robe requiring a corsetlike (sic) obi that modern young ladies are allegedly unable to tolerate. ...Beautiful but impractical is the modern rational consensus on kimono.

Liza Dalby, *Kimono: Fashioning Culture*, 2001[1993] (3)

I did not go to Japan with the intention of doing research on kimono. I believed statements such as the one made above by American anthropologist Liza Dalby in the opening of her book *Kimono: Fashioning Culture*, the validity of which seemed to be confirmed by my first sojourn in Japan during June 2010 for a two-week course on food and bathing culture offered by Mount Holyoke College and hosted by Japan Women's University. I seldom saw a woman wearing a kimono out walking or on the subway, and most certainly never saw a man wearing one in public. The one exception to this was when I happened upon a wedding procession at Meiji Shrine in Shinjuku, a ward of Tokyo. There I saw a

number of women and one man—the groom—wearing kimono. The bride wore a special white/cream colored bridal kimono, complete with “horn-hiding” (*tsuno kakushi*) cap. The mother of the bride and the mother of the groom both wore a *kurotomesode*, a style of kimono so called for the black color of the body of the garment (*kuro*) that is patterned only around the hemline and the length of the sleeves (*tomesode*), with a gold-hued obi (Figure 1).



Figure 1 A Shinto wedding ceremony at Meiji Shrine, Shinjuku.

Excluding the mother of the bride, the mother of the groom, and the bride herself, only about three of the some sixteen female guests wore kimono. These women wore colored *tomosode* kimono paired with an obi of a contrasting color: a solid periwinkle kimono with a pale sea foam green obi; a sage-green kimono with a scattering of flowers with a obi embroidered with flowers on a golden background; and a graduated yellow-green kimono patterned with flowers at the hem, paired with a gold-orange patterned obi. With the exception of the bride, all

the women wore their kimono in identical fashion with the obi tied in a *taiko musubi* (drum knot), the style now considered to be the standard. The only man wearing a kimono in the wedding party was the groom, who wore a black and white striped *hakama*, a type of pleated trouser, over his black crested kimono. Two men, most likely the father of the bride and the father of the groom, wore tuxedos while the other men in attendance wore suits. Thus my experience in Tokyo seemed to confirm that kimono are rarely worn outside of ceremonial occasions such as weddings and almost exclusively by women. They are simply too restrictive, too expensive and, in the case of men, too feminine to be worn on a regular basis. Because of this, the amount of interaction that the majority of Japanese have with the garment is so small that how to wear it has fallen out of common knowledge. As such the tradition of wearing it survives mainly through kimono rental and dressing services for special occasions as well as a cultural hobby through kimono dressing or *kitsuke* lessons.

At the end of that same summer I returned to Japan, this time to Kyoto where I would study abroad for the next eight months at Doshisha University through the Associated Kyoto Program. I had chosen this program partly because of its location. I was hopeful of using this opportunity to revisit the geisha district of Pontochō in which Dalby had conducted her fieldwork in the 70s in order to see the impact of the advent of widespread personal technology use on this community whose very survival was based on trading ideas of “tradition.” Therefore I used my first moment of free time after having moved into my host

family's house to hurry off to Pontochō. Walking down the narrow streets paved with tiles bearing the crests of the *okiya* (geisha houses) of the district, I was ecstatic to catch sight of off-duty *maiko-san* (apprentice geisha) going about their daily business clad in rather simply-patterned kimono, their hair still done in the *wareshinobu* style indicative of her *maiko* status.

Afterwards I went to Yasaka Shrine, famous among the plethora of Kyoto shrines and temples as the site of the Gion Festival in the summer. The shrine was bustling in the warmth of a late September afternoon. Businessmen in suits walked through the Shrine as a short cut while young and old alike offered money and prayed before the various altars and sub-shrines found within the main compound of Yasaka Shrine. Particularly of interest to me were three young women who stopped to pray at a shrine dedicated to beauty. Each was clad immaculately in kimono, the obi of which had been tied stylishly in a knot other than the *taiko musubi*. Each had her hair impeccably styled, two with their curled hair pulled back and one with a sleek bun-like coiffure, and each sporting a flower-inspired hair accessory (Figure 2). Given that I was studying abroad in a city that is advertised at home as well as abroad as the seat of Japanese “tradition” and given that kimono wearing is now a “traditional” practice, I expected to see at least some women wearing kimono. However, the number of young people wearing kimono on days that did not correspond to a specific ceremonial occasion surprised me. These young women simply seemed to be enjoying their day in

kimono despite the fact that “modern young ladies are allegedly unable to tolerate” wearing it (Dalby 2001[1993]:3).



Figure 2 Three young women in kimono visiting a beauty shrine inside of Yasaka Shrine, Kyoto

Not only did I continue to see young women wearing kimono around popular tourist areas as the weeks continued to unfold, but young men as well, often walking hand-in-hand with a kimono-clad girlfriend. I even saw young men with spikey orange hair and piercings wearing brightly colored kimono and looking the epitome of punked-out, kimono-style. Occasionally I even saw young women wrapped in the elaborate costumes of a *maiko*, or an apprentice geisha; one woman stands out in my memory because I could see the tattoo of a cross on the back of her neck showing through her thick white makeup.



Figure 3 Three young women celebrating coming of age day in Tokyo in January 2011 dressed in kimono that resemble courtesans of the Edo Period.

While amused and confused by these kimono that did not correspond to my understanding of the role of a kimono in Japanese society, it was not until I saw a classmate's photo of three young Japanese women on the day of their coming-of-age ceremony (*seijinshiki no hi*) that I realized there was still much research left to be done on wearing kimono in contemporary Japan (Figure 3). These young women had donned *furisode* (formal long sleeved kimono worn by young unmarried women) in accordance with the prescribed manner of dress for young women on that day, but with shocking alterations: the collars of their kimono were pulled down so low as to reveal their entire left shoulder. Considering that young women are instructed to wear their kimono collars that they overlap close to the hollow of her throat, this was a radical deviation from the norm. What's more, two of the young women in the picture had their obi tied

in the front, a style reminiscent of woodblock prints of courtesans from long ago. I was stunned. This was definitely not the type of kimono I had seen worn by women in Mejiro or even the young women at Yasaka Shrine, let alone Dalby's "conservative old ladies" (Dalby [1993] 2001:3).

Something had changed since the time that Dalby had penned the opening to her book, and I was determined to find out more. I set out to interact with kimono and those that wore them as much and in every way that I could. I applied for a research grant, purchased the cheapest kimono I could find, and started taking kimono dressing lessons. I thought that I would be researching new innovations and styles of kimono, but those flamboyant and extraordinary forms eventually faded away in importance as I began to notice the larger number of young women and occasionally men wearing more "normal" kimono as well as the number of women dressing like geisha, *maiko*, or even *oriyan*. Still I did not know why so many people would wear kimono when the scholarship I'd read cast the practice as so unpopular.

I learned while talking with an employee of a kimono rental store that in addition to wearing a kimono for formal occasions such as *seijinshiki* or graduation ceremonies, local sightseeing was a popular reason for renting kimono. I was taken aback; young Japanese were paying to be dressed in a kimono for a day for the purpose of walking around the local sites. They were having *fun* with kimono. Clearly the kimono's vital signs were stronger than I had been lead to believe. But why had I not seen similar practices in Tokyo? In an attempt to find

out what was going on, I began to survey anyone who I saw wearing a kimono in the popular tourist areas of Kyoto, particularly Gion. While I occasionally met someone who own their own kimono and could dress themselves in the garment, the overwhelming majority were doing sightseeing rentals and could not dress themselves.

While the answers regarding what the kimono symbolized showed remarkable diversity, the answer I most commonly received to the question of why they chose to wear a kimono on that day was some combination of the following: because it was the national costume (*minzoku ishō*), because they were in Kyoto, and because wearing the kimono suited the atmosphere of Kyoto (*funiki ga ii*). The responses of my informants indicated a very clear relationship between kimono and Kyoto, defining the latter as place that lent itself to the wearing of kimono. The scholarship on kimono fails to explore how the practice of wearing kimono might differ from region to region is unexplored. Existing research tends to focus on either the regions of Tokyo (see Goldstein-Gidoni 2001[1999] and 2005, Assmann 2008) or does not approach the subject from any particular location (see Dalby 2001[1993]); voices from the northernmost region of Hokkaido as well as the southernmost region of Kyūshū remain absent from consideration.

Paola Zamperini writes in her essay “On Their Dress They Wore a Body: Fashion and Identity in Late Qing Shanghai” that “we cannot think about clothes without thinking about the body underneath, and we cannot think about the body

without thinking about the clothes” (Zamperini 2003:302). If this is true of clothing, then how much more weighty are the implications of this statement when applied to a national costume that is supposedly a physical representation of the culture from which it comes? Therefore this thesis is not an attempt to disprove but rather complicate the idea of a single kimono culture that can be easily summed up in a single assertion. I hope to provide a new theoretical lens through which one may understand the kimono as a means of play and self-identification through connection to larger imagined communities: in other words, the kimono as *cosplay*. In this the actor relies on a pre-established costume to perform a type of Japaneseness that has been influenced by the forms of interaction the individual has had with the garment, with the political climate, and with location. This performance is then judged in turn by an audience that holds its own unique beliefs about the Japaneseness the kimono embodies. The benefit of this treatment of the kimono is that it shows how various meanings come to be indexed to the kimono even as the garment’s form remains fairly static.

In the first chapter, I develop my argument by examining the progression of the kimono from an unmarked form of quotidian dress to a ceremonial costume using Jeffery C. Alexander’s theory of cultural pragmatics. In the second chapter, I will illustrate the ways in which the practice of wearing the kimono in contemporary Japan mirrors the practice of cosplays. I will then introduce Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic reproduction to show how the blurring of what was once two separate categories of interaction with kimono—that is to say

owning versus renting the kimono—have resulted in a shift from the kimono as being widely understood as a means of social distinction to a means of expressing collective individualism and thus creating the necessary conditions for the kimono to emerge as cultural cosplay.

Reinforcing the idea that individual interpretation is essential to understanding the meaning of any specific instance of kimono wearing, in chapter three I look at how styling the kimono as “cute” or “delinquent” may serve as either an act of resistance á la Judith Butler against traditional expectations or an expression of conformity with mainstream pop culture through traditional guises. Lastly, I will look at the practice of *maiko henshin* (maiko transformation) to explore how the meanings of costumes change when distanced from the time and place in which they originated. In this final chapter I will also examine my own experiences of both doing *maiko henshin* as well as wearing a more ordinary kimono in Kyoto to explore the question of who is able to access the Japaneseness associated with the kimono.

The research for this project took place between February and April 2011 in the prefecture of Kyoto. I distributed paper surveys to Japanese individuals in my acquaintance such as the language professors of the Associated Kyoto Program and my *nihonbuyō* (Japanese dance) teachers. Questions included the amount of familiarity the individual had with the garment as well as opinions about the kimono. Originally I wanted to learn more about opinions regarding “new” kimono styles such as those of the young women in Figure Three. After

learning that those styles weren't so much indicative of a massive kimono fashion revolution, my focus switched to exploring the importance of Kyoto's role in the popularity of kimono wearing in the prefecture, I changed from paper surveys to interviewing any individual I saw wearing kimono around in Kyoto. I then broadened my informant base to include individuals in my acquaintance whom I knew had experience with the garment, kimono store employees, and lastly Doshisha University students with no experience with kimono. To reach as many individuals as possible, I then turned to an on-line survey site and asked Japanese friends to forward it to anyone who they thought might be interested. Lastly, I conducted a few interviews with Japanese friends via Skype after I had returned to the United States. My goal in conducting my fieldwork was to solicit opinions from as diverse an informant group as possible in order to identify any possible experiences not represented by current interpretations as to what the kimono "is" or otherwise represents.

I would like to include a note here on an aspect of kimono culture that is not represented in-depth in this thesis. I do not explore either the significance of the fact that the kimono is tacitly a form of female dress or utilize any feminist readings in the analysis of my fieldwork. I made this choice for two reasons. First and most importantly, my informants never brought up the subject themselves, and when asked they rejected the possibility of the modern kimono being connected to anti-feminist ideasm or the assertion that the kimono is representative of subjugation of women and of *ryōsai kenbo* (good wife/wise

mother). One young woman who had enjoyed wearing kimono on her *seijinshiki* even as she commented on the difficulties associated with wearing the garment said that the kimono might have represented *ryōsai kenbo* “a long time ago,” but not any more. As such, I let the responses I received guide the questions I addressed in this thesis. Second, there is already a substantial literature offering a feminist critique on the kimono such as that of Dalby (2001[1993]), Goldstein-Gidoni (2005, 2001[1999]), and Jones and Leshkovich (2003) that I did not feel I could meaningfully add to given the focus of my thesis.

Lastly, I would like to address a plausible source of bias from my own personal tastes and understandings that may have affected my interactions with my informants and shaped the language of this thesis. The first is that I love Kyoto, kimono, and geisha. I discovered the discipline of cultural anthropology by reading Liza Dalby’s ethnography *Geisha* (1998) and went to Kyoto with the dream of revisiting the fieldwork she had done in the geisha community of Pontochō in the mid 1970s. I wanted to see how a profession that traded on ideas of “tradition” had changed in an era of increasing personal technology and so on. This proved an unmanageable topic, given my still imperfect Japanese and the time constraints placed upon me by classes, and so moving to studying kimono seemed like an obvious choice once I realized how much the topic had to offer.

My time spent conducting this fieldwork was extraordinary not only for the information I obtained, but also for the relationships I built through it. My kimono *kitsuke* teachers became my friends, surprising me not only by coming to

my dance recital, but by giving me a large bouquet of flowers and a beautiful book on the traditional colors used in kimono. They also gathered several of their friends took me to a Japanese-style restaurant where they treated me to a wonderful meal and beseeched me not to forget what I had learned about kimono.

Kimono also factored into my relationship with my host family as their skepticism about the strength of my resolve to learn to wear kimono changed into admiration as I became increasingly proficient in dressing myself. I was touched when my host family suggested that I take the kimono collection of my host-stepmother who had passed away while I was staying there. Rather than simply giving them to me, my host-mother called over *obāchan*, an elderly woman from the neighborhood of no blood relation who had become a part of the family, and together my host-mother, *obāchan*, and I opened all of the boxes and went through the kimono one by one. *Obāchan* patiently told me about each kimono as we unpacked it—the types of patterns, the significance of the pattern placements, the season in which it was meant to be worn—before repacking them into a different box for me to send home. At the end of the processes, I had four boxes filled with kimono, *haori*, *obi-jime*, *obi-age*, and various other accessories. As touching as this was, I am also willing to look at the practical aspect of this gift-giving: no one in my family wore kimono, and my mother's home, already

bursting with knick-knacks, did not need four boxes of kimono and she was probably grateful to have someone to take them.¹

Given the nature of these relationships, I cannot help but like the kimono. To try to rid my thesis of all traces of this would render my experience inauthentic. That being said, I tried as much as possible to remain objective throughout the fieldwork and writing processes. Because most of my informants had chosen to do a sightseeing rental for the purpose of enhancing their day in Kyoto, it seems somewhat appropriate that my words be colored by attraction to the kimono—both mine and that of my informants.

¹ This manner of gift giving is discussed at length in the chapter “Troublesome Things” in Inge Daniels book *The Japanese House: Material Cultural in the Modern Home* (2010).

Putting on Modern Kimono

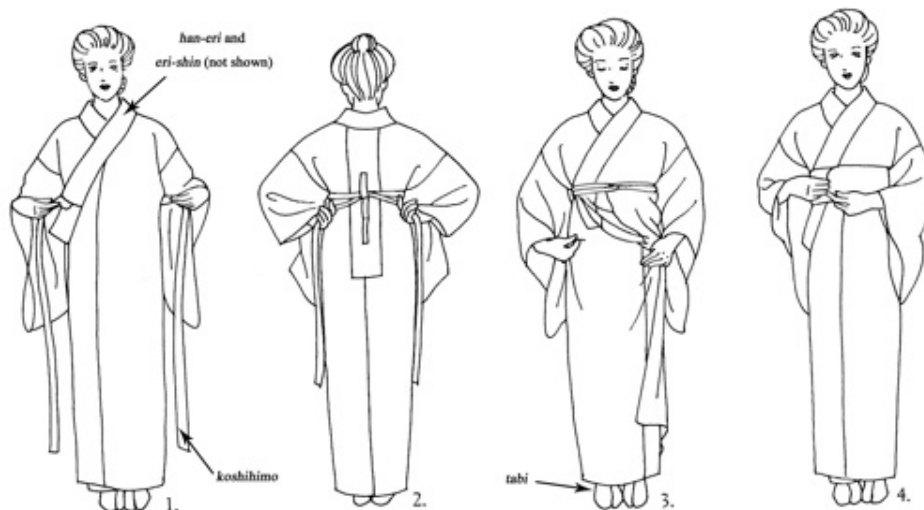


Figure 4 An under-kimono called a *nagajūban* is worn over a *hadajūban* (not shown) and tied in place with *koshihimo*. A half collar called a *han-eri* is sewn to the collar to the *nagajūban*. This forms a pocket into which an *eri-shin* is inserted to stiffen the collar. All images from *The Book of Kimono: the Complete to Style and Wear* by Norio Yamanaka (1982).

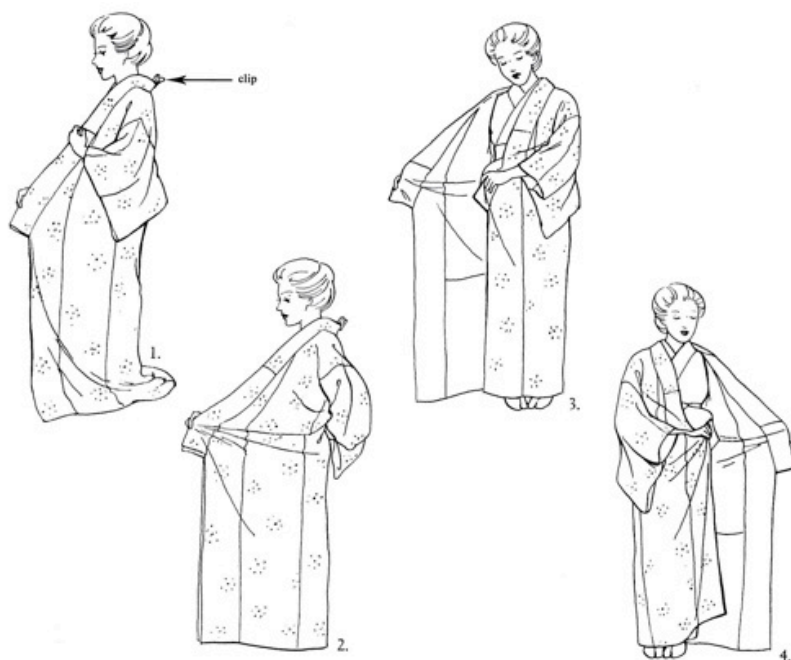


Figure 5 Dressing in a kimono. The kimono is always worn wrapped left over right.



Figure 6 The excess length is gathered up and allowed to drape over a *koshihimo* tied around the waist. The excess material is then folded over.

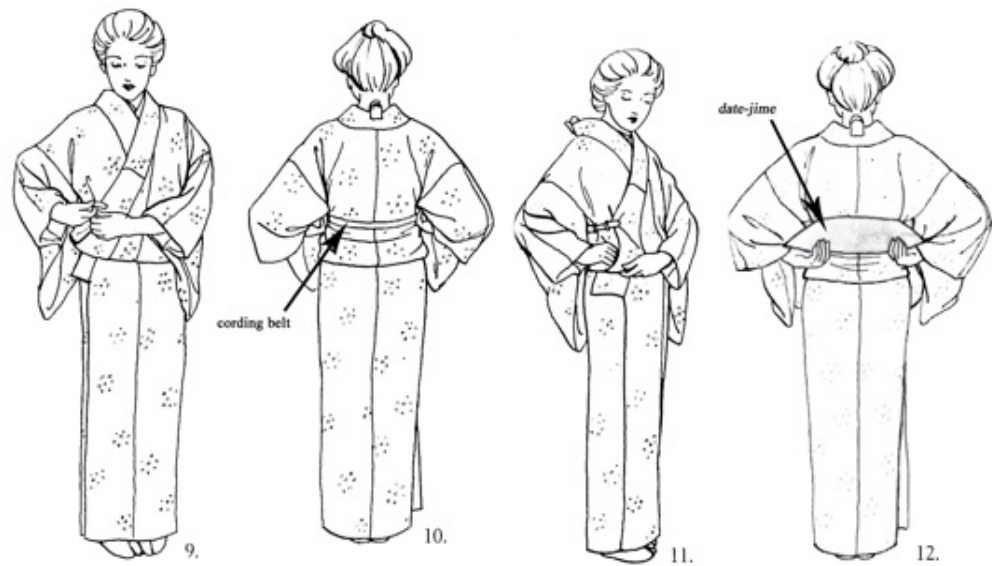


Figure 7 A cording belt or an additional *koshihimo* may be used to tie the kimono shut. Over this a *date-jime* is tied.

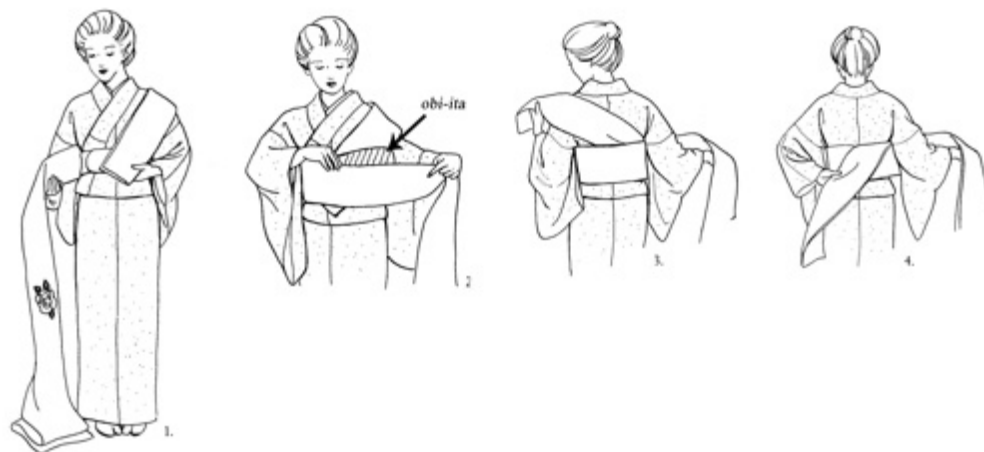


Figure 8 How to tie a *taiko* or drum knot obi. An *obi-ita* is inserted between the kimono and the obi to ensure a smooth surface once the obi is tied.



Figure 9 An *obi makura* (literally an "obi pillow") is used to give the knot its distinct shape. An *obi-age* is tied over the *makura*.

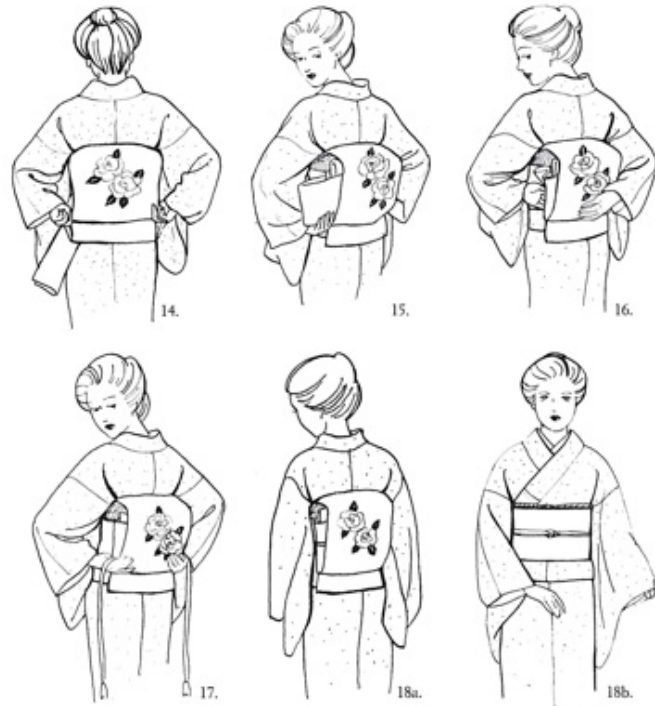


Figure 10 Final steps of tying the *taiko* obi.

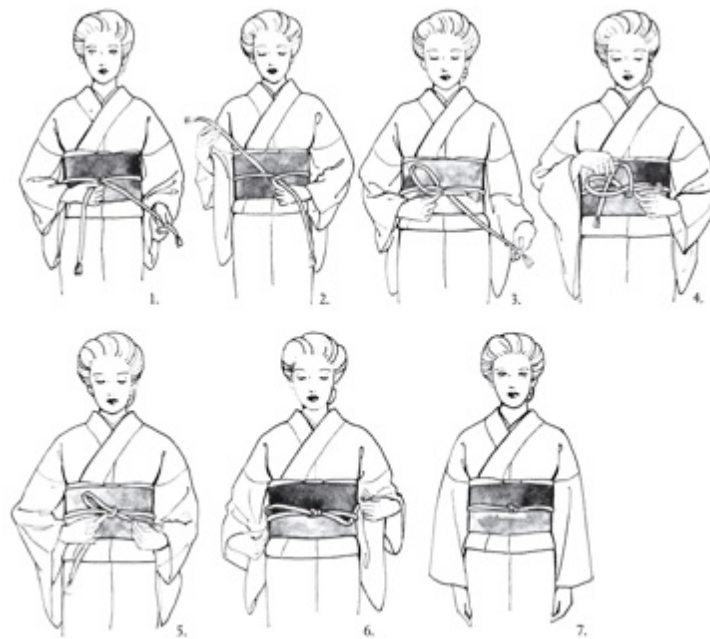


Figure 11 How to tie the *obi-jime*, the thin braided cord that keeps the excess lengths of obi tucked up.

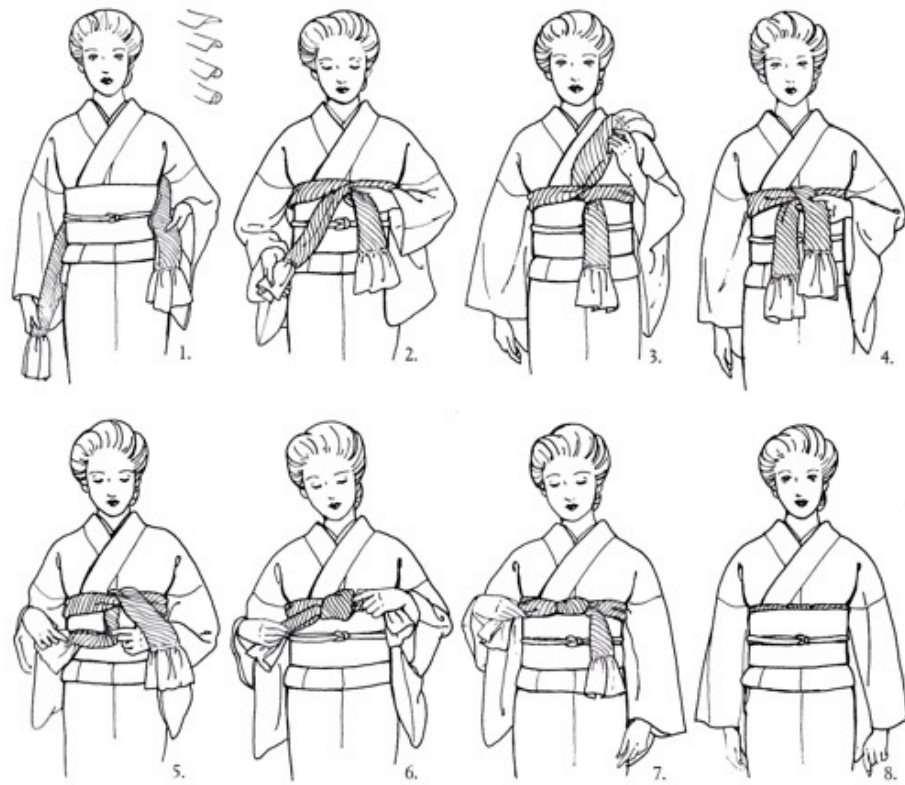


Figure 12 How to tie an *obi-age*.

CHAPTER ONE: CLOTHING VERSUS COSTUME

The garment that currently holds the title of the national costume of Japan does not suggest the hundreds of years of dynamic sartorial evolution that came before it. Indeed the modern kimono's predecessor was a narrow sleeved white undergarment called the *kosode*, hidden beneath the upwards of twelve layers of robes worn by court women of the Heian Period (794-1185), a fashion that marked Japan's first break with Chinese fashion influences (Dalby [1993]2001:228). Periods of wartime and peace would continue to shape not only the kimono's ancestor but also other forms of indigenous Japanese fashion. The creation of the radical changes of the Meiji government to transform Japan into "a modern, 'rational' nation, modeled on a Western ideal" starting in 1868 is often credited as having created the modern kimono as a symbol of Japaneseness and thus into a costume (Goldstein-Gidoni 2005:154).

My subsequent argument that kimono can be viewed as a form of cosplay is based on the assertion that the kimono is in fact a costume rather than clothing. In this chapter, I will first explain the difference between clothing and costume and provide illustrations as to why the kimono falls into the latter category. I will then use Jeffery C. Alexander's theory of cultural pragmatics to explain how the

kimono's self-discovery as a uniquely Japanese form of dress as a result of the modernization in the Meiji Period coupled with subsequent natural disasters, foreign influences, and the coming of World War II resulted in its gradual *de-fusion* from quotidian Japanese dress and its eventual *re-fusion* into modern Japanese society as a form of costume.

Hilda Kuper describes *clothing* as “part of the total structure of personal appearance which includes hairstyles, ornaments, masks, decorations and mutilations” (Kuper, 1973:348). To this I would like to add that the form clothing takes is decided upon by fashion, which is defined broadly as “what people wear” (Barnard, 2007:3), and that the two are “crucially linked” (Entwistle 2000:3). Fashion is characterized by movement and change, and clothing is the means through which fashion expresses itself. Risks are taken in fashion, some of which “will catch on” while others “will expire as fads” (Wilson, 2007:17). While “fashion has its laws” that govern seemingly arbitrary changes made to clothing (Young 2007:48), *costumes* have their rules that keep them securely out of the realm of fashion and, in this case, the kimono cum national costume out of quotidian dress.

The form of a costume is regulated by rules that govern its appearance and slow the process of change giving the costume its steadfast appearance and promotes an on-sight familiarity with the garment (see Figures 4-12 for a summary of the those rules). In other words, a costume is an “iconic representation” (Alexander 2004:529), conveying the “invisible motives” of the

actor without the need of external explanation. As such, costumes also presuppose an audience's familiarity with the costume and the meanings for which they stand. It conveys a known image without the need of external explanation and as such presupposes the audience's familiarity with the content the costume represents. Take for instance a Santa suit. Not only is someone wearing a Santa suit conspicuous walking down a crowded city sidewalk, but the name of the costume (i.e. Santa) is known to those who see it so long as they possess a familiarity with the western tradition of Christmas. In short, a costume is an assemblage of items that creates a meaning far larger than its individual parts, and that elicits the understanding of what the costume represents thanks to tacitly understood cultural scripts.

Still, the kimono aspires to reconnect with the realm of fashion from which it fell; a kimono may be made *fashionable* through creative usages of patterns, color, or the inclusion of certain accessories. While these stylizations may or may not suit the tastes of any given individual, they generally do not prevent the ensemble from being recognized as a kimono. There are even organizations that actively promote and encourage the inclusion of personal touches in kimono. One such organization is the Kimono de Ginza. Founded in 1999 in Ginza, a wealthy district in Chūō, Tokyo, the organization sponsors monthly public meetings at which participants are encouraged “to be creative, to play with different identities, and to experiment with gender boundaries”

(Assmann, 2001:365).¹ In a 2009 article titled “All for the love of wearing kimono,” Japan Times reporter Sayo Sasaki noted the innovativeness of this organization, mentioning in particular a woman from Yokohama who “wore a yellow ribbon used for wrapping a bottle of wine instead of a thin strap used in keeping the obi in position” as well as other members who “had sewn a (sic) Christmas-theme cloth together and made it into an obi or painted a snowman on a kimono jacket” for a Christmas-themed gathering (Sasaki 2009).

This “thin strap” that Sasaki mentions is, of course, taking the place of an *obi-jime* and the obi still fulfills its function as an obi regardless of the material. While the privileging of certain materials over others in creating a “real” kimono will be discussed later, what is important for our purposes here is that these changes keep in line with the prescribed form of the garment and therefore more closely resemble *substitutions* than *innovations*.

That being said, the kimono has been subject to a fair amount of accessorizing in recent years as will be seen in later chapters. Typically seen on young women’s rental kimono and hakama for *seijinshiki* or graduation, it is now possible to accessorize one’s ensemble with lace, ribbons, beads, silk flowers, and so on, the implications of which will be discussed in chapter three. While my informants’ responses ranged from unbothered to overt disapproval, there was a

¹ Assman unfortunately does not provide any specific examples of members’ gender-bending in her article. Given the disparity between the numbers of men and women who choose to dress in kimono, I am likely to believe that this “experimentation” with gender is primarily limited to women adopting more masculine styles rather than the other way around.

unified consensus that drastic alterations to form rendered the ensemble something other than a “kimono.”

Take for example the exchange I had with two Japanese Mount Holyoke College students. “What’s that?” one of the students, a first-year, asked in English when I opened up the magazine to the first picture on which I wanted their opinions (Figure 13). It was clear to me that the woman was wearing a kimono, but had substituted other parts of the ensemble for more mundane items of dress: the “obi” is a red scarf, the “inner-kimono” appears to be a scarf, and black stockings and lace-up boots have replaced the *tabi* socks and *zori* sandals.

“It’s a kimono,” I asserted, referring to the actual robe rather than the title of the costume. The students settled into a few moments of silence, considering the image.

“I think it’s maybe *fashionable*, but...” initially replied the other student, a junior, in English before switching into Japanese. “It’s like it gives the feeling that the balance is broken (*kuzureteiru*)—the balance of the way the kimono ought to be (*arikata*)—“

“*Arikata*?” I asked, unfamiliar with the word she had used.

“It’s image,” she provided after a moment of discussion with the other student.

“Would you say that this is kimono-*rashii*?” I asked, curious. “Is it kimono-like?”

“I would say it’s not like a kimono,” the first year replied.

“I thought it’s a new fashion or clothing,” the junior added. “When it’s all finished, the coherence (*matomari*) is messed up. The total coordination is broken. It doesn’t fit when I look at it. I just get disturbed.”



Figure 13 When you’re coordinating an outfit, if it’s not daringly interesting, then it’s not fashion” (*arenji suru nara daitan ni omoshirokunakereba fasshon ja nai*). An example of a dubious “kimono” from the 2011 spring/summer edition of *Kimono Salon*, pp. 53.

Although the kimono continues to be worn in contemporary Japanese society, it will never fully re-enter society as a form of daily dress. This is due in part to a widely circulated idea of what the kimono “should” look like based on claims about what does or does not make for a “real” kimono. As such, there is a perpetual self-consciousness about dressing in kimono (Dalby 2001[1993]:112). The creation of this self-consciousness of the kimono as something other than

quotidian dress can be best understood by an examination of the historical evolution of the garment using Jeffery C. Alexander's cultural pragmatics.

Developed as part of a discussion of the role of ritual in increasingly complex societies, Alexander's theory of cultural pragmatics utilizes the concepts of *fusion*, *de-fusion*, and *re-fusion* to explain the challenges an actor faces in having his or her social performance of ritual recognized as "legitimate in the eyes of the powers that be" (Alexander 2004:532). According to Alexander,

The more simple the collective organization, the more its social performances are *fused*. The more complex, segmented, and differentiated the collectivity, the more these elements of social performance become *de-fused*. To be effective in a society of increasing complexity, social performances must engage in a project of *re-fusion*. (Alexander 2004:529)

Fusion then is the simplest relation in which an object or image is indistinguishable from its context. In the case of the kimono, *fusion* describes the time when the garment functioned as a dress and was subject to the whims of fashions and the sensibilities of the era. The number of robes worn, the location of the obi as well as its construction, the length of sleeves, and the placement of patterns are just some examples of the areas in which the kimono had undergone drastic changes over the centuries (Dalby 2001[1993]:17-57).

The process of *de-fusion* may then be understood as a singling out an object through a change to the society or background; something has changed that makes the performance stand out when it had previously seemed natural. *De-fusion* came as a result of the Meiji Restoration and would eventually relegate the garment to the rank of national costume—that is to say, something separate from

the daily life of the majority of Japanese today. As part of the process of nation building, the Meiji government relied on the “invention of traditions” as well as a reimagining of history to unite the people of Japan as Japanese even as they pushed for modernization by following western models (Goldstein-Gidoni 2005:155).

However, the kimono and the Japaneseness that it came to represent was not suitable for the public sphere dominated by men. Addressing the style of Japanese courtly dress, the Emperor Meiji gave the following address in 1871:

... We greatly regret that the uniform of our court has been established following the Chinese custom, and it has become exceedingly effeminate in style and character... The Emperor Jimmu [660 – 5858BCE] who founded Japan, and the Empress Jingu [201 – 269CE] who conquered Korea, were not attired in the present style. We should no longer appear before the people in these effeminate styles, and we have therefore decided to reform dress regulations entirely. (Slade 2009:55)

Obviously neither the Emperor Jimmu nor the Empress Jingu were attired in the suits that the Japanese court and public officials were urged to wear, but nevertheless on November 12, 1872 the Emperor Meiji ordered noblemen to wear Western dress instead of the traditional robe and crown (Slade 2009:129).

However ominous such declarations might sound, the kimono was neither abolished nor frozen at the onset of the Meiji Era; rather, it was modernized. Certain practices in dress persisted such as wrapping the garment left over right, which started in the Heian period (Slade 2009:30), and gathering up the excess length of kimono and blousing it over a tie at the waist as seen in Figure Six, which started during the Momoyama period. Japanese experimented with combining Western accessories such as shawls and umbrellas to this form. While

many of these innovations fell quickly out of fashion, certain changes persist into the current day such as the practice of letting the collar of one's under kimono be seen beneath the kimono itself. The abolition of sumptuary laws and improved textile production also rendered materials such as soft, pliable cottons and silks available to a larger portion of the population (Slade 2009:129).

Despite the Meiji being a period of rapid modernization and with the exception of the very wealthy, sartorial reform came relatively slowly to the vast majority of the population and the kimono persisted well into the late 1920s. Western clothing served as the costume for those men who occupied the “public, nondomestic” sphere while kimono remained the dress of home life (Slade 2009:57). Published in the form of an illustration in a women's interest magazine in July of 1925, the results of Kon Waijirō's “modernology survey” based on observing the dress of 1,180 people during a day spent at Ginza found that nearly all (99%) of the women wore kimono while a little over half (67%) of men wore western suits (Silverberg 2007, fig. 5). What's more, men preferred to leave their western clothes for the public sphere and return to wearing kimono at home during leisure time. This created the phenomena known as the “double life” in which “sartorial modernity was adopted for public life, while private life, in the home and in the leisure quarters, remained partial to traditional forms of dress (Slade 2009:41).

One reason cited for the continued preference for indigenous forms of dress stemmed from largely practical concerns: the styles of Japanese houses

including how leisure time was conducted within them were ill suited for Western clothing: “leisure and home life remained floor-based and thus at variance with fitted garments, difficult-to-remove shoes and other attributes of Western garb” (Slade 2009:42). For this reason men chose to return to their kimono upon arriving home while women, who did not occupy the same public sphere even upon leaving the home, remained fairly consistently in kimono.

It was not until the widespread adoption of Western-style houses and furnishings known as the *bunka jūtaku* (culture houses) did the *bunka fuku* (cultured clothes) from the West find a place in the Japanese private life as well. One factor that may have helped increase the presence of Westernized dwellings may have been the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923. More than 700,000 homes were destroyed in the devastated cities of Tokyo and Yokohama, and millions lost their possessions (Slade 2009:57). Rather than replacing these buildings with traditional forms, more modern styles were adopted, and those replacing their personal belongings tended to purchase Western imports rather than traditional goods (Slade 2009:112). The earthquake had also raised questions as to the practicality of wearing kimono as “it was said that the kimono had proved dangerous during the quake since its long sleeves and train prevented rapid movement” (Slade 2009:57). This coupled with the increase of Westernized school uniforms for children and the subsequent fire at the Shirokiya department store on December 16, 1932 in which the female modesty required for the wearing of kimono was held responsible for the deaths of several young kimono-

clad shop girls, indicated a definite change of opinion in regards to kimono (Slade 2009:59).

Despite the growing critiques of the kimono as an impractical and even dangerous garment, the adoption of Western dress by women was not without considerable hesitance. The period of cultural and social change unfolded after the Great Kantō Earthquake and the Modern Girl, “a glittering, decadent, middle-class consumer who, through her clothing, smoking and drinking, flaunts tradition in the urban playgrounds,” was its “cultural heroine” (Silverberg 2006:51). To explain the Modern Girl briefly is far from simple; Miriam Silverberg dedicates an entire chapter to her (“The Modern Girl as Militant”) in her book *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense: the Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times* (2006). It would be a gross oversimplification to say that the streamlined image of the flapper is appealing for its practicality or because of the style’s resemblance to the tube-like kimono (Dalby [1993]2001:128). What is most important for our discussion here is that while the innovation of the Modern Girl showed the progress of Western dress in accordance with trends in fashion, the kimono remained as it was, freezing into the form that exists still today (Dalby [1993] 2001:129).

The Modern Girl was not to last, displaced by the return of the “good wife, wise mother” as the skies over Japan darkened with the coming of the World War II. Ironically, the end of kimono as quotidian dress was also a result of World War II. While foreign influences were frowned upon, the kimono was seen as “an

expression of unpatriotic indulgence in luxury” and was virtually prohibited during the war years, the swinging sleeves and long skirt found wasteful (Dalby 130). What’s more, the bombings of urban centers led to widespread transition from Japanese to Western-style architecture (Slade 139). Western clothing had become the default norm for the Japanese population. When the kimono did return around 1955, it did so primarily as a form of ceremonial dress for the ceremonies like *seijinshiki*, or as an indicator of socioeconomic status (Dalby 2001[1993]:131, 137).

The kimono as a form of ceremonial or formal attire for women represents the kimono as *re-fused*. As mentioned earlier, *re-fusion* involves a certain self-consciousness that was absent when the garment *existed* in its fused form. This is because the re-fusion takes place in the context of disjuncture between the original time of *fusion* and the present. Therefore *re-fusion* never quite allows the costume to fully join the context in which it is worn. To wear a kimono on a ceremonial or formal occasion is to break with the ordinary; likewise to wear a kimono on an ordinary day is to break with the sartorial norms of modern Japan. Yet there is something that compels Japanese to return to the kimono even outside of ceremonial or formal occasions, especially in the case of Kyoto. In the next chapter, I will show how the functions of the kimono in modern Japan can best be understood by examining it as a form of cosplay.

CHAPTER TWO: KIMONO AS CULTURAL COSPLAY

How has the kimono managed to persist, and in some instances seem to thrive, even though Dalby felt that the kimono was dying when she did the research for her book *Kimono: Fashioning Culture*? As discussed in the previous chapter, the kimono exists in modern Japan as a costume governed by a set of rules regarding its form and is thus largely separate from the progression of fashion. The key may lie in examining the kimono as a part of a relatively recent practice that deals specifically with issues of performing both individual and group identities through use of costume whose form and traits are already known to an intended audience: *cosplay*. I will argue that cosplay is an effective way of explaining the kimono's function as a means of collective individualism and as something that is simultaneously recognized as Japanese and yet peripheral to contemporary mainstream Japanese society.

There are four key ways in which the practice of wearing kimono in contemporary Japan mirrors the practice of cosplay: that the wearing of kimono is first and foremost an activity expressing collective individualism; that individual interpretation plays an important role in understanding the meanings of the costume; that an appropriate stage enhances cosplay; and that an actor cannot

perform the identity indexed to a costume except through the use of the costume itself. In addition to providing a general overview of the practice of cosplay as it relates to kimono, I will argue for this first point using Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic reproduction.

Though I seek to employ the term in new ways, *cosplay* is not my own invention. It is a Japanese-English portmanteau of the words "costume" plus "role-play" and refers to the practice of dressing up as manga, anime, or video game characters typically at anime conventions or other similar events (Kotani 2007:62; Winge 2006:65). As it may be difficult to see the immediate connection between dressing like a fictional character and donning a kimono, it is useful here to frame this subcultural practice in terms of cultural pragmatics to expose some immediate similarities between kimono and cosplay. In terms of cosplay, *fusion* would be in a character in the context of the media (anime, manga, video game, etc.) from which it came. The character and perhaps even the costume evolves as the game, series, or film continues just as clothing trends develop in the real world. The character is *de-fused* when it is removed from its fictional context and thus no longer subject to change or influence by the action of the narrative. Its form also becomes static and thus more easily recognizable. *Re-fusion* is then achieved when actors "offer a plausible performance" through adopting the dress and possibly the mannerism of a specific character (Alexander 2004:529).

For a performance to be "plausible," an actor must have access to "objects that can serve as iconic representations to help dramatize and make vivid the invisible motives and morals they are trying to represent" (Alexander 2004:529).

For both the cosplayer and the kimono wearer, this “object” is the costume, the indispensable tool by which he or she “nonverbally communicate(s) his or her chosen character and character traits” (Winge 2006:72). Cosplayers bring seemingly disjointed elements together in pre-prescribed orders to achieve an identity through representing an image. Therefore attention to certain elements of the costume is absolutely necessary for hoping to achieve recognition as a particular character, and then they must be assembled in the proper way. By way of an example, I will use the character Cloud Strife from video game company Square Enix’s famous video game *Final Fantasy: VII* (Figure 14).

In accordance with the character design, elements such as spiky blond hair, blue eyes, black shoulder armor and so on must be properly assembled to allow a cosplayer to represent himself or herself as Cloud Strife. Likewise, the wearing of a kimono involves specific parts assembled in prescribed ways. The kimono, the *nagajūban* (under-kimono), the *eri-shin* (collar stiffener) and the *han-eri* (lit, “half collar;” the strip of silk sew to the collar of the *nagajūban* that forms a pocket into which the *eri-shin* is inserted), the obi and all of its accessories, and so on are arranged accordingly to portray what has come to be known as the kimono.



Figure 14 Cloud Strife from the video game Final Fantasy: VII (Square Enix 1997). Image obtained from finalfantasy.wikia.com/wiki/Cloud_Strife on 2012 April 26.

The “success” or “failure” of a performance thus depends upon whether not the cosplay can elicit a positive identification of the character from an audience through this assemblage. Therefore it is critical that actor and audience share the necessary background information so the cosplay will be meaningful. In cosplay, this information is gained through familiarity with the media from which the character comes. Regarding kimono, ideas surrounding what the kimono “is” are transmitted primarily through the way in which individuals interact with the garment. These interactions usually occur either through taking kimono *kitsuke* (dressing) lessons or through utilizing kimono rental and dressing services.

The differences between being able to dress oneself in kimono and renting a kimono can be described by the arguments outlined by Pierre Bourdieu in his

essay “Haute Couture and Haute Culture” (1993), which is an abbreviated version of his work “Le couturier et sa griffe, contribution à une théorie de la magie” (Rocamora 2002:343). In the field created by the relationship between haute couture, that is to say luxury fashion, and culture, Bourdieu identifies an antagonistic relationship between players of two emergent categories: the “designers” who possess and reproduce fashion capital and thus occupy a dominate position, and the “*parvenus*” who struggle to obtain that capital (Bourdieu 1995[1993]:133). These distinctions are maintained by their respective means of reproduction. The cultural capital of the “designers” is produced by and for those of a similar background and is thus intended for a limited audience; “*parvenus*” instead rely on “discredited” large-scale production that produces for a “mass” or “popular market” (Rocamora 2002:344-345).

Those who can dress themselves in kimono may in this light be seen as possessing a form of cultural capital that distinguishes them “from the majority of Japanese people in contemporary society who do not know how to wear kimono” (Assmann 2008:372). This consequently casts renting kimono as an inferior practice, one of imitation with no substance. As such, it may be possible to understand these different modes of interaction with the kimono as “owning” a cultural distinction or “renting” culture, the principal difference between them being the former possesses not only knowledge of how to dress in the garment but the proper comportment associated with it while the latter can only seek out services to help them reproduce the form. Bourdieu later says in *The Rules of Art* (1996) that these divisions may be in the process of melding together (Rocamora

2002:345). Following this line of thought, I contended that the decreasing number of Japanese who learn to wear kimono has led to a blurring between the previously distinct practices of “owning” culture through *kitsuke* lessons and “renting” it through dressing services as evidence by the availability of inexpensive *kitsuke* lessons with minimal ideological content and the coming into existence of sightseeing kimono rentals, which I shall discuss more thoroughly in Chapter Four. I suggest that these practices have played a significant role in shifting the purpose of wearing a kimono from an indication of class or status to a symbol of collective individualism, thus bringing the practice closer to a form of cosplay.

The kimono is an item of luxury in contemporary Japan. Not only is difficult and restrictive to wear, but it also typically requires considerable time and practice to learn how to wear it properly—both in terms of successfully remaining clothed without something coming unknotted as well as learning the rules of etiquette that governs its composition. These rules became the subject of kimono dressing or kimono kitsuke schools that sprang up in Japan in the 1960s to address the lack of experience modern Japanese women had with kimono (Dalby 2001[1993]: 119). The dissemination of knowledge in this way has helped to standardize the appearance of the kimono as it exists today and elevate the practice of wearing it to the level of an art, transforming it into a piece of cultural capital along with other traditional art forms such as tea ceremony and flower arrangement (Assmann 2008:372). Consequently if one is able to claim ownership of this knowledge, it follows that one may claim ownership of that facet of culture

as well. In her article “Between Tradition and Innovation: The Reinvention of the Kimono in Japanese Consumer Culture” (2008), Stephanie Assmann explores the culture of consumption that surrounds the garment, considering both the purchase of the actual garment itself as well as the lessons that enable one to wear it. She identifies three key reasons as to why the kimono is alive in contemporary Japan: that “mastering the art of the kimono can be interpreted as a form of cultural capital whereby wearing a kimono fulfills a role in social distinction;” that the kimono is an “expression of collective individualism that is often imbedded in group activities;” and that the “kimono has become a communicative symbol to convey an individual attitude towards societal conventions and national identity” (Assmann 2008:360).

What it is exactly that the kimono symbolizes and therefore the meaning of the kimono is not homogenous throughout Japan, but is shaped largely by the means of interaction with the garment. As the majority of Japanese did not have conscious interaction with the kimono in their youths beyond the obligatory *shichi-go-san* ceremony, meaningful interactions with the Japanese national costumes come later in life, if they come at all. *Kitsuke* lessons play an important roll in shaping one’s experience with kimono, but schools or programs are not unified in their ideologies or agendas. Some schools propose to teach a way of being that goes hand in hand with the wearing of kimono. Let us consider the Sōdō Reihō Kimono Gakuin founded by Yamanaka Norio. Claiming connection to these other touchstones of high Japanese culture, Yamanaka chose for the name of his organization sōdō, or the way of dressing. The Chinese reading of the first

kanji (装), read as *sō*, means clothing. The second kanji (道), read as *dō* in Chinese or *michi* in Japanese, may be understood as “way” or “path.” This is the same character found in *sadō* (tea ceremony: lit, “the way of tea”) and *kadō* (flower arranging: lit, “the way of flowers”). Given the ideological nature of the *kitsuke* offered by the school, the image of a path is appropriate. Not only does the image suggest the time and attentive dedication needed to learn a specific skill, but also the idea that kimono represents a path that one chooses to walk on to the exclusion of others speaks to the mental state that is cultivated through the process. The wearing of kimono is not merely a form of dress. It is a “way.”

The Sōdō Reihō Kimono Gakuin seeks to instill in its students the proper etiquette to ensure the transmittance of the “four virtues” of kimono: “love, beauty, decency, and harmony (*ai, bi, rei, wa*)” (Assmann 2008:367). However, these virtues are not limited to the kimono itself; rather, such ideologically based *kitsuke* seek to also shape the student into the model of an idealized Japanese woman. By way of analysis, Assmann states “along with wearing the kimono in an appropriate way, Japanese women are encouraged to adhere to a whole list of complex rules and philosophical principals. Kimono is not only elevated to a symbol of national pride but puts on women expectations of how to preserve their “Japaneseness.” It calls on women to affirm their “female Japaneseness” (Assmann 2008:371), which is identified by Dalby as the “willingness to sacrifice personal desires for family” (Dalby 2001[1993]:117).

It may not seem surprising then that Yamanaka cites the lack of women wearing kimono in Japan as a sign of the moral decline of society. In his book on

kimono, Yamanaka identifies eight different reasons women may have for not being able to dress in their own kimono. Four of these reasons deal with practical concerns such as not knowing how to sew, fold, or store kimono as well as not knowing where to wear it. Another three reasons indicate a deficiency in understanding the importance of the kimono: not having someone to speak with about kimono; not knowing the pleasure of wearing a kimono; and not knowing the value of kimono (Yamanaka 1982:11). The last two reaffirm that the knowledge of how to dress oneself properly is only part of being educated in kimono *kitsuke*. The other part of equal importance is the receiving of moral instruction to guide her transformation towards becoming an ideal Japanese woman.

While this may not be an explicit call for the return to a *ryōsai-kenbō* or good wife, wise mother ideology, the kimono-clad woman in this light does suggest something of a self-sacrificing, enduring woman. One of my interviewees, a twenty-two year old male student at Doshisha University, referred to women who wear kimono as *shitataka*, which is glossed as ‘determined,’ ‘stubborn,’ ‘tough,’ or ‘hearty.’ Given that the interviewee’s interest in kimono came from the “samurai spirit” that he feels was evident in the Japanese of a time since past, this image of a formidable woman may stem from historical accounts as well as historical fictions depicting the wives of samurai from a time when nearly all Japanese wore kimono as clothing. Although traditional, this is mostly likely not the type of tradition that Yamanaka, who states, “the greatest pleasure

for a woman is to become beautiful” (Assmann 2008:370), had in mind when he founded the Sōdō Reihō Kimono Gakuin.

The last type of woman who cannot wear a kimono as identified by Yamanaka is one who cannot afford to purchase her own kimono. However, it might be wise to attach being unable to afford *kitsuke* lessons to that statement. The cost of an education at Sōdou Reihō is approximately 200,000 yen or 2,600 USD for a six-month course of bi-weekly lessons after an initial membership fee (Assmann 2008: 367). Of course, this would be in addition to the purchase price of a kimono and all of its accessories. Although Yamanaka expresses concern at the correlation he perceives between societal morality and the decline of the kimono, it is obvious that this idealized version of Japanese femininity is not intended for all women given its restrictive price tag. Instead, it appears to be directed towards women of a certain socio-economic class with a certain amount of financial comfort and freedom. In this way, the kimono is not only a symbol of Japanese traditional culture or national identity, but also a marker of socio-economic status. Therefore rather than rendering kimono culture readily available, organizations like the Sōdō Reihō Kimono Gakuin limit access to this form of cultural capital.

Compare this to renting a kimono for a given occasion. The current prevalence of renting kimono is a relatively recent phenomenon, born out of necessity after Japan’s economic collapse in the early 90s. Although many families were already relying on the skills and knowledge of professional dressers for occasions that necessitated the wearing of kimono well in advance of the

collapse, having to rent a kimono was a source of public embarrassment. The renting of a kimono was indicative of a family's limited resource, reflecting harshly in particular on a father's inability to pay for a kimono and its required accoutrements for the women of his household, especially daughters (Goldstein-Gidoni 2001[1999]:356). After the bursting of the economic "bubble," kimono rentals became more acceptable due to financial necessity, and kimono stores responded by offering reasonably priced rental options. Now there exists a fairly bewildering number of both regional and national chains advertising various rental packages.

Kimono rental services focus on making sure that their clients achieve the proper kimono form, often making "corrections" to the body with padding (Goldstein-Gidoni 2001[1999]:361), but to there is more to "owning" culture than looking the part. One must also be literally able to "walk the walk." It was brought to my attention that one of the problems with rental services is that they do not properly teach one how to carry oneself in the garment. The fact that kimono and hakama rental catalogues tend to include instructions as to how to sit and manage the garments sleeves in the back of their book highlights this gap in knowledge.

"Young people nowadays don't know how to walk in kimono. That's why even if they're wearing a kimono...." One of my informants said before demonstrating a very exaggerated style of walking, making a great show of picking up her knees and stomping around much to the amusement of the others around her. My informant's parody of the manner in which young people walk in

kimono today reveals an internalized understanding of the difference between “pretension and distinction” (Bourdieu 1995:135). It is not enough for one to be wearing a “real” kimono; rather, one must also have a body that is trained to properly wear a kimono to make it “real.” Without such training, even the most well worn kimono becomes empty, a pretention that emphasizes the social distinctions of those who own the cultural capital rather than merely rent it.

However, it is questionable how much longer these distinctions will carry weight given the prevalence and acceptability of rental kimono in contemporary Japan. The privileged class of those with kimono education is apparently not reproducing itself above replacement rate. Already kimono *kitsuke* must be reintroduced to this class from outside of it through *kitsuke* schools. Of course obtaining a *kitsuke* education constitutes its own form of cultural capital, especially if received from an elite school. However, selling this education opens it up to a wider audience and creates the potential of forming a new class of kimono wearers—a group of *nouveau kimono*, if you will. Additionally, as the number of Japanese who can dress themselves continues to dwindle, the prestige that comes with knowing how to properly wear kimono might also fade away. To continue with the example of knowing how to walk properly in a kimono, what good does it do those who can claim proper kimono comportment if the majority of Japanese lack sufficient familiarity with the garment and are thus unable to evaluate their performance as superior to those young people who wear rented kimono without an understanding of how to behave in them.

As such, there is a movement away from the kimono as a class or status symbol in favor as an object of collective individualism and as a means of enjoying time spent with friends and, perhaps more importantly, with the kimono itself. I feel this is evidenced by the existence of informal, low-cost dressing lessons such as the ones I received from the Kyoto Prefectural International Center, the objective of which was not to produce “ideal Japanese,” but to help anyone enjoy kimono. I was fortunate enough to discover the existence of these and other Japanese cultural experience classes when I happened to find a flyer produced by the Center attached to a bulletin board in building in which my study abroad program office was located. The price of these *kitsuke* classes was 1,000 yen (approx. \$12) per lesson with an additional 500 yen (approx. \$6) fee should one want to borrow a kimono from the Center. Printed by the instructor’s name and contact information was a friendly invitation: won’t you enjoy kimono (*kimono wo tanoshimu kai*)? Even in the earlier stages of planning my research I knew that physically interacting with kimono was an important if not vital means of gaining insight in the role the garment plays in Japan’s sartorial drama, so I was thrilled by the reasonable prices. I e-mailed the instructor, a woman by the name of Matsui Megumi, and registered for the class.

I received a total of seven kimono lessons. The lessons were typically between two to three hours each and were held either at the Kyoto Prefectural Center on Friday afternoons or the Kyoto International Community House on Saturday mornings. The number of *kitsuke* teachers I worked with eventually increased to three women. Out of these women, I considered the organizer of

these lessons Matsui Megumi to be my main teacher. Matsui, 44, was a native of Kyoto who began teaching kimono *kitsuke* at the age of twenty-four, four years after she had received her own *kitsuke* education at a dressing school.

“After the war, Western clothing became ordinary, and it became common that people lived without ever having worn kimono,” Matsui replied when asked why she felt that people were still interested in learning to wear kimono. “The elderly were able to dress themselves when they were younger, but many have forgotten. Young people have never worn kimono, and their mothers are of a generation that is not able to teach them how to wear it so they have no other option except to go to a dressing school. As such, many people are no longer taught to wear kimono.” Matsui said that she wants to guide many people in learning how to dress in kimono so that more people can enjoy this aspect of Japanese culture: “I want to teach more people so that they understand the virtue of the kimono because this aspect of Japanese culture will come to an end if not inherited by the next generation. I especially would like the privilege of teaching young people.”

Although Matsui indicated a desire to spread the virtues of the kimono, there was no discussion of these virtues or even of issues of proper comportment for wearing a kimono in the lessons. Instead, there was a great emphasis on form. For instance, Matsui made me retie the upper portion of my *nagajūban* countless times, stressing the importance that the collar remained closed closely at the hollow of my throat. This was necessary for two reasons, she said. One was a matter of style. Young women wore the collars of their under-kimono close to

their throats, thereby showing more of the under-collar (usually white, though can be of a different color or patterned), while older women wore them angled downward in a more acute V-shape. The other was an issue of being “dressed.” One was as good as naked if one’s collar was allow to fall open, Matsui informed me. Therefore it was important that the collar be initially set as tight as possible to allow for it opening slightly during the rest of the dressing process. We also addressed how far the kimono collar should be pulled down in the back: while young women could expose more skin than older women, collars were generally kept around one fist width back from the nape of the neck. By the time I had finally gotten by under-kimono in a passable state, I was already exhausted.

In keeping in line with the social nature of the kimono, learning to dress was only part of my kimono *kitsuke* experience. My teachers and any other students present would have brunch in the lobby of the Kyoto International House after the Saturday morning lessons were over. With those of us who owned our own kimono still wearing them, we enjoyed showing off our abilities and also acting as living advertisements for the *kitsuke* lessons. I also participated in several minor social events with my *kitsuke* teachers and other students. One such occasion was an outing to a monthly flea market at Kitanō Tenmangu Shrine where Matsui regularly purchased second-hand kimono for both her personal use as well as for the prefectural and community centers. As the flea market coincided with the plum blossom viewing festival for which the shrine is well known, we spent the day looking at the sweet-smelling flowers and sifting through kimono, followed by a delicious lunch at a near-by restaurant.

Advertisements for kimono rental use the appeal of group activities to reach out to potential customers, especially young adults who are of age to experience two major social events: *seijinshiki* and college graduation. Using captions placed closely to models in their catalogue as if to make visible their thoughts, the catalogue uses hakama-clad smiling models to state the pleasure of wearing beautiful kimono on a day of celebration with friends: “let’s have the best time ever wearing hakama that we like (*ki ni iru*) with dear friends and having girl’s talk.” In this light, the kimono is both a means for self-expression as well as a prerequisite for full participation in events such graduation and coming of age day ceremonies. Rather than casting kimono wearing as something that young women would want to do as a given because of their gender and nationality, the focus has shifted to having fun with friends through participation in group activities.

If the choice to wear a kimono is not made lightly, then neither is the choice to learn to wear kimono by oneself. It requires time, patience, and depending on one’s choice of *kitsuke* schools and access to a kimono and all its required accessories, anywhere between a fair and extortionate amount of money. Meanwhile the rental industry helped to promote the kimono not as a symbol of socio-economic status, but as a piece of cultural capital to which one may gain limited-time access for a fee substantially less than the cost of purchasing a kimono. Although one leaves the rental shop with neither a kimono of his or her own nor the knowledge of how to dress oneself in the garment, one is still able to participate in activities of “collective individualism.” I argue that the de-

stigmatization of kimono rentals has recast wearing the garment as a means of fun and self-discovery, which has prompted the creation of simple kimono *kitsuke* lessons that focus more on form and enjoyment through kimono than on producing ideal Japaneseness. Although there seems to exist a certain accord as to what a kimono should or should not look like across all varieties of *kitsuke* lessons as well as rental plans, these varied means of interaction as well as the understandings that each individual brings to these interactions shapes his or her interpretations of the garment.

CHAPTER THREE: 'CUTE' AND 'DELINQUENT' KIMONO

“Each cosplayer determines the accuracy of his or her cosplay dress and character portrayal,” says Theresa Winge in her work “Costuming the Imagination: Origins of Anime and Manga Cosplay” (Winge 2006: 72). Cosplayers may choose to recreate their costume as authentically as possible while others only go for the “bare minimum” necessary to look the part (Winge 2006:72). The wearers of kimono likewise have a similar choice when it comes to deciding the look of their ensemble—not an easy feat considering the number of patterns, colors, and accessories available to a prospective customer today.

Several of my young female interviewees indicated a general distaste for modern kimono with non-traditional patterns. “We don’t really need those accessories,” replied one eighteen-year-old girl from Shiga prefecture who was wearing a hand-me-down kimono while sightseeing in Kyoto with a friend (also in kimono). “Those strange ribbons and hearts... impossible (*ariahen*)!” Yet these new kimono styles are readily accessible to young people through rental services. What is the purpose of making alterations to the kimono in terms of form or aesthetics (e.g. accessories, patterns, colors, etc.)? What inspires a young woman

to don a veritably Technicolor kimono laden with plastic beads and flashy lace or to bear her shoulders, or a young man to forsake the prescribed suit in favor of a kimono? Should we interpret these instances as acts of resistance to social convention, or is there something else at play here as well? In this chapter, I show how the same instance of wearing kimono may be read both as an act of resistance to and alliance with mainstream culture. In doing so, I reaffirm that individual agency cannot be overlooked in the choice of wearing kimono, even on designated ceremonial occasions.

Judith Butler's performance theory offers insight into how we may read variations made to the kimono's form as acts of resistance that highlight the artificiality of the modern kimono. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1999), Butler writes that performance is a political act of resistance through the parody of privileged identities and is necessitated by unequal access to power and resources. Butler illustrates this concept with a discussion of "butch" and "femme" identities among lesbian women. While not exclusively a form of sartorial identity, "butch" is marked by what would be considered a more masculine style of dress while "femme" is marked by a more feminine style. Butler states that the replication of seemingly heterosexual identities within homosexuality does not reaffirm heterosexuality's position of authenticity or originality. Rather, it confirms that the category of heterosexuality is constructed rather than natural:

Thus, gay to straight is *not* as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy. The parodic repetition of "the original" ... reveals

the original to be nothing other than a parody of the *idea* of the natural and the original. (Butler 1999:41)

In other words, the act of parody does not replicate an “original” in order to blend in with its perceived “naturalness,” but instead draws attention to how both the “original” and the “natural” are actually constructed and artificial. This is very apt in describing the kimono, which aspires to represent Japaneseness even though its closest ancestor from the time when Japanese fashion was the norm was intended only as a form of ceremonial dress for women of the samurai class and does little to represent the often silenced sartorial experiences of the rural populations of Japan. As such, looking at deviations from norm may be a means of exposing the unnaturalness of the kimono as the national costume of Japan.

The most blatant example of alterations to the kimono’s form was the image of the three young women with courtesan-esque kimono on their *seijinshiki* that I obtained second hand from another classmate. Regretfully I had not been there to speak with these young women myself, nor did I encounter anyone similarly clad during my research. As such I am left to form my opinions based on those expressed by several of my other informants upon viewing a photo (figure 3) of those three women. As such, I focused instead on how members of their intended audiences might have perceived them.

For instance, I observed a negative response when I presented the picture of the three young women from the *seijinshiki* in Tokyo (figure 3) to three informants I spoke with at a small coffee shop across the street from Mount Holyoke College.

“*Mazui*.¹ The people who own kimono shops will be angry,” replied Morimoto Shunji, an older Japanese man whom I had the good fortune of meeting along with several other Japanese while in Massachusetts on March 17, 2012. He then solicited the opinion of his friend. “What do you think, Nakayama-san?”

“When it’s like this, it becomes not kimono,” Nakayama replied in English.

“It’s like grafting modern senses onto kimono in a very odd way,” supplied a woman with gray streaks in her black hair. She appeared to be half Japanese, and self-identified as an ex-pat. “Not in a “kimono-sense” kind of way. And that off the shoulder business is like....”

Nakayama then volunteered that he enjoyed the way *enka* singer Ishikawa Sayuri wore her *obi-jime* obliquely across the front of her obi. “That I don’t know how traditional kimono business feels about it or people think about it, but I really like it.”

“But that’s... a modern kimono sense of changing the kimono,” the woman insisted. “This is just modern sense this is.... grafting.”

My female informant’s response reaffirms the argument presented in chapter one: there is a certain allowance for changes to the kimono so long as they adhere to a “modern kimono sense.” An *obi-jime* worn obliquely, for example, is an appropriate alteration while drastically altering the silhouette is not. There is a pushback once innovation goes so far as to make an ensemble “*not* a kimono” as

¹ Japanese: ‘unattractive’

evidenced by the two Mount Holyoke student's rejection of the kimono in figure five as a "real" kimono. These informants did not supply much by way of reason as to why they felt like this besides that these young women did not know what it meant to wear the kimono correctly.

One of my kimono teachers, a stout woman with graying hair and glasses, surprised me with her nonchalance when I asked her for her opinion on young Japanese who wear the kimono in ways other than the prescribed manner on *seijinshiki*.

"What they do is not kimono," she said as we inspected my kimono-clad form in a restroom mirror after a Saturday morning *kitsuke* lesson at Kyoto City International Foundation. "They are only interested in fashion, not kimono. After *seijinshiki* or graduations are over, then you won't see them anymore."

As it turns out, she was right. I never saw an alteration that drastic again. I would see a young woman wearing a kimono over a long sleeved shirt during the winter, or another with her kimono at knee-length so as to show off her knee-high boots, but such sightings were seldom compared to standard silhouettes. I was intrigued by the implications of what my teacher had said: that a kimono could render the world of fashion momentarily, but would lose something of itself in the process. This raises an interesting question: if these kimono are not "real" kimono in these moments, then can one say that they are acts of resistance against the national costume? Or have they been coopted by young Japanese as an expression of another mainstream version of Japanese identity? To answer this, it may be

helpful to consider how these performances might be a means of expressing alliance to a Japanese identity generated by interaction with popular Japanese culture, particularly *kawaii* or “cute” culture.

Kawaii is translated into English as cute and carried with it many of the same overtones: “sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, vulnerable, weak, and inexperienced” (Kinsella 1995:220). After entering popular consciousness as a trend in the mid 1970s, it progressed from the dominating style in pop culture in the 1980s to a lifestyle choice for some marked by affected handwriting, slang, food, and so on. For our discussion today, we will largely be focusing on *kawaii* clothing style and how it has seemingly infiltrated kimono rentals as evidenced by the products marketed for young women for their *seijinshiki* and college graduation ceremonies.

The aim of cute clothing was to make wearers appear younger than they were through strategic use of color, lower-quality material such as plastics and veneers, and the inclusion of lace and frills (Kinsella 1995:229). It idealized childhood as a time before one was obligated to relinquish personal freedom in order to take on the responsibility and obligations that come with being an adult in Japanese society—a perception largely influenced by the period of lackluster “political and social imagination in Japan” during which *kawaii* style evolved (Kinsella 1995:242). Although young men began to identify with the style in the late 1980s, it was seen as something produced and consumed primarily by women

as women stood to lose the most autonomy upon entering an adulthood revolving around the responsibilities of marriage and motherhood (Kinsella 1995:243-4).

It is ironic to consider the origin of Japan's cute culture when we see how it has influenced styles of the Japanese national costume that young women now most frequently wear on occasions that commemorate their induction into various stages of adulthood, but there is no sense of parody in the catalogues that offer such styles. To attire oneself in a Hello Kitty-esque cuteness is simply one more option now available for consumers to choose from. For example, the kimono and hakama featured in a catalogue produced by a rental company called Ange offers an array of colors from pastels to violent Technicolor creations; the (seldom subtle) patterns include hearts, flowers, butterflies, and bold geometric shapes. What's more, the ensembles feature a variety of accessories including large silk flowers or sparkly, presumably plastic chains made of gem-cut spheres or hearts that can be attached to the front of one's hakama, little top hats to be pinned into one's hair, lacey trims for collars, hems, and the edges of sleeves, and so on. The styles offered are loosely organized into different categories such as "Elegant Cute" (elegant *kawaii*), "Elegant Feminine," "Sweet," and so on. Some of the combinations conjure up some sense of what one might generously call modern takes on "traditional" styles, baring the occasional sparkling heart or butterfly. Other styles such as those found in the "Pop&Cute," section can be best expressed by inviting the reader to imagine if the brand Lisa Frank known for its rainbow-colored products began producing hakama (figure 15).



Figure 15 An example of a hakama for a college graduation ceremony form the Ange Hakama rental catalogue.

The advertising rhetoric used in the catalogue illustrates both the pervasiveness of the collective individuality achieved through group activities identified by Assmann as well as the indolent nature of *kawaii* culture. *Kawaii* style as it appears here is also a reaffirming of the self as something to be admired as an intentional display as evidenced by a particular line of text in the Ange

rental catalogue: “if you want something lovely, then leave it to me” (*raburii nara watashi ni omakase*).

In addition to cute kimono and hakama, Ange also offers a selection of men’s hakama. Included in the rental catalogues is a one-page double-sided insert showing eleven different styles of men’s hakama as well as one photo of a couple holding hands while both dressed in hakama. While the grand total of twelve photos of men in hakama in a thirty-five page catalogue with dozens of smiling hakama-clad girls that advertises upwards of five hundred potential kimono-hakama combinations may hardly seem significant, even that small number speaks volumes about the changing attitude towards kimono as a vehicle for playful expression of individuality through participation in group activity for both men and women.

What’s more, it is interesting to examine how young men wearing hakama for an occasion such as the coming of age ceremony are represented in rental catalogues. While kimono on a gendered female body is supposed to transform her into the ideal Japanese woman, it does not have the same feminizing effect on a gendered male body despite the condemnation the garment received from the Emperor Meiji as “effeminate” (Slade 2009:55) When I broached the idea of the kimono as possibly being unappealing to men because of its effeminate nature with both male and female Japanese college students, they fairly unanimously rejected it. Maybe a long time ago people felt that way, said one male student with some experience wearing kimono from studying tea ceremony at his

university, but no longer. Now men's kimono is associated with the idea of a delinquent, a style called *yankii* in Japanese (figure 16).



Figure 16 A *yankii*-style hakama for men from the Ange Hakama Rental catalogue

All eleven photos of men wearing hakama from the Ange rental catalogue are intended to portray *yankii* masculinity. The men's styles include both patternless kimono in somber, "masculine" colors along with flamboyant hakama-kimono combinations. The punk style is obvious in certain photos more than others, such as those bearing the image of a dragon winding across the haori, the jacket typically worn over the kimono with a hakama, or a shimmering blue kimono/haori combination worn with a hakama with a blue gradient. Other kimono such as a dark blue kimono and haori with crests worn over a black and white striped hakama, the likes of which may be worn at a wedding, may not seem particularly *yankii*. Equally important to the actual kimono itself, however, is the deportment of the model and the use of accessories. One of the model sports

a head of orange spiked hair and a faint beard; two off the models sport one or several ear piercings, respectively. What's more, the models adopt a very similar wide-legged stance. Some models, including one who wears a very "traditional" kimono along with an ear piercing, stand with their arms crossed and scowling; others make bold gestures. Whether wearing a subdued or vibrant hakama, smiling or scowling, these male models seem to all represent a conspicuous, masculine confidence.

Just as *kawaii* culture has influenced kimono, it seems that the image of a man in kimono in pop culture has changed from regrettably effeminate to the costume of delinquents as a result of the garment's connection with a conspicuous group of men who in part rely on kimono to display their position in society: the yakuza. As part of a larger discussion of costume and appearance of yakuza, Jacob Raz says that the kimono serves two purposes:

...being the national costume, it denotes belonging to the Japanese cultural milieu. Moreover, since it is rarely worn by the modern Japanese male, it further denotes the 'Japaneseness' of its wearers. But, by its very rarity it also signifies the opposite: it denotes exclusiveness. [...] Thus, although as a unit of significance it is a declaration of affiliation to Japanese culture, in its context declares the 'outsiderness' of its wearer. (Raz 1992:220)

The origins of the yakuza stem from groups of juvenile delinquents or discriminated minorities (Raz 1992:220). The use of kimono has influenced perceptions of the yakuza as being simultaneously both extremely "Japanese" and peripheral to Japanese society. This as a result has influenced the perception of and added new meanings to the garment as it relates to men. Because of the strength and duration of the yakuza's performance with kimono, it is now possible

for young men to access the type of masculinity associated with the yakuza and thus cosplay a delinquent through wearing kimono.

The reasons for a young man to choose to wear a hakama on his coming of age day are as unique as the given individual: maybe he wants to participate in a group activity while standing out from a crowd of similarly-suited male peers, or perhaps match his kimono-clad girlfriend. Despite his intentions, the strong link between yakuza and men's kimono gives those who see him a "delinquent" vibe. Of course this is not the exclusive meaning of a man's kimono; it is merely one possible option available because of one group's prolonged contact with the costume itself. The characteristics of one group that wears kimono has imbued the kimono with the traits the group is perceived to have, which in this case is a dangerous yet strangely attractive *yankii* masculinity of the yakuza. In other words, while the costume initially informs an audiences' perception of the actor, the actor's performance may add new meanings to the costume over time; these new meanings then are accessible to other actors. As stated in the first chapter, a cosplay is first defined by the parameters of its required costume, but it is possible for new meanings to be layered upon the costume with each performance. The degree of success the cosplayer has in *re-fusing* the cosplay will determine whether the new meanings will become widely known.

The selling of kimono as *kawaii* or *yankii* shows that the modern kimono is by and large not simply an example of art for art's sake, but a commodity for play and consumption (Kinsella 1995:247). The culture of cute originally

represented a way to reject the values and expectations of modern Japanese society, but has now become so pervasive that it operates as a means of joining the collective Japaneseness. Through acting childish, young Japanese attempt to escape the obligations their society tries to foist upon them. This is ironic considering that cute has also permeated those ceremonies that mark such life-course events as *seijinki* or graduation from college. Likewise men may be trying to reclaim a form of Japaneseness that is simultaneously traditional and peripheral by rejecting their Western suits.

As such, these choices in style might represent a display of ironic self-awareness and therefore an act of resistance against the dominant culture. Or, these young women and men might be eagerly consuming a kimono culture that has been made more palatable for their sensibilities. Resistance is possible, but identifying it is a challenge short of asking the actors themselves. This is where it becomes difficult to apply Butler's performance theory. For Butler, there is no "doer beyond the deed" and no identity beyond the moment of performance (Butler 1999:33). In other words, there is no authentic performance where an outside appearance matches an inner self. Performance is therefore a masquerade that is successful when one can "pass off" their appearance as 'reality'" (Entwistle 2000:144). Theorist Seyla Benhabib has critiqued this aspect of Butler's theory, stating that it strips of an individual of "any concepts of selfhood, agency, and autonomy" (Benhabib 1995:21). If a kimono represents Japaneseness, then what is a Japanese attempting to "pass as" by wearing it? Dalby might be

among the voices that argue that a woman might use the garment to try and “pass” as a suitable marriage partner, but this assumption is complicated by the presence of “cute” kimono options as well as sightseeing rentals: while some young women may still use kimono as a calling card for cultural achievement or a cute kimono to resist accepting new adult roles, there are a considerable number of young women who use the garment to express their identification with both tradition and the sensibilities of mainstream Japanese youth culture.

CHAPTER FOUR: *FURUSATO*, THE HOME OF JAPANESENESS

Cosplay emphasizes the idea of a stage. Although there is no reason why one could not, one typically would not cosplay as Cloud Strife, wear a prom dress, or wear a kimono to stay at home and, say, watch TV. Such overt acts of costume demand a stage, for it is in their interaction with an audience as well as with settings that these garments are imbued with their meaning. The stage not only refers to public space versus private. As indicated by Dalby and confirmed by the practices of kimono-wearing that I observed, kimono is no longer simply a form of clothing, one more option hanging in the closet of possibilities. It has become a type of costume, *created* in opposition to mainstream fashions but *comparable* only against itself just as a cosplay can only be evaluated in terms of how well it represents the character design. As such, to cosplay is to break with mundane sartorial expectation and for that reason both cosplay and kimono tend to be worn on specific occasions: the former tend to be worn at large comic and anime conventions known commonly as *cons* and the later typically on ceremonial occasions.

It was because of the importance of stage that I was initially so surprised by the number of Japanese I saw wearing kimono any day of the week in Kyoto. I already knew from my exchanges with rental store employees that most of them were doing a sightseeing rental, but that did little to explain why someone would want pay to be dressed in a kimono just to walk around the city. I decided that the only way I could get to the bottom of this was to actually ask individuals dressed in kimono why they had chosen to wear kimono that day. My first interviewees were a couple from Kobe. I was terribly nervous about how to catch their attentions without being rude, but I could not pass up the opportunity to ask them some questions for not only the woman but the man as well were both wearing kimono, the latter being a much rarer sighting. I followed several paces before I finally gathered the courage to make contact. Her husband had wandered away while I spoke with her, leading me to suspect that he was not interested in speaking with me about kimono. To my surprise he came back after I was done speaking and was eager to share his thoughts on kimono. "They're warm in the winter and cool in the summer. They suit the climate of Japan," he explained, expounding upon the merits of the national costume. However, he demurred when I asked him if he wore kimono often. He told me that embarrassment kept him from wearing kimono in his home city despite his desire to do so and thus limited his wearing to his trips to Kyoto.

This would not be the last time I would hear people refer to Kyoto to explain why they had chosen to wear kimono. Such responses were not limited to

those with experience and the knowledge of how to dress themselves; the responses of many first-time and veteran renters as well as students with no experience beyond being dressed by their parents in kimono or yukata for their *shichi-go-san* ceremonies indicated a strong relationship between Kyoto and kimono. The kimono is simultaneously the national costume of Japan and the cultural property of Kyoto. How did Kyoto come to be a particularly good place to wear kimono? In this chapter I utilize Marilyn Ivy's discussion of *furusato* or "hometown" to illustrate how historical coincidence reinforced the triangular relationship among Kyoto, kimono, and geisha, and how this relationship became the foundation of marketing strategies to recast Kyoto as a city of "Japaneseness," a place that simultaneously appeases and perpetuates nostalgic longings or *akogare* for a Japan since past and provides a perfect stage for kimono cosplay.

Kimono seems to be inextricably tied up (no pun intended) with the costume of the geisha and maiko (apprentice geisha), and Kyoto now claims ownership of these professional kimono wearers if at the very least for the purposes of tourism advertisements. The one-day Kyoto prefectural bus pass has a photo of two maiko in the middle of a dance. On the Kintetsu train line, I saw pastel-colored train cars each adorned with a prefecture name and its respective iconic images. This included deer and temples for Nara; for Kyoto, it was the Golden Pavilion, The Pure Water Temple, and, of course, a maiko. The link between geisha and Kyoto is also significant for the kimono, as from as early as

the Muromachi Period it was their predecessors—the *asobime* (lit: “playgirls”)—who set the trends in fashion.

“Playgirls” were “multitalented, trendy ladies who led rather public lives” who are commonly referred to today as courtesans (Dalby [1993] 2001:37). From the emergence of these “playgirls” onward, it remained the women of the pleasure quarters whose elaborate dress provided the inspiration for the wardrobes of the stylish women in the city. However, once the sumptuary laws of the 1720s prohibited overt displays of opulence in deportment, the elaborate costumes of the courtesans began to lose their appeal in favor of dark blues, browns, or greens with simple stripes or otherwise muted patterns. This new “darker, sophisticated aesthetic” was known as *iki*, and it was the geisha who excelled as fashion icons of the Edo period:

...geisha were the most *iki* women, and they came into their golden age at this time. A shy maiden was too innocent to be *iki*, a proper wife too correct. But a high-class courtesan in the licensed quarters was not *iki*, either—she was overdone and hemmed in by her conservative traditions. Geisha were the fashion avant garde. Their taste in stripes, dark colors, and subdued patterns propelled the mode of *iki* into the consciousness of an age. (Dalby [1993] 2001:55)

But these *iki* geisha were not necessarily geisha of Kyoto. Well into the Meiji period, woodblock prints from the time locate these geisha and other courtesans in various areas of Tokyo including the Yoshiwara and Shinbashi. In her work *The Silk Weavers of Kyoto*, Tamara K. Hareven includes transcripts of her interviews with various weavers from the Nishijin district of Kyoto, an area created by Toyotomi Hideyoshi in the Momoyama period as a safe-haven for

weavers who had hitherto been scattered by warfare that remains famous today for producing magnificent (and costly) woven obi (Minnich 1963:173). In one particular interview weaver Yamaguchi Itaro, famous for his work on weaving four scrolls illustrating scenes from *The Tale of Genji*, explains that one of the reasons he did business with people in Tokyo was the demand for fine obi from the women of the pleasure quarters:

The licensed prostitution quarters [*yuukaku*] in Tokyo were prosperous. At that time, the fashion trends and boom for *obi* were set by the prostitutes, rather than by the townspeople. I use the term *yuukaku* in a general sense. In fact, there were two kinds of women in the *yuukaku*: one of them was commercial prostitutes [*shougi*] and the other type was women entertainers [*geisha*]. Women in *yuukaku* wore luxury items, unlike in the present *yuukaku*. Those prostitutes and *geisha* bought their own *obi*, because they made lots of money. ... They wore really conspicuous clothes and were different from the contemporary *geisha*. The Mitsukoshi department store used to issue a magazine called *Time*; the magazine covers had pictures of famous *geisha* in the Shinbashi district of Tokyo who were wearing luxurious kimono. ... Of course, there were rich people's wives and ladies of the nobility who wore much better kimono than the *geisha*. But women of the nobility did not show up in public. By contrast, the *geisha*'s business was to display good kimono and they were willing to appear on posters. Naturally, *kimono* had to be advertised only through the *geisha*. (Hareven 2001:113)

As indicated by Yamaguchi, there is a strong relationship between the *geisha* and kimono. As 'proper' women were unable to do so, kimono and obi retailers relied on *geisha* to display their kimono in advertisements. In turn, *geisha* relied on those same retailers to purvey fine garments, as the quality of their attire often determined the amount of money they could gain as performers as well as from their patrons (Hareven 2001:113). Kyoto's rebirth as a supposed center for

kimono culture as well as for maiko and geisha may be explained in part by the decline of Tokyo's geisha communities in locations such as Shinbashi after the Great Tokyo Earthquake of 1923. Yamaguchi said of the relationship between the Great Tokyo Earthquake and the flourishing of Kyoto's pleasure district:

When Tokyo was destroyed by the earthquake, wealthy people from all around the country visited Kyoto and played around in the Gion [*geisha* and entertainment district]. They spent lots of money here. They also bought *kimono*, particularly during the recovery period after the earthquake. (Hareven 2001:114)

As stated earlier, the earthquake played a significant role in the phasing out of the kimono as quotidian dress in the Kanto-region as Japanese-style buildings and possessions lost in the earthquake were largely replaced with those of a Western-style and questions as to the garment's practicality were raised. It is therefore possible to suggest that through the process of rebuilding Tokyo into a "modern" city, Kyoto was cast as a city of tradition because its scenery and architecture were spared. This, coupled with the subsequent shift in spending practices from the Tokyo pleasure quarters to those of Kyoto as indicated by Yamaguchi, may in part explain why geisha and maiko exist in both domestic as well as foreign imagination as lovely creatures indigenous to Kyoto despite the fact that geisha communities in Tokyo such as those in Asakusa existed as contemporaries to those of Kyoto and continue to exist into the present day.

However, it is more than seismic coincidence that has rendered Kyoto a hotspot for kimono wearing. The efforts of commercial and governmental cultural industries provide a multitude of options and incentives for wearing kimono, but

that does little to explain why it would be appealing to travel to Kyoto (or, for residents of the city, to specific sites within Kyoto) and put on a kimono to go sightseeing. If you have the inclination to walk around in kimono, why not simply put one on wherever you happen to be? The answer to this seems to be that not all places in Japan are equally “Japanese.” In her book *Discourses of the Vanishing*, Marilyn Ivy suggests that Japan’s success as a modern capitalist nation has created ambiguity about Japanese cultural identity, specifically in regards to what was perceived as “lost” through the process of modernization. The nature of that perceived loss can be best understood through an exploration of the phenomenon of nostalgia. According to Ivy, there are two components essential to nostalgia. The first is that the possibility of the loss of something is real, and the second is that the threat of that loss remains:

...the consuming and consumable pleasures of nostalgia as an ambivalent longing to erase the temporal difference between subject and object of desire, shot through with not only the impossibility but also the ultimate unwillingness to reinstate what was lost. For the loss of nostalgia—that is, the loss of the desire to long for what is lost because one has *found* the lost object—can be more unwelcome than the original loss itself. Despite its labors to recover the past and deny the losses of “tradition,” modernist nostalgia must preserve, in many senses, the sense of absence that motivates its desires. (Ivy 1995:10)

The kimono is also shaped by this idea of nostalgia. As indicated by both scholars such as Goldstein-Gidoni as well as many of the individuals I interviewed on the streets of Kyoto, the sight of a kimono-clad figures inspires a feeling of *akogare*, or longing, in the beholder, which is part of the garment’s appeal. If the kimono returned to mainstream fashion, then it would no longer be

an object of longing. Therefore attempts at mollifying unease about the state of the loss of Japanese culture must do so in a way that provides the means of reconnecting with the “lost” object without actually reinstating it into everyday life. In other words, the kimono must remain in a state of *re-fusion* rather than become *fused* once more.

One example of this process explored by Ivy is domestic travel campaigns such as Discover Japan (1970) sponsored by Japan’s national railway companies as a means for Japanese to embark on a journey “home.” Ivy elaborates, saying that

travel to discover Japan... presumes both that one’s point of departure, one’s home, is *not* Japan, and that the Japan motivating travel is incomplete, not fully locatable: there would be no need to travel if one were at the destination, no impetus for a journey if what one sought had already been found. (Ivy 1995:30)

Clearly the home that is being discussed here is not the physical place to which a Japanese returns after work or school. Rather, the subject of discussion here is the concept of *furusato*, a word that encompasses the English “hometown” as well as “historic village” and “native place.” It is an ideological “national-cultural home” (Ivy 1995:30) with connections to a sense of origin other than one’s current place of residence and claims a history that predates and exceeds one’s own existence. To say that one’s home is “not Japan” is to say that it is presumed disconnected from the “traditions” of an idealized past; the reason it is not locatable is because the distance to this *furusato* is not spatial, but temporal.

The Discover Japan and all subsequent domestic travel campaigns were therefore responsible for selecting appropriate locations to physically represent the idea of *furusato*, working with other travel, media, and tourism enterprises in “discovering and purveying striking remnants of a purer, more pristine Japan” (Ivy 1995:33). In this way, the burden of preserving Japanese “culture” is foisted onto certain localities so that Japan may claim that tradition has not disappeared completely in the face of modernity; it just exists now in certain places. Culture is something that one must travel to rather than something that is readily accessible through and integrated in daily practice. As one cannot presumably stay in these places forever for the need to return home, the nostalgia that makes the place appealing remains unthreatened.

Tourism has capitalized on the longing to return one’s national-cultural home and turned the concept of the *furusato* into a consumable commodity from the public transportation required to reach one’s destination to the souvenirs and local food specialties one may purchase while there. Therefore although Ivy focuses on an example that presents travel to remote locations as a means of reconnecting with cultural origins, the utility of the concept of *furusato* that she creates is also useful for an examination of the creation of a physical location for an imagined national-cultural home through tourism.

With tourism and service industries making up sixty-five percent of workforce, Kyoto is careful to cultivate its image as a storehouse of traditional Japanese culture for both foreign and domestic audiences alike. For example,

most guidebooks don't mention that the head office of Nintendo as well as Kyocera, a company that produces, semi-conductors, mobile phones, and ceramic goods is in Kyoto (Dougil 2006:220). Like the "Kyoto" train cars depicting images of maiko, one is more likely to see advertisements exhorting Kyoto's role as vanguard of traditional culture such as the ads I saw on local subways produced by a prefectural organization called "Kyoto Creation." The campaign was called "Thank goodness Kyoto is in Japan" (*nihon ni, kyouto ga atte yokatta*). These posters had that line of text written in Japanese either besides or superimposed on an image meant to represent Japan: a man dressed in a somber black hakama, holding a *wabi-sabi* tea cup (Figure 17); a masked Noh actor performing outdoors in the twilight; a young woman in dark pants and a white long sleeve top kneeling on a veranda as she contemplates a folding screen displayed on the opposite side of a Japanese-style garden.¹

¹ Poster images and additional information available at:
<http://www.city.kyoto.lg.jp/sogo/page/0000035115.html>



Figure 17 “Thank goodness Kyoto is in Japan” (*nihon ni kyoto ga atte yokatta*).

The name of this organization is indicative of the innovations that go on there in order to keep “traditional” culture alive, relevant, and, what’s more, to keep its production a money-making enterprise. Kyoto as it exists now is a fairly modern creation, especially when it comes to the kimono culture that exists there. Although there are attempts to block certain signs of modernity such as Nintendo, I argue that the kimono rental industry for sightseeing is a means by which to save a dying traditional industry by generating appeal for wearing kimono among younger people as well as by providing access to kimono at prices they can afford.

From the standpoint of tourism, the kimono is a difficult object to present in a readily consumable form. Museums such as the Shiorian Jūban and Machiya Museum are one way in which tourists can have casual interaction with the kimono, or as in this particular case with the *nagajūban*, the garment worn just beneath the kimono itself. The museum consists of the physical house itself, which is of the “*daibeizukuri*” style, as well as an exhibit of *nagajūban* and

sketches of patterns from 1920 to 1940. Interaction with the garments here is limited to looking, unless a guest would like to be fitted for a custom-made *nagajūban* or silk gauze (*ro*) yukata, the price of the latter running at a hefty 39,900 yen.²

Still, a demand for kimono among a younger generation exists. A 2001 article in the Japan Times contained both an interview with one such young (then 39) kimono enthusiast who wanted kimono retailers to begin providing affordable kimono and the head of one of four kimono and clothing companies who were trying to do just that by introducing “wa-no-fuku,” polyester kimono that “do not require special training to be put on” for about 30,000 yen (Daimon).³ Another article from the Japan Times in 2004 indicates the blossoming of the second-hand kimono industry, which offers used kimono at a fraction of the cost of a new (Nakamura), a threat to tradition retailers. However, reasonably priced used kimono have a limited appeal as the majority of young people who are interested in wearing kimono do not know how to wear kimono and often do not have someone capable of teaching them. In this case, learning to wear a kimono then requires some sort of lesson, the formality (and consequently the price) of which varies depending on school or organization. As stated earlier, the cost of these

² Approximately \$490 and \$362 respectively as of April 9, 2012. Prices obtained from the Shiorian website: <http://shiorian.com/index2.html> (accessed 2/6/12)

³ I was unable to find any information on what is meant by “wa-no-fuku.” Google search results came up with several pictures of a kimono-like jacket and pants combination that is similar to employees of stores selling traditional Japanese sweets often wear. Given that this style claims that no training is required, I suggest that a kimono-like variety of the “wa-no-fuku” may consist of a skirt and a kimono-like jacket over which a pre-tied obi is worn.

lessons ranges from reasonable to extortionate. Regardless of the price, learning how to dress is a time intensive process; as I learned from experience, one cannot hope to master it in a day. Further complicating the matter is the lack of an appropriate venue in which to wear kimono outside of ceremonial or otherwise formal occasions. Therefore even though many young people indicate their desire to try and wear a kimono, the financial and time commitment may be prohibitive.

In Kyoto, it seems that both parties have found a satisfactory solution to this challenge: offer kimono rentals for local sightseeing. While kimono rentals for ceremonial purposes such as the coming-of-age ceremony have been around now since the end of the “bubble days” in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Goldstien-Gidoni 2001[1999]:360), renting kimono for sightseeing around Kyoto is a recent invention that started about ten years ago, according to an employee at the Yasaka branch of the kimono rental store Yume Kyoto. What sets sightseeing kimono rentals apart from others is because prices are reasonable, clients need not wait for a specific ceremony on a predetermined day, but can opt to be dressed in a kimono whenever the mood strikes them.

Furthermore, kimono shops not only generate revenue from renting, dressing, and additional services such as hair and makeup, but also ensure that they will continue to have a client base as they neither sell kimono to clients, nor do they teach the clients how to dress themselves. Indeed it does seem to be a thriving enterprise if the amount of customers and the harried but ever-polite demeanor of the staff on the day I ventured into Yume Kyoto are to be taken as

any indication of success. Only a few days after New Year's, the store was packed with young women in various stages of the transformation process. Immediately visible were those selecting their kimono and those who were already dressed in the process of having their hair and makeup done. As such, it is not surprising that some stores now offering sightseeing kimono rental packages at reasonable prices often originally opened their doors under different guises. For example, before opening its doors as a "kimono rental salon," the store Ume Kyoto in Kitano Kyoto was a producer of *obi-jime* for thirty years.⁴ Yet another store, Okamoto, boasts a history of one hundred and eight years as a kimono producer before switching over to doing rentals.⁵

Despite its apparent success at restoring life to a floundering industry, renting kimono out to tourists does not appear to be pervasive throughout Japan. A Google search of the keywords "sightseeing," "kimono," and "rental" in Japanese yields around 868,000 results, the astounding majority of which consist of links to services located in Kyoto: out of the first ten hits, eight of them involve Kyoto in the hyperlink for the website while the word "sightseeing" itself is found in the website description.⁶ This is not surprising when one considers that the stores offering these sightseeing rentals make explicit references to the city of Kyoto in its advertisements. For example, Kimono Rental Yume Yakata where a few of my interviewees had done rentals has the following written beside a slide

⁴ <http://www.umesakura.net/about/> (accessed 2/6/12)

⁵ <http://www.okamoto-kimono.com/about/index.html> (accessed 2/6/12)

⁶ The two websites that did not mention Kyoto instead referenced Nara and Nikko, respectively.

show of photos of smiling young Japanese in kimono on the top page of their Japanese website:

I want to try walking through Kyoto wearing a kimono. But I can't put one on by myself..." For this sort of person, we will rent to you and dress you in a finely patterned kimono and obi. Wear a kimono in Kyoto and do things like go sightseeing, or enjoy some shopping...

Yume Yakata also specifically mentions Kyoto in their description of their couple's kimono service (Figure 18):

If you're going on a Kyoto date with your boyfriend, then we recommend this plan. His kimono-clad form might suit him surprisingly well.



Figure 18 Couple's kimono rental for Kyoto dates taken at Yasaka shrine.

Other websites simply suggest that whether sightseeing, strolling, or going on a date in Kyoto, one should feel free to dress in kimono and enjoy oneself. Such is the blurb on the rental menu page of the website for the Yume Kyoto rental store, which had also been mentioned by some of my interviewees. Wanting to explore this link between Kyoto and kimono, I decided to visit Yume Kyoto during a brief trip to Japan I took with an American friend in the winter of

2011. Trying to speak with shop employees so close and just after New Year's was probably not the best idea, though definitely indicative of the popularity renting kimono for sight seeing enjoys. The tiny shop was flooded with mostly young women in various stages of the renting process from selecting their kimono to getting their hair styled in a salon area that wasn't partitioned off from the main waiting room. Rental forms covered the reception desk, indicating that the staff would not be getting a break anytime in the near future.

According to an employee, sightseeing rentals took off in the surrounding area roughly ten years ago, meaning in the early 2000s. This information paired up nicely with an article published in 2005 that I'd read in the Japan Times about rumors of a "kimono boom." When I asked him why Kyoto was such a popular place for wearing kimono, he excused himself for a moment and came back with a little red book. The cover was divided by the image of an *obi-jime* and adorned with four little *chidori* birds (known as plovers in English), the symbol of the Kyoto geisha quarter called Pontocho and explained that clients received one of these little books when they came in for their *kitsuke* appointments (Figure 19).



Figure 19 2011-2012 Kyoto Kimono Passport from www.kimono-passport.jp

These little books were passports for the Kyoto Kimono Passport campaign, organized by The Executive Committee of “The City of Kimono, Kyoto” (「きものの似合うまち京都」実行委員会) and sponsored by the following organizations: The Chamber of Commerce and Industry for the Kyoto Metropolitan Area and Kyoto City (京都府・京都市・京都商工会議所); The Kyoto Incorporated Foundation for the Promotion of Japanese Clothing (財団法人京都和装産業振興財団); The Kyoto Textile Business Union (京都織物卸商業組合); The Nishijin Product Wholesalers Partnership (西陣織工業組合); The Kyōyuzen Federation of Cooperatives (京友禅協同組合連合会); and the Kyōzome Wholesaler Industry Union (京染卸商業組合).

Upon arriving at the homepage for the Kyoto Kimono Passport, one is greeted by two lovely young Japanese women in kimono standing on a bridge

over the Kamo River. Their bright smiles seem to represent the simple caption that runs down the middle of the image: happy in kimono (*kimono de ureshii*). To the left of this caption, an image of the 2011-2012 passport stands out brightly against a background. Below this is a pretty explanation of the campaign:

When you display your kimono-clad self, you will receive preferential treatment at temples and shrines, and receive discounts and souvenirs from museums, restaurants, and more. From places you can get into for free wearing kimono to where to do kimono rental as well as events to enjoy while wearing kimono, this passport is filled with great information for the kimono-wearing you.

The site also includes links to resources about museums, Japanese cultural classes, *kitsuke* and kimono rental services, and information about participating temples, shrines, stores, restaurants, and so on. Approximately in its tenth year of existence, the campaign seems to be doing well if the number of people one sees walking through the historic and scenic areas of the city is to be taken as any indication.⁷ While all of this information showed me that sightseeing rentals in Kyoto were popular enough to sustain many rental stores as well as such involved campaigns, it still did little to elaborate on what that unspoken connection between Kyoto and kimono actually *was*. This indicated that although these campaigns use Kyoto to generate interest in kimono, the reasons as to why it would be appealing to wear the garment while sightseeing in the city remain

⁷ Information about this campaign was very hard to locate beyond what was published on its homepage. Especially difficult to find was the start year of this campaign, which is not listed on its website. No external information (e.g. Wikipedia) page exists for the campaign. To determine the year, I did Internet searches for the Kyoto kimono passport in previous years, the oldest of which I was able to find was from 2002. I e-mailed the organization responsible for organizing this campaign via e-mail, but never received a reply.

unstated as though the implicit relation between Kyoto and kimono were something obvious. My interviewees often cited being in Kyoto as a reason for their wearing of kimono. “It’s the flavor of Kyoto,” (*Kyoto no ajiwai*) one twenty-something young woman from Ishikawa responded. I received many other responses along the lines of “*funiki ga ii*,”⁸ which can be roughly glossed as “it (kimono) suits the atmosphere.”

“It’s a place of the history of Japan.” A forty-nine-year-old kimono kitsuke teacher that I had the good fortune to meet by chance at Yasaka Shrine echoed this sentiment. “Kyoto is a place of Japanese history, so naturally kimono suits the city because here is the culture of *wa*.⁹ Kyoto equals *wa*, which equals kimono,” she went on to say, surprising me by using the English word “equals” in her explanation.

The word innovation is not one typically associated with Kyoto. Guidebooks readily tout Tokyo and its environs as modern marvels of neon, robotics, and modernization while Kyoto fulfills the role of the “old capital,” the locus of “authentic” Japanese culture and the fodder for nostalgic reminiscences. When considering the steps that various industries have taken to keep kimono alive, such as the Kyoto Kimono Passport campaign, among the generations that by and large do not know much about kimono, it seems that Kyoto has become a center for kimono innovation precisely through its attempts at preserving kimono

⁸ Colloquial spelling of the word *funiki*, meaning “atmosphere,” “mood,” or “ambience.”

⁹ 和(*wa*) glossed as peace, harmony, or Japanese-style.

use outside of ceremonial occasions. I have not done extensive research on the kimono culture of Ginza, or really anywhere else other than within the city limits of Kyoto. However, my most recent sojourn in Ginza in January of 2012 confirmed the opinions I had formed based on existing scholarship on kimono as well as talking to Japanese living in the Tokyo area: the kimono culture of Ginza seems vastly different than that of Kyoto. There were no young women dressed in garish rental kimono with hair styled into elaborate, appropriate-for-prom configurations who I had so often seen around major shrines in Kyoto. Instead, the women in the shopping districts of Ginza wore elegantly subdued kimono and kept their hairstyles tidy. No frills, no lace, no Technicolor patterns. Their kimono appeared to be silk and, given the lack of sightseeing rental kimono services, presumably belonged to their wearers.

The availability of casual interaction with kimono plays a strong role in shaping the kimono culture of an area. Without access to casual rentals, wearing kimono in areas like Ginza requires either a prohibitively costly rental such as those usually reserved for coming of age ceremonies or an education in kimono kitsuke, which often requires access to kimono and absolutely requires a certain amount of dedication in order to master. Conversely, Japanese can experience wearing a kimono without any prior knowledge of the garment or how to put it on themselves. These rental industries give people access to that which they long for without ever creating the risk of that longed-for object re-entering the realm of the mundane; the city itself provides a suitable stage. The kimono remains oscillating

between states of *de-fusion* and *re-fusion* in Kyoto, accessible but never without a sense of longing. It is an important cosplay that not only allows Japanese to flirt with a tangible symbol of their national identity in a place of historical significance, but also plays an important role of shaping the atmosphere of Kyoto itself and the understanding of self for the people of the region. It is also important, however, that the kimono never be reintroduced into the realm of the mundane or else the kimono would lose the nostalgic essence that keeps people returning to the city to experience Kyoto.

“Out of all of the cities, the people in Kyoto have extremely (*mechakucha*) high pride,” said a twenty-two year old student at Doshisha University from Shiga prefecture who was particularly interested in tea ceremony when explaining to me his take on the link between kimono and Kyoto. “We feel the honor of Kyoto. We want to convey that we are people of Kyoto (*kyōto jin*).”

CHAPTER FIVE: *MAIKO HENSHIN*

...the fact that no foreigner can wear kimono without looking silly, at least to a Japanese.

Liza Dalby, *Kimono: Fashioning Culture*, 2001[1993] (113)

It is my intention in this chapter to discuss how a costume gives a cosplayer access to an identity that is otherwise unavailable to him or her. The costume in cosplay informs an audience of the role the actor is playing, therefore allowing the actor to shift from the identity awarded by the costume and their actual identity (Winge 2006:72). In a similar vein, there is another aspect of my research that I would also like to address in this chapter, one that had considerable impact on my fieldwork. It is the issue of my racial identity and my consequent status as foreigner. With my dark blonde hair, blue eyes, and high-bridged nose (a feature that my host mother enjoyed commenting on), I am very obviously not racially Japanese. My appearance often set the tone of even mundane interactions I had with strangers in Japan such as being presented with English menus upon entering restaurants or store clerks assuming that I spoke no Japanese. As such, I often wondered how my foreignness affected my kimono wearing performances. In this chapter I would also like to examine my experience doing *maiko henshin*

as well as several particularly telling episodes regarding my kimono-wearing to not only reaffirm that the kimono provides access to Japaneseness, but also to consider the question of who can access this quality.

Maiko henshin is one of the most overt forms of cosplay involving kimono that a young woman can do. It is a service through which one may be dressed and photographed as a maiko. However, in spite of the name, women can choose to be dressed as a geisha at nearly all *henshin* studios; depending on the studio, one may even choose to be dressed in the costume of a *tayū*, a high-ranking courtesan, or in the *nijūhitoe* style of the Heian court. Why would a woman choose to pay the equivalent of hundreds of dollars to be dressed as a maiko or a geisha whose professions are still critiqued by some feminist thinkers as a symbol of female oppression in Japan? Furthermore, what would prompt a woman to dress as a *tayū* who, unlike the geisha, was sold for sex? The answer lies in the fact that once removed or *de-fused* from the world in which they live and work, the costume of the geisha or *tayū* loses its original communicative values and adopts a *re-fused* role as a beautiful ambassador to Kyoto and, for international audiences, of Japan in general. To reaffirm the power of the processes of *de-fusion* and the disjuncture that occurs with *re-fusion* through *maiko henshin*, I will briefly outline the history of the geisha and her costume.

Established in 1589 by Saburoemon Hara, a stable hand of the then-warlord Hideyoshi Toyotomi, the walled-in Yanagimachi (Willow Town) was the first pleasure quarter in Japan (Downer 2001:39). However, this was the world of

the *yūjo* (courtesan), complete with its own hierarchy among prostitutes, system of apprenticeship, and required curriculum of both erotic and performance arts. The genesis story of the geisha begins rather *outside* of the walls of the pleasure quarters on the banks of the Kamo River. In 1603, a woman by the name of Okuni no Izumo with her troupe of female entertainers introduced a new style of dance that “was not just brilliant, but cheerfully erotic” (Downer 2001:38). Her dance repertoire ranged from adaptations of ancient folk dances to cross-dressed, sexually charged pantomimes of assignations with women of various castes. Her novel dance style was called *kabuki*, a derivation of the word *kabuku*, which means “to frolic” or “to be wild and outrageous” (Downer 2001:38). The popularity of kabuki did not go unnoticed by both amateur prostitutes and courtesans alike, and soon there were a number of kabuki troupes. A series of brawls among male kabuki fans over the actress led to a ban in 1628 on women performing in public, but women continued to perform up until 1647 when the last offending theatre was successfully closed. Men took up kabuki as their own. Some of the female kabuki dancers took their trades indoors, not to the pleasure quarters, but to samurai households. There “they gave private performances or set themselves up as teachers of music and dance” (Downer 2001:38).

The first female geisha did not appear until 1751. Previously the profession of geisha belonged to men who entertained at gatherings of courtesans and their customers in the pleasure quarters. Female geisha outnumbered male geisha by 1780, and by 1800 geisha had become a tacitly female occupation

(Dalby 2001:56). The creation of the female profession of female geisha, recognized as such in 1779, was done so in opposition to both the role and appearance of the *yūjo*: “[t]he geisha in the licensed quarters were forbidden to sleep with the *yūjo*’s customers... Geisha were not to wear flamboyant kimono, or combs or jeweled pins in their hair” (Dalby 2001:57). Despite their somber appearance compared to the resplendent *yūjo*, the popularity of geisha soared. Undoubtedly this is due in part to the professions originating outside the walls of the pleasure quarters rather than within. While their relationship to prostitution may have been ambivalent vis-a-vis their status as performers as was often the case in other parts of the world, geisha operated within the pleasure quarters but were neither bound by its walls nor its traditions: “they came in and out of the quarters freely and were in every sense worldly, unlike the caged and sheltered *yūjo*” (Dalby 2001:56).

The journey of a young woman *maiko* to geisha is marked through sartorial changes that are supposed reflect the woman’s progress from “child” to “woman,” originally both in the sense of her development as a performer as well as sexual experience. A substantial part of training for newly debuted *maiko* is conducted through *minarai*, or learning through observation. During this period, a *maiko* accompanies her geisha “older sister” when she goes out to entertain clients to learn by the older woman’s example.¹ Therefore the *maiko*’s elaborate,

¹ Seniority is based on years of experience rather than actual age in the geisha community; therefore it is possible that a geisha may be bound to a *maiko* in the capacity of an “older sister” even though the geisha is younger than the *maiko*.

colorful costume as compared to her older sister's serves as compensation for this period of relative silence as well as to reaffirm the maiko's role of an inexperienced child in the social world of geisha. Whereas a geisha may only paint her face white for gatherings where more formality is required or for public performances such as the spring dances, a maiko will always have her face painted when in attendance at a party. The makeup requirements for the maiko changes as she advances in rank from junior to senior maiko: lessening of the amount and intensity of blush; painting the lips more fully in red. The same is true for maiko hairstyles, which are constructed using the maiko's real hair and adorned with silver flutters and other ornaments; geisha may choose to wear wigs with less ornamentation. The height of a maiko's wooden clogs also change with seniority, the most junior of maiko's wearing the highest clogs. This tradition continues as possibly a throwback to times when a young child was sold to an *okiya* (geisha house), and the high clogs helped compensate for a maiko who had not yet reached her full height (Downer 2001). A maiko wears a *furisode* kimono, indicating her youth, the innermost collar of which is red, indicating her inexperience. A maiko was initiated into the geisha world through a ritualized sexual experience called *mizuage*, after which she ceremonially "turns the collar" literally changing her red inner collar for the white collar of a fully-fledged geisha. After this, the new geisha trades in her dazzling costume with the

swinging sleeves of maidenhood for the more restrained costume of a mature woman.²

What is of particular interest of the maiko's costume is the inherent contradiction it embodies. While overall the costume serves as an indication of both professional and sexual inexperience, a maiko's collar is worn as low as that of a geisha's to expose as much of the neck as possible, emphasizing her latent (i.e. virginal) sexuality. The nape of a woman's neck is traditionally and continues to be considered by Japanese men as powerful erotic (Miller 2006:23). To bring more attention to the erotic quality of this area, a maiko's white face makeup is applied so that the nape of her neck is left intentionally unpainted in a forked design, the tips of which stretch down towards her collar. While perhaps less so for a maiko on the cusp of becoming a geisha who is therefore participating more fully in engagements with her older sister, the implications of this aspect of the costume stand out stronger: sitting quietly and observing, the junior maiko is like a virginal yet hyper-sexualized doll. It is this "inexperience" that makes her both endearing and desirable, but also prevents her from joining the ranks of the "adult" geisha (Dalby 2001).

This is very different from the image of a maiko advertised by Studio Shiki, a popular *maiko henshin* studio in Kyoto. Upon visiting their website, a guest is greeted with an elaborate video. As digitized "Asian"-inspired music

² It is important to note that the ritual of *mizuage* is no longer practiced and young women training as maiko have control over their sexuality; therefore the maidenhood/virginity now indicated by her costume is a metaphoric representation of her junior standing as compared to geisha.

played, the video showed a woman kneeling before a mirror in a beautiful tatami mat room as other women dressed in black transformed her from everyday Japanese into a maiko as well as women already fully transformed and strolling through the most picturesque locations of Kyoto. Over this, a woman narrates the pleasures and power of doing *maiko henshin* in Kyoto, “the home of the Japanese soul,” as you “start a journey to search for the new you.” The site showed mature, professional photos of women being painted, styled, and dressed as a maiko.

Studio Shiki has been in business for thirty-one years as of 2012 and offers a variety of photography “plans” at their studio. Prices vary accordingly. After a special discount package offered for school fieldtrips, the least expensive plan is the “Maiko Studio Photography Plan” at 8,900 yen.³ In addition to the basic makeup, hair, and dressing service, this package includes six in-studio pictures that will be printed and bound in a glossy photo album. Customers are then free to take additional pictures with their own cameras inside the studio or outside of the studio building. Currently the most expensive plan on the Japanese website is the “Flagship Store Special.”⁴ This plan includes sixty poses taken on-location by studio staff at some of the scenic locations around the studio such as Toudai Temple and Yasaka Shrine, twelve in-studio photographs, a glossy twenty-four photo album, a CD-R of all photos taken, and thirty minutes of free

³ Prices as of November 27, 2011.

⁴ The English version of the website also advertises another plan called the “Highvision Maiko Photography Plan” in which a video is filmed of the client in the style of a documentary. The price listed at 100,000 yen. This plan is not listed on the Japanese version of the website, so I assume it is no longer available.

time during which customers' friends or family are free to take pictures. This process, which takes an estimated three hours and twenty minutes, costs 24,900 yen, about 323 dollars.⁵ For my experience I chose the 18,000 yen "Outdoor Maiko Photography Plan," which included an outdoor photo session of sixty poses, a twelve-page glossy photo album, a CD-R of all pictures taken, and thirty minutes of in-costume free time in the areas surrounding the studio. I also paid an additional fee of 2,100 yen for a *han katsura*, literally a half-wig, which incorporates the clients own hair into the wig to give the appearance of a natural hair line. Being a stickler for authenticity (and considering how much I was paying for the service as it was), the *han katsura* was a must.

The "journey to find a new me" advertised by the website began with a check in at the front desk in an unimpressive reception room. The walls were pastel in color, and the most striking feature was the automated hot/cold beverage machine of the variety that dispensed your beverage into a paper cup. When the receptionist confirmed my appointment, she gave me a thin under robe, *tabi* socks, and directed me to a changing room. The narrow room was already filled with women in various stages of undress. Some were washing the thick white makeup from their faces in one of the several sinks that lined one wall of the room while others were pulling out their clothing from the wall of lockers on the opposite side, cell phones already in hand. There was none of the romance or mysterious allure the website had suggested. Instead I felt like I had stepped into a

⁵ Conversion rate as of November 27, 2011.

maiko processing facility, all modern and all business. I suddenly felt awkward and shy, but none of the women seemed to pay any attention at all to my presence. I quickly chose an available locker and, per the English-Japanese instructions that were posted in various locations in the locker room, dressed myself in the polyester under robe and slipped on the *tabi*, the bottoms of which were made stiff not by thick cloth, but by cardboard inserts. I dumped my glasses (I had unfortunately run out of contact lenses) and cell phone into a plastic basket from inside the locker for personal items. The studio had particularly strong policies prohibiting photographs being taken in unauthorized locations or stages of the process. Preparations finished, I proceeded up to the second floor for hair and makeup.

The walls of the second floor were sea foam green. A loop of Western classical music streamed from the overhead speakers including the aria “Voi Che Sapete” from Mozart’s “The Marriage of Figaro,” a piece that I had sung several times at recitals. Sitting in one of several makeup chairs placed in front of a long mirror and counter, I waited and watched while two other makeup artists worked on their customers: a thin woman and a heavier set woman. The employees worked in silence except for the occasional “close your eyes,” “open your eyes,” “look up,” “look down,” and so on. After first making sure that I could understand Japanese, the stylist who came to apply my makeup fell into a similar pattern of silence punctuated by directions. In those moments when my speaking would not impede the makeup application, I explained that I was a student studying abroad

from America and was doing *maiko henshin* as part of a larger project on kimono for which I was also learning kimono dressing and conducting interviews. I ventured a few questions as my face disappeared behind a white mask with pinked cheeks: what sort of people did *maiko henshin*? Was it more popular among Japanese or foreigners? According to the employee, the age range of the women who do *maiko henshin* is wide, and generally done by individuals from outside of Kyoto who have come to the area for sightseeing. She said that women often want to try *maiko henshin* in order to connect with a sense of Japanese-ness unavailable to them in everyday life and the alluring beauty that exists in the world of geisha. While Japanese women typically booked the most appointments, foreigners were not uncommon; in fact they had already done two other foreign women that day before my appointment. My makeup finished, my stylist attached the *han katsura*, carefully pinning and brushing my natural hair into the heavy, pre-ornamented wig. The sections of my visible hair were sprayed black, making it undetectable from the wig itself and providing the “natural” appearance it had promised.

Moving then up to the third floor, I selected my kimono from an almost overwhelming array. The body of the kimono was a smoky black, dissolving into occasional patches of white on which subdued roses and golden designs were dyed towards the hem of the kimono and the bottoms of its long sleeves. The staff chose the obi. Compared to the makeup application, the dressing process was finished in the blink of an eye. My dresser secured various forms of padding over

my under robe at my waist and chest to “correct” my shape so that I could wear the kimono “beautifully” before dressing me in a red *nagajūban*. The process of dressing seemed remarkably familiar to what I had learned in my *kitsuke* lessons until the dresser draped a heavy collar on my shoulders. The front of the collar was white brocade with small red accents, but back and the inside edge were red. The collar attached to nothing, but its considerable weight kept it from falling off even as it was pulled back to a point that was only appropriate for maiko and geisha. *So that’s how geisha keep their collars so low*, I thought to myself. Then I noticed that other staff members who were not currently occupied came to hang around the doorway to my dressing room, apparently interested in the talkative foreigner who was, among other things, learning *nihonbuyō* and loved geisha.



Figure 20 The author as a maiko.

Once completely dressed and completely disappointed that I could barely see the finished product without my glasses, I stepped into the high clogs of a junior maiko and stepped out with my photographer back into the world from which I came, only now as a “maiko” (Figure 20). Once the photo shoot was over, I was given a half hour of free time to wander as I pleased before returning to the studio to have my costume dismantled. The results of my free time were as interesting as the process of being made into a maiko. I was flattered to hear the word *kirei* (beautiful, pretty) uttered in my direction as I walked along the street.

Although I once heard someone say *gaijin* (foreigner), the response I received in my costumed form was overwhelming positive. I was stopped by a group of foreign (non-Asian) tourists who asked me in Japanese if I would take a picture with them.

My most amusing exchange took place with the members of an amateur photography club. The members were both male and female, all upwards of middle age. I had walked past them once as they rested on a set of stone stairs. Instantly they took out their cameras. Suppressing a grin, I continued on my way down the street to explore other locations as a “new” me. When I passed back again possibly ten minutes later, one male member of the group approached me and told me in Japanese about their involvement with said club and, after thoroughly praising my beauty, asked if they could take my picture. Thus began my second photo shoot of the day. They set me in a suitable location (no electrical wires or anything else that might ruin the effect) and asked me to look this way and that, even once providing me with a pen and a pad of paper so I could mime signing an autograph. One of the men from the group asked me if I was Japanese. “Korean, then,” he pressed when I replied that I was not. The man who had first approached me took down both my e-mail and permanent addresses and sent me digital and glossy print-outs of the pictures they had taken of me that day.

It might seem easy to dismiss the reactions I received from this group as a reaction to the fantastic costume itself rather than either my foreignness or my ability to “pass” for a Japanese. Yet I was the subject of attention even when

wearing a normal kimono. I received comments from complete strangers when I wore kimono in public. While walking on crowded Nishiki Street in a second-hand pink silk kimono after seeing the Miyako Odori (the spring dances in Gion), I received many smiles from young and old women alike. One woman who was also wearing a kimono even stopped me on the street to tell me I was *kirei* before walking away. In an elevator in the Takashimaya department store two old women exclaimed about how *kirei* I was. Boys riding by on their bicycles gave me thumbs up while I sat with a friend on a bench by the side of the Kamo River during cherry blossom season. Older men engaged in *hanami* (flower viewing) stopped to chat and women made small talk with me on subway platforms.

In addition to being flattering, these experiences provided useful insights as to the relationship between my non-Japanese body and my kimono as perceived by a variety of audiences. Particularly interesting to me was that when these strangers felt the need to praise me for wearing kimono, they did so in Japanese. I feel that it was my being a foreigner that singled me out as someone who needed to be praised rather than simply because the arrangement of my kimono or how it looked on my body was aesthetically pleasing. As indicated by my host mother after my first attempt to dress myself, I came to possess cultural knowledge that most Japanese did not have.

Therefore even as my foreignness singled me out as someone to be praised for wearing a kimono, my ability to wear kimono simultaneously subsumed that foreignness as indicated by the way in which I received praise: because I can wear

kimono, it must follow that I can both speak and understand Japanese without difficulty. Perhaps some insight into the transformative power the kimono seems to possess can be gained by examining the idea of *henshin*. Glossed as “metamorphosis” and “transformation,” the word *henshin* consist of two kanji. The first kanji, *hen* (変), indicates “change.” The second kanji, *shin* (身), indicates “body” or “oneself.” The nuance of the word indicates more than a superficial change; rather, it is a physical change that leads to an inner change, a way of discovering a new self. As such, the kimono did not make me into a Japanese any more than it would have made a racially Japanese *more* Japanese. Rather, it allowed me to demonstrate my knowledge and appreciation for Japanese culture in a way that would have been impossible without the costume. Japaneseness is not only about the body; it is about the *presentation* of it. It is a testament to the transformative power of the kimono as a cultural symbol that one of my kimono dressing teachers was able to write the following on a card she presented me at the end of my *nihonbuyō* recital: please become more Japanese than a Japanese (*nihonjin yori nihonjin ni natte kudasai*).

CONCLUSION

On the morning of March 17, 2012 I had one of my last and by far my most unexpected interviews regarding kimono. I had barely started working on my thesis in the Thirsty Mind, a small coffee shop across the street from Mount Holyoke College, when I heard someone speaking Japanese. I looked up and was pleasantly surprised to see two Japanese, a man and a woman, waiting at the counter to order their drinks. I didn't think too much of their presence until more Japanese began to arrive. Curious as to what was going on but too shy to actually approach anyone, I strategically reordered the papers on my table so that a magazine on kimono fashions that I had bought in Japan was prominently displayed on top, hoping that someone might notice me and come over and talk.

Miraculously, my ploy worked. A older man wearing blue *mompei* trousers and the tapered end of his graying beard in a thin braid saw my magazine as he walked towards a table behind me. His name was Morimoto Shunji.

“*Kore wo yomemasu ka?*” he asked me. “Can you read this?”

“The kanji are difficult, but I can manage,” I replied in Japanese. Seeing the various chapters of my thesis spread out around me, he asked me what I was doing. I provided him with rough, truncated explanation of my research at which point he caught the attention of another Japanese man with salt-and-pepper hair closely cropped against his head. He came over to us. “She’s doing research on kimono and Kyoto,” Morimoto explained.

“Is that so,” the other man said, eyeing the magazine. He looked at me. “My mother owned a kimono shop in Kyoto,” he said, and my unexpected interview with potter Nakayama Hiroshi began.

A self-described “leftover hippie,” Nakayama spent several years traveling outside of Japan after college. He eventually found his way to Argentina where he began to make pottery in the 1970s. He stayed there until the burgeoning violence of the Dirty War made it impossible for him to continue his craft. He intended to return to Japan, but decided to go to New York after hearing that the city was “so interesting.” What he intended to be a brief sojourn before flying home eventually grew into a stay of ten years. He lived in SoHo and continued to create pottery using a kiln he installed in his basement. The increasing gentrification and commercialization of the neighborhood eventually prompted his move to Western Massachusetts where he lives today. He has lived in America for thirty-two years to date and has not once returned to Japan.

Nakayama described the process through which his mother sold kimono. Orders for kimono would arrive at the store in Kyoto, and then his mother would

bring those orders to the clients. She had inherited the business from her father, a merchant of kimono originally from Shiga prefecture. Nakayama did not know whether his grandfather had inherited the business or had started it himself. His mother ran the business nearly up to her death about fifteen years ago. “We closed the store after she died,” he said. “My older brother went off to be a salary man somewhere else.”

“Who were some of her typical customers?” I asked.

“Wealthy people,” he said over the sound of espresso being ground for a latte. “Especially my mother went to Ashiya—do you know Ashiya? It’s a very wealthy area near Kobe. It’s a very special area. Or some other places—I don’t remember. Osaka, or... not very much in Kyoto.”

Since his mother owned a kimono store, I assumed that he would have considerable experience with kimono. Much to my surprise, he replied that he did not. “Because I was born after the war,” he said.

Every part of being Japanese was denied. Only about fifteen, twenty years after the war did people start getting interested in Japanese things like kimono. The shop was separate from our home, so I didn’t have anything to do with it. My mother still wore kimono at home, though. ... Her customers were mostly women [but] she was dealing with some men’s clothing. So she often [asked] me if I want kimono... it [didn’t] have to be a formal kimono but more casual, [for] daily wearing. But I was never really interested in it. That’s how I grew up, that was my culture. It’s away from things Japanese. But... Like after twenty years the end of the war, people started to realize that Japanese culture is important.

Nakayama’s words provide us with a look at a time when the kimono was in a state of *de-fusion*. Nakayama did not recognize the importance his mother placed in the kimono. The kimono was a representation of Japaneseness and,

although he was a Japanese, his culture was not. This indicates a critical moment for the role of the kimono in post-war Japan: because of the disjuncture of culture, and consequently of identity as well, between pre- and post-war Japan, the kimono could not return to its *fused* state as an unmarked, mundane form of dress. Instead the *re-fused* kimono as a form of cultural cosplay combines not only ideas of “tradition” but utilizes the language and trappings of contemporary Japanese to render it accessible to a wider audience.

Take for instance how English is routinely used in printed media involving kimono. The magazine *Kimono Salon* is written with ‘kimono’ in hiragana, the phonetic alphabet for indigenous Japanese words, while the word ‘salon’ is in roman characters (called *romanji* in Japanese); advertisements for rental services such as Ange Hakama Rental and Watabe wedding have English words and phrases scattered throughout their look books. Even the name of the former is foreign: *ange*, French for “angel.” Furthermore, the models used in both cases look Western. Every model in the Ange Hakama Rental catalogue has their hair dyed in a shade falling somewhere between natural dark brown to a fake bright orange and styled in ringlets or other elaborate coiffures. With her large, round eyes and high-bridged nose, the model for Watabe Wedding hardly looks Japanese at all.

Foreign loan words also appeared in the responses I received from several of my informants, such as that of another kimono *kitsuke* teacher who used the English word “equals” when she wanted to express that “Kyoto equals *wa*, which

equals kimono.” Among its other glosses, the Japanese *wa* (和) indicates Japaneseness or Japanese-style. While it is possible to read this mixing of languages to discuss an inherently Japanese culture as how Japan’s love of emulating Western culture has come at the expense of their traditional practices, I feel that it illustrates how the kimono is still able to represent Japanese identity even though what it means to be Japanese has undergone and continues to undergo considerable changes. These sentiments were reflected in an interview I had with a twenty-two-year-old male Doshisha University student who was interested in both kimono and tea ceremony. I interviewed him during a lunch outing on the grounds of the old Imperial Palace, located within walking distance of Doshisha University.

I opened with my baseline question. “Have you ever worn a kimono?”

“Yes. That was... when I was twenty. I rented it for my *seijinshiki*.”

“That’s a little rare, isn’t it? Why did you decide to do that?”

“*Identity*, probably,” he replied, using the Japanese-English phonetic transliteration of the word ‘identity’ rather than a native Japanese word.

“What sort of ‘*identity*’?” I asked, following his lexical lead.

“It’s a juncture (*kurigi*). That time of being twenty and becoming an adult... because around the time of that ceremony I had the pride of being a Japanese. It’s like from around the time I was a child I thought I would do that.”

“Did you rent it alone?” I asked.

“What do you mean? Like, with friends or alone?”

“Yes, that’s it.”

“Ah. By myself.”

Small, scattered raindrops began to fall.

“Why are you interested in kimono?”

“ Why... hmm... Long ago the Japanese who wore kimono were... were very exacting (*komaka*), weren’t they? Like, if you looked here from another country you would at least think that. Truth be told, I like it and I feel like returning to that time. Samurai *spirit*,” he concluded, using the Japanese-English ‘spirit.’

There was no sense of irony in his blending of languages. Instead it shows the emergence of a new interpretation of Japanese identity that is being negotiated under guise of returning to an idealized past. A full return to the past is both impossible and undesirable as evidenced in our discussion of the concept of nostalgia, but borrowing the trappings of that past may serve as a source of guidance on how to proceed into the future. I had the good fortune to speak with Amanda Seaman, Associate Professor of Japanese and Director of Asian Languages and Literatures at the University of Massachusetts Amherst on this subject:

I... think that Japan as a country and particularly their young people are very rootless and they’ve been let down by the economic system and all of the fall out from Fukushima. Modern tradition is falling apart, so they’re going back as Japan always does, to what is essentially Japan. But they don’t want to go entirely back so that they’re sort of picking what they like out of it. And so they’re valorizing particular traditional aspects of Japanese culture, but without the sort of intellectual process that goes with

it. So it's not a Yanagita Kunio¹ type of going back and looking at things... it's [like] wow, this is really cool and I want to go back and admire this and I'm not entirely sure I want to go all the way back. ... and I think the kimono sort of represents a part of that. Look at these people who are going back and picking up what's traditional Japan... this is part of a cycle.

This desire to return to cultural origins may in part explain the desire of young Japanese to seek out more interaction with kimono outside of ceremonial or official occasions. If we examine the kimono after it was reintroduced after World War II to Japan as a form of cultural cosplay, then the *re-used* kimono possesses the dynamism to represent Japaneseness—whatever that Japaneseness happens to be. Because ideas of what it means to be Japanese have not passed through the generations unchanged, it follows that the opinions about the meaning and role of the kimono, a physical representation of that identity, would also have changed accordingly. To wear the kimono in Kyoto is both a means of reconnecting with a type of Japaneseness that is seen as authentic or pristine as well as a vehicle of discovering and enjoying “the me that is different from always” (Kimono Salon). The *re-fused* kimono as cosplay is self-conscious of its role as a communicative symbol of national identity, but retains the dynamism necessary to embody a variety of discourses on what exactly that identity is despite its fairly consistent form. Simultaneously a means of making oneself distinct from the crowd and a way to enter into larger communities as well as a site of both ceremony and play, to understand the kimono as a form of cultural

¹ 1875-1962. Scholar. Considered founder of the study of Japanese native folklore (*mizokugaku*).

cosplay is to understand the dynamic and varied meanings of what it means to be Japanese.

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