

Between Tradition and Innovation: The Reinvention of the Kimono in Japanese Consumer Culture

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Abstract

The kimono plays a marginalized role in contemporary society, but continues to be worn on festive occasions. In this article I explore the role of the kimono from several angles. Based on participant observation and in-depth interviews with members of two organizations, I examine two diametrically opposed approaches towards the kimono in order to provide an insight on how differently it is being reinvented in Japanese society.

I will identify four areas in which the kimono is being kept alive in Japan. First, I argue that the kimono is related to consumption. Not

only does the purchase of the garment itself involve consumption, but the training of how to wear a kimono is also related to consumption of education and experience. Conventional approaches towards the kimono that emphasize manners and etiquette coexist with innovative approaches that experiment with age and gender boundaries. Secondly, mastering the art of the kimono can be interpreted as a form of cultural capital whereby the kimono fulfills a role in social distinction. Thirdly, I argue that wearing a kimono has become an expression of collective individualism that is often embedded in group activities. I conclude that the kimono has become a communicative symbol to convey an individual attitude towards societal conventions and national identity.

KEYWORDS: consumption, Japan, consumer culture, kimono, fashion, national identity, reinvention, cultural capital

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” (Dalby 2001: 3). In this introduction the anthropologist Liza Dalby, who spent one year training and working as a geisha in Japan, acutely summarizes the current image of the kimono.

The kimono in contemporary society indeed plays a marginalized role, yet continues to be worn mostly on formal occasions such as weddings, funerals, coming-of-age days, and for tea ceremonies. Due to the relevance of the kimono on festive occasions, it seems unlikely that the kimono will vanish entirely.

In this article I will focus on the following research questions. I will investigate the reasons why the kimono is being kept alive in contemporary Japan despite often being perceived as an anachronism. To be more precise, I intend to discuss the kimono as a group-oriented activity and I will also explore how it is perceived as a national symbol. Furthermore, I argue that the kimono is closely related to consumption. Not only does the purchase of the garment itself involves consumption, but also the appropriate training of how to wear a kimono (*kitsuke*) is related to the consumption of education and experience. Moreover, the kimono fulfills an important role of being a symbol of social distinction.

The Kimono as a Reinvented Tradition

The term kimono literally means “a thing to wear” and was adopted into English during the Meiji period (1868–1912) when Western clothes were first introduced to Japan. It was only at that time that Japanese people

became aware of the fact that they were wearing distinct ethnic clothing and felt a need to create a name for their native clothes. However, the major distinction was made between *wafuku* (Japanese clothing) and *yōfuku* (Western clothing), a distinction that has remained until today and has found its way into the lexicon.¹

Hobsbawm and Ranger have argued in their well-known thesis on inventing traditions: “‘Traditions’ which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983: 1). The kimono is an example of a tradition that could only be recognized and named as such through the encounter with a contrasting other, which elevated the kimono to a symbol of unique Japanese clothing. In its contemporary form the kimono is an invention of the Meiji period and represents the most formal wear. The kimono is by no means the only native garment. Apart from the kimono, many variations of partially more casual *wafuku*, such as the *yukata*, continue to be worn by both genders. In her book *Kimono*, Dalby has devoted a whole chapter to the practical folk clothing of farmers during the Meiji period and the twentieth century (Dalby 2001: 144–62). Yet, despite the existence of a variety of Japanese clothing, it is the kimono as the most formal and refined garment confined to women that mainly continues to be associated with Japanese clothing.²

Wearing a kimono in contemporary Japan means making a deliberate decision to take off *yōfuku* and to return to wearing native dress. After the abolition of the four-class system of the Tokugawa period (1603–1867) the kimono lost its role as a signifier of social rank and rather became a symbol of “distinctive Japaneseness,” which was expressed in contrast to the foreign while seeking to establish continuity with the historic past at the same time.

The Kimono and Consumption

The kimono is related to consumption in many different ways. The sociologist John Clammer has argued that aesthetic sensibility in Japan is not so much expressed in any conventionally artistic form such as art or architecture, but rather in mundane activities of the everyday life such as shopping (Clammer 1992: 195). Wearing a kimono in contemporary Japan is as much about displaying a sense of aesthetic sensibility as it is about consumption. The combination of a kimono and kimono-related wear such as the *obi* (sash) require careful selection, taste, and in many cases substantial financial resources.³ Since there are clearly defined rules related to gender, age, marital status, season, occasion, and taste (class) when wearing a kimono (Dalby 2001: 163), even a minor mistake can lead to the embarrassment of the kimono wearer. The garment itself and the mastery of wearing the garment in an appropriate and flawless way becomes an indicator of age, taste, and class.

Moreover, the kimono represents conspicuous consumption. The elaborate garment is not suited for daily life, but rather serves as a

decorative and ceremonial dress limited to special occasions (Dalby 2001: 138–9). Non-functionality as way of displaying luxury and refinement becomes a function in itself.

Closely related to the importance of appropriate kimono attire is yet another form of consumption: kimono schools that have increasingly emerged since the 1960s (Dalby 2001: 119–21). Kimono schools offer an education called *kitsuke* in Japanese and there is a whole complex of manners taught alongside so that kimono schools assume the character of finishing schools. For example, not only is the proper way of dressing in a kimono important, but it is also vital to practice how to walk in a kimono, how to bow in a kimono, and how to fold a kimono. Younger women, in particular, who have not been trained in how wear their native garment, are taught appropriate kimono wearing, posture, and manners. Not only has the dress itself become an object of consumption, but a whole industry has emerged around preserving the art of kimono wearing. Moreover, the kimono as the garment worn by geisha has been reinvented as a symbol that is being used to uphold the enigma of Japanese culture.⁴ Outside Japan, the kimono is still associated with the geisha⁵ and reinforces the exotic cliché of the demure and graceful Japanese woman. This most refined and over-stylized garment is being used to represent the essence of Japanese culture.

In the introduction I have shown that the kimono is an invented tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) that has gone through a long historical process of awareness, invention, and reinvention and is moreover closely related to consumption. I argue that this process has not come to a halt in contemporary Japanese society.

Research Method

For this study I have used a combined quantitative and qualitative approach. Firstly, I have examined data on recent kimono sales in Japan and secondly, I have conducted participant observation and in-depth interviews with two organizations whose participants are dedicated to the kimono. These two organizations were deliberately chosen in order to show two diametrically opposed approaches towards the kimono and to provide an insight on how differently the kimono is being reinvented in contemporary society.

I interviewed members of the organization Kimono de Ginza in Tokyo during three of their monthly meetings in 2005 and 2006 in Tokyo (October 8 2005, November 12 2005, May 13 2006).

Research on the second organization, Sōdō Reihō Kimono Gakuin,⁶ is based on in-depth interviews I conducted with two members of this group at their affiliation in Sendai on April 26 2006 as well as on an in-depth interview with Yamanaka Norio, the founder of this organization on May 31 2006 in Tokyo. I had the opportunity to witness a kimono

contest held by Sōdō Reiho Kimono Gakuin on April 1 2007 in Tokyo. In addition, I relied on literature that has been published by Yamanaka Norio and on websites that both of these organizations maintain (Sōdō Reiho Kimono Gakuin: <http://www.sodo.or.jp/>; Kimono de Ginza: <http://kimono-de-ginza.jp/>).

Data on Recent Kimono Sales

Whereas sales of Western clothes are well documented, obtaining data on sales of *wafuku* is rather difficult since *wafuku* only play a minor role in the retail market. Furthermore, kimonos or kimono-related wear such as the *obi* are passed on from one generation to the next. A kimono might, therefore, be inherited rather than purchased, in which case it remains within one family for generations and does not appear in any statistical record.

According to the data of Kimono Nippon (2006), the Kyoto Foundation for the Promotion of Japanese Dress, the sales of *wafuku* amounted to 630 billion yen in the year 2001.⁷ This is a very small share compared with sales of women's Western clothing (*yōhin*), which amounted to more than 6 trillion yen in the same year. According to an article in the *Japan Times Online* (Nakamura 2004) the new kimono market shrank from 787.7 billion yen to 590 billion yen whereas sales of second-hand kimonos rose from 6 billion yen in fiscal 1999 to 34 billion yen in fiscal 2003 during the same period.

The Yano Research Institute (2006),⁸ a market research institute based in Tokyo, conducted a detailed internet survey on women, their attitude, and consumer behavior regarding the kimono ("Women between 20 and 60: Consciousness and Consumer Behaviour Regarding Kimono" [20–60 *dai jōsei no kimono ni kansuru ishiki to kōbai kōdō*]). This survey was carried out in 2006 for the second time in two consecutive years and included questions about recent purchases of kimonos and/or kimono-related goods, about the kind of kimono goods that were bought, and where these goods were obtained. The percentage of respondents who had recently acquired kimonos or kimono-related goods amounted to 25%. Especially women in their twenties (32.5%) and women in their fifties (32.8%) had recently bought kimonos or kimono-related accessories. Moreover, unmarried women demonstrated a stronger interest in buying kimonos (34.5%) than married women (22.7%). When asked about what kind of kimono goods had been obtained, kimono-related consumer articles such as the *obi*, footwear, and hair decorations made up 80% of such acquisitions, followed by the purchase of *yukata* (41%).

Sales of second-hand kimonos (recycled kimonos) and casual kimonos were also examined in this survey. If second-hand kimonos were bought, they tended to be of low cost, approximately 10,000 yen. There still

seemed to be a great reluctance to buy second-hand kimonos: overall 50% of all respondents replied that they felt hesitant about buying a second-hand kimono. In reply to the question whether respondents owned a casual kimono, only 16% answered that they did. Women in their forties were the largest group of respondents who possessed a casual kimono (25.7%).

According to the few data that are available, purchases of kimonos remain rare and more often consist of the acquisition of kimono-related goods such as footwear. Although there seems to be a slight tendency towards an increase of second-hand kimonos and casual kimonos, the results of the survey conducted by Yano Research Institute clearly show that more moderately priced second-hand kimonos and casual kimono wear are not yet associated with a very positive image.

Case Studies

Case Study: Kimono de Ginza

A recent example of a network of kimono enthusiasts that has gained public attention is the group Kimono de Ginza, which was founded in 1999 and was at first intended to be open only to men. However, as women began to show an interest in the activities, women were able to join the group the following year. Depending on weather conditions between eighty and a hundred participants, men, women, and children of all ages, meet once a month on the Ginza, an exclusive shopping district in Tokyo. Participants are from different professional backgrounds: among them are civil servants, company employees, teachers, and office workers. There is no membership in the true sense—participation is free to anyone who wears a kimono on the day of the occasion. The gatherings are merged with the latest technology: a picture of each meeting is displayed on the website homepage where future meetings are also announced. After the photo shoot the group splits up into smaller groups to go for a walk in the vicinity or to take a stroll around department stores to shop for kimonos and kimono-related accessories. The meeting is concluded by a dinner in a Japanese pub (*izakaya*) followed by a “second party” (*nijikai*).

Motives: Playfulness and Study

The motives of participants for joining the monthly gatherings varied greatly. Some participants mentioned that there is little or no chance for them to wear their kimono in everyday life, so the event provides a rare opportunity to wear their native dress. Some participants favor the timelessness of the kimono: whereas *yōfuku* have allowed gender boundaries to blur and have undergone frequent changes in colors, patterns, length, and shapes of clothes, the shape of a kimono has remained unchanged.

A combination of playfulness and study was visible throughout the meetings. Younger participants were interested in acquiring more knowledge about how to wear a kimono and were seeking advice from older participants about color combinations and the appropriate kimonos for different occasions. Some members expressed pleasure in stepping out of their everyday life. The event allows participants to be creative, to play with different identities, and to experiment with gender boundaries: some members have specifically chosen a “handle name” or a “stage name” for the gatherings while some participants dress in kimono that is normally not worn by their gender.

A certain kind of playfulness is also reflected in the name of the organization, Kimono *de* Ginza (my emphasis). The word *de* is written in Roman letters. Experimenting with the vocabulary of foreign languages or with the use of *katakana* instead of Chinese characters or *hiragana* adds an element of fashionableness to kimonos. Moreover, adding Roman letters to the name suggests that the kimono is not being interpreted as a solely Japanese garment, but presents itself as an increasingly cosmopolitan piece of clothing.

Closeness to Consumption

Throughout the gatherings consumption remained an important topic of conversation. Participants compared prices of kimonos and were especially proud when they had bought a very reasonable item from a second-hand kimono retailer. The majority of the participants chose to wear cotton instead of silk and emphasized their choice of wearing a reasonably priced kimono as a conscious decision. Inheritance from family members also played an important role. Several participants combined a new or a second-hand kimono with a sash they had inherited from their mothers or grandmothers which shows an aspiration to maintain family traditions].

Expression of Collective Individualism within a Community

Kimono wearing is often pursued as an activity within group settings or organizations. In some cases, women friends dress in kimonos to go out together in order to attend, for example, a tea ceremony. In other cases kimono wearing is practiced within an organization in which the art of kimono wearing is being taught and maintained. Whenever kimono wearing is embedded into a group activity, the kimono is closely intertwined with the role of community.

The community is characterized by a need and a desire to belong, especially in times of growing uncertainty, but is often no longer bound to a limited locality (Delanty 2003: 195). New forms of communities, such as online communities, create social intimacy but at the same time do not involve immediate social interaction and are not bound to spatially limited localities and long-term stability, as has for instance always been the case in small-town neighborhoods.

In the case of Kimono de Ginza, the activity of wearing kimonos takes place within a well-defined group setting that promises a certain sense of protection and stability. The gatherings represent a specific form of community that is characterized by being bound to a defined place and an interest in a particular activity and, moreover, involve face-to-face interaction. The creation of this community is not a matter of coincidence as is the case in small neighborhoods where people find themselves bound together fortuitously. The gatherings of Kimono de Ginza are well planned, carefully maintained, held on a regular basis, and tied to a particular interest that their members share. This community is deliberately created for the purpose of reviving an invented tradition, but relate to this tradition in an innovative form that breaks free from rules and restrictions that are associated with kimonos. Furthermore, these community events allow for creating new playful identities outside daily pressures and responsibilities.

Participants gather in a network, which is related to tradition, but at the same time involves consumption and entertainment. However, this community does not involve any responsibilities. There is not even a membership fee that would implicate certain financial obligations. Participants may join and leave the community as they wish. Community activities consist of occasional gatherings that evoke a sense of belonging but can be dissolved at any given moment. In his book *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*, the French sociologist Michel Maffesoli speaks of “emotional communities” that are characterized “by fluidity, occasional gatherings and dispersal” (Maffesoli 1996[1988]: 76). Maffesoli has used the term “tribes” to describe the emergence of heterogeneous groups and networks of people within mass consumer society. According to Maffesoli’s argument, mass consumer society has been fragmented into smaller groups and networks that are not class-based and characterized by temporary, yet emotional relationships.

The activities performed by Kimono de Ginza suggest a new form of collective individualism. Related to a sense of innovation is a desire to express individualism, but to do so within a group setting that promises a sense of belonging, protection, and stability. A striking characteristic is the fact that the kimono as the national garment is chosen in order to express this kind of group-based individualism. Kimonos used to be the norm before the encounter with foreign clothes, but the kimono is now confined to official occasions and is often perceived as an anachronism accompanied by restrictive conventions. In the meetings of Kimono de Ginza the kimono has become the opposite. It is the national dress presented in a more innovative form that attracts attention. This community revives and reinvents a tradition while rejecting the restrictive conventions that are associated with this very same tradition. Some participants of Kimono de Ginza experiment with gender and age boundaries and break with some of the defined rules of kimono wearing.

Even more strikingly, many of the participants I have interviewed during their monthly gatherings defy a formal kimono education altogether because they reject the values of discipline, hierarchy, and propriety that are implied in such an education. Many participants prefer to practice wearing the kimono on their own and rely on the advice of family members or friends.

Case Study: Sōdō Reihō Kimono Gakuin

The second case study presents a much more conventional approach towards the kimono. Sōdō Reihō Kimono Gakuin⁹ is a well-established kimono academy and finishing school that is represented throughout Japan. The organization was founded in 1964. Its main office is located in Tokyo and seven affiliations operate in major cities throughout Japan. The founder of the organization, Yamanaka Norio, has published several books in both Japanese and English in which he outlines the philosophy of the kimono. He emphasizes four virtues that are expressed by wearing the kimono: love, beauty, decency, and harmony (*ai, bi, rei, wa*).¹⁰ Yamanaka has traveled extensively to propagate the philosophy of the kimono abroad and expands on meeting representatives of various countries in his publications.

As mentioned in the introduction, training at a kimono academy is part of consumption associated with the kimono. The cost for a six-month course consisting of sessions held twice a week at Sōdō Reihō Kimono Gakuin amounts to approximately 200,000 yen in addition to an initial membership fee.¹¹

There is a close relationship between *sōdō* (kimono wearing) and *reihō* (etiquette).¹² Training at Sōdō Reihō Kimono Gakuin is not solely confined to a kimono education (*kitsuke*), but also includes a more general training on manners and etiquette which is, however, always related to the kimono.

Kimono wearing is perceived as a skill that needs to be acquired, maintained, and passed on. In an interview conducted with Yamanaka Norio on May 31 2006, Yamanaka emphasized the principles of lifelong learning (*shōgai kyōiku*) and lifelong employment (*shōgai shūshoku*) as a motivation for a kimono education and for becoming a kimono professional. A kimono education is closely related to training as a kimono consultant. This task of preserving an acquired skill and passing on this knowledge to future generations is also reflected in the name of Sōdō Reihō Kimono Gakuin. The Chinese characters of the name *sōdō* mean “the way to dress.”¹³ The second Chinese character *dō* or *michi* can loosely be translated as “way” or “path.” The philosophical concept of *michi* refers to acquiring certain knowledge or a skill in one area of concentration through carefully repeated practice. Specialization in one area of knowledge is closely related to tradition in the sense of passing on this skill or knowledge to future generations (Pörtner and Heise 1995: 226).

Currently there are approximately 9,000 kimono consultants or kimono professionals throughout Japan who work either in department stores or have their own *kimono kyōshitsu* [kimono classroom], having obtained the necessary qualifications and a license (*ninka*) from Sōdō Reihō Kimono Gakuin. The organization is divided into two related organizations. Sōdō Reihō Kimono Gakuin cooperates with the Kimono Consultant Association. All members of the Kimono Consultant Association have acquired a kimono education at Sōdō Reihō Kimono Gakuin before becoming kimono professionals. The organization is approved of and endorsed by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (Monbu kagakushō) and the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (*Keizai Sangyōshō*) that set the exams that future kimono consultants need to pass in order to obtain the qualification to work independently as kimono professionals. Sōdō Reihō Kimono Gakuin is characterized by a complex structure, a solid membership base, an efficient administration, and official approval by the Japanese government.

Unlike Kimono de Ginza, there are no regular group activities held at Sōdō Reihō Kimono Gakuin. There are two events: the New Years Party and a seminar for all of the participants in the Tohoku region. In addition, participants tend to organize events on a smaller scale on their own.

Kimono contests (*Zen Nihon kimono yosou kontesuto sekai taikai*) have been held on a yearly basis since 1972 in Tokyo and are attended by participants from all over the country. Women, men, children, students, and also foreigners dress in kimono on stage. While the amount of time needed to dress properly in a kimono is important, the “overall beauty” (*zentaitekina utsukushisa*) and the tying of the obi (*obi no musubikata*) are also essential criteria used to determine the three winners of each of the categories. Moreover, participants deliver a speech entitled “The kimono and I” (Yamanaka 2005: 120–1).

Results of In-depth Interview at Sōdō Reihō Kimono Gakuin

The following account is based on an interview I conducted with two employees at the affiliation of Sōdō Reihō Kimono Gakuin in Sendai on April 26 2006. Sendai is located in Miyagi Prefecture, which is one of the six prefectures in the Tohoku Region in Northern Japan on the main island Honshū. Sendai is the largest city in Miyagi Prefecture and has approximately one million inhabitants. The city serves as major connection between Tokyo and Sapporo. Whereas Sendai is a major city that offers all of the conveniences of shopping, eating out, and entertainment, the surrounding areas of Miyagi Prefecture are rather rural.

At present there are approximately 200 participants (*seitō-san*) enrolled in the affiliation of Sōdō Reihō Kimono Gakuin in Sendai

which represents the kimono academy in the Tohoku region. The school offers courses once or twice a week for a period of one or two years. However, no full-time intensive course is offered at the school. Presently all of the participants are women who are for the most part in their thirties, forties, and fifties. Participants have different professional backgrounds: among them are housewives, while other members are employed at offices, working as teachers or at local food stores (*o-bentōya-san*).

When asked for the reasons why participants decide to pursue a formal kimono education, especially the wish to wear a kimono because one is Japanese (*Nihonjin de aru kara*) was mentioned. But also the desire to connect to a tradition by wearing a garment that has been passed on from grandmothers to mothers to daughters was named as a motif for wearing kimono. A third reason seems to be the desire to discover a self (*jibun ga dete mairimasu*) after Western clothes has been put aside. Moreover, participants would like to learn how to generally improve their posture (*shisei*) and movements and how to enhance their general appearance (*kirei ni naritai*). By wearing a kimono, participants have expressed a desire to please others and to share this activity with other, mostly women friends.¹⁴ Kimono wear seems to be related to women networks and is often confined to special occasions such as going out to attend a tea ceremony (*ocha no keiko wo tanoshimu*).

Kimono Education at Kimono de Ginza

While conducting my research on Kimono de Ginza I also inquired if participants had received an education at kimono schools. Participants stated that the question of a kimono education has generally not been discussed among members, but for advice on how to dress in a kimono members instead relied on instruction by family members or experienced members of Kimono de Ginza, consulted manuals or shop assistants in kimono stores or simply kept practicing. Several members expressed a critical attitude towards a formal kimono education and rejected any constraints related to age, season, or marital status. Although a formal kimono education, as conducted at S d Reih Kimono Gakuin, does not seem to be favored by the participants of Kimono de Ginza, there is a need to know more about the kimono, such as for example the appropriate kimono wear for special occasions such as weddings.

Expression of National Identity or Fashion: Different Interpretations of the Kimono

As stated in the introduction, the kimono as a national garment is often associated with a sense of “Japaneseness,” a sense of national identity rather than being perceived as a fashionable piece of clothing. Moreover, the kimono is closely linked to other Japanese cultural practices such as flower arrangement, the tea ceremony, and calligraphy.

“Theories of Japaneseness,” called *Nihonjinron* or *Nihon bunka-ron* in Japanese, have been a thoroughly discussed subject in the academic discourse on Japan. These theories refer to a vast canon of literature on Japan that has been produced by Japanese and foreign intellectuals alike and emphasizes the uniqueness of Japanese culture and customs in different areas such as cultural practices, structure of society, and social and economic customs. In these theories Japan has been primarily contrasted against cultures of the “Western” hemisphere, in the broadest sense predominantly against Western Europe and particularly the United States. It is not China and Korea as countries that are much closer in terms of local proximity and cultural and religious characteristics that Japan is being compared to. Since the Meiji period, primarily “Western” cultures are being contrasted against Japan. In order to explain the essence of Japanese culture and societal structure, dichotomies such as “group orientation” in Japan and “individualism” in Western cultures have been established. These theories of *Nihonjinron*, which gained increasing popularity in the 1970s and 1980s, were severely criticized by intellectuals who denied these “theories of Japaneseness” and dismissed Japan’s uniqueness as a “myth” (Aoki 1990: 133–43; Dale 1986; Leheny 2003: 37).

Members of Kimono de Ginza are proud of wearing their native garment and regret the fact that opportunities to wear kimonos remain rare in daily life. As mentioned above, there is also a desire, especially among younger participants, to relate to the tradition of the kimono and learn more about the appropriate wearing of the kimono from older and more experienced members of Kimono de Ginza. Yet, a formal kimono education, which stresses a more refined sense of “Japaneseness,” is not favored by participants of Kimono de Ginza as they prefer to create their own combinations of kimono wear.

A stronger sense of national identity is dominant in the case of Sōdō Reihō Kimono Gakuin. Yamanaka emphasizes the kimono as “the world’s most beautiful garment” (Yamanaka 2005: 90). Being a well-established kimono school, Sōdō Reihō Kimono Gakuin is concerned with upholding a tradition that appeals to gentle femininity and propriety, but does not allow for any fashionable variations or overtly sexual interpretations of the kimono. Yamanaka stated in the interview in May 2006 that “the greatest pleasure for a woman is to become beautiful” (*josei no saikō no yorokobi ha utsukushiku naru koto desu*). According to his argument, this sense of refined beauty does not vanish with age as the kimono brings out the beauty of a woman regardless of her age, provided the kimono is worn appropriately and in accordance with the philosophy of kimono that Yamanaka has meticulously expanded upon in his publications. However, the kimono is at risk of dying out due to the fact that many women in contemporary Japanese society do not know how to wear a kimono properly. This loss of kimono tradition is sometimes associated with a decline of morals. Yamanaka, for instance, has differentiated between nine “types” of women who do not wear the

kimono for different reasons, which are listed below (Yamanaka 2005: 17–18):

[I] cannot get dressed [in kimono] on my own (*jibun de ha kirarenai*).

1. [I] cannot sew [kimono] (*nuenai*).
2. [I] cannot fold [kimono] (*tatamenai*).
3. [I] cannot buy [kimono], the price is too high (*nedan ga takakute kaenai*).
4. [I] do not know where to wear [kimono] (*yosotte iku tokoro ga nai*).
5. [I] do not know the pleasure of wearing [kimono] (*yosou yorokobi wo shiranai*).
6. There is nobody [I] can tell about kimono (*kimono wo tsutaeru hito ga inai*).
7. [I] do not know the value of kimono (*kimono no shinka wo shiranai*).
8. [I] do not know where to store [kimono] (*shimau tokoro ga nai*).

Along with wearing the kimono in an appropriate way, Japanese women are encouraged to adhere to a whole list of complex rules and philosophical principles. Kimono is not only elevated to a symbol of national pride but puts expectations on women of how to preserve their “Japaneseness,” to be more assertive, of how to affirm their “female Japaneseness.”

In this sense, wearing a kimono also entails significant gender differences. Dalby has described how differences in the length, color, and manners of tying the sash are shaped by gender (Dalby 2001: 168–9). Kimono wearing for women involves complex rules and a need to observe the proper etiquette. Whereas for men wearing a yukata in a more relaxed form is socially acceptable, women need to adhere to a more formal way of tying the sash, even when they are wearing a *yukata*.

Between Tradition and Innovation: The Reinvention of the Kimono in Japanese Consumer Culture

The kimono in its contemporary form continues to be reinvented. The history of the kimono goes back to the Heian period (794–1192), but the kimono in its modern form is an over-stylized invention of the Meiji period that has been transformed into a national symbol of Japanese culture. In the introduction I asked why the kimono is being kept alive despite being perceived an anachronistic piece of clothing and in which form the kimono manifests itself. I will identify three areas in which the kimono is of relevance.

The National Garment in Consumer Culture

Firstly, as I have pointed out, the kimono is closely related to consumption. Data on kimono sales indeed point to the marginalized role of *wafuku* on the Japanese retail market, which is dominated by sales of *yōfuku*. Yet the kimono continues to be an alternative to Western dress, especially on festive occasions. Moreover, data that I have obtained from Yano Research Institute suggest a tendency away from the kimono as a primarily ceremonial dress of conspicuous consumption towards a dress that is increasingly suited for daily life. Moreover, recent kimono magazines evoke a more playful approach by showing combinations of kimonos of the Taishō period (1912–26) or Shōwa period (1926–89) with non-kimono-related accessories such as handbags, jewelry, shoes, gloves and scarves, or kimonos combined with an obi that displays a motif that is not solely related to Japanese culture, but also contains playful elements (see the magazine *Kimono-Hime* 2005). The kimono has come to be a national garment that is being reinvented in a more fashionable manner.

There is also a relationship between the preservation of the kimono and consumption. The fact that many Japanese people require training when the occasion demands that they wear a kimono has activated a whole industry that has evolved around upholding a cultural skill that is at risk of dying out. The art of wearing a kimono also provides career opportunities. After having obtained an education in *kimono kitsuke*, qualified kimono teachers are able to open their own kimono academy and pass on a skill while being able to earn a living.

The Kimono as a Form of Cultural Capital

Secondly, kimono wearing reveals social distinctions in society. Mastering arts such as kimono wearing, tea ceremonies, and flower arrangement can be identified as cultural capital in a Bourdieuan sense, which is closely related to consumption (Bourdieu 1987[1979]). Clammer has convincingly argued in his analysis about consumption in contemporary urban Japan that the possession of cultural capital allows for differentiations to emerge among people of the same economic background (Clammer 1997: 103). The ability to master traditional Japanese arts presupposes a distinctive education and sets people who have accomplished this ability apart from the majority of Japanese people in contemporary society who do not know how to wear a kimono or how to practice a tea ceremony. Wearers of the kimono acquire cultural competence when they receive the formal kimono education offered at Sōdō Reihō Kimono Gakuin, which is costly and part of a whole network of refined skills that form the cultural capital of the well-educated Japanese woman. This element of cultural competence is also of importance for members of Kimono de Ginza, but in this case the possession of cultural capital is tied to a greater sense of accessibility and transparency. Members of Kimono de Ginza are proud of wearing

second-hand kimonos and of maintaining an organization that is open to anyone regardless of his or her individual financial situation.

The Kimono as a Communicative Symbol

Members of the two organizations that have been studied here display diametrically opposed approaches towards the kimono. Whereas Yamanaka emphasizes the kimono as “the world’s most beautiful garment” (Yamanaka 2005: 90), members of Kimono de Ginza display a more playful and experimental attitude towards the kimono. Members of Sōdō Reihō Kimono Gakuin uphold the ideal of gentle femininity and aim at preserving conventions associated with the kimono, whereas participants of Kimono de Ginza defy conventional kimono habits while holding on to a tradition through renewing and innovating it at the same time. By reinventing the kimono in a more fashionable manner and by breaking with age and gender restrictions, members of Kimono de Ginza form a counter-movement to more conventional organizations such as Sōdō Reihō Kimono Gakuin, which emphasizes formality, propriety, and subjects especially women to restrictions. In a broader sense, members of Kimono de Ginza utilize the kimono as a symbol to express their disapproval of the societal rules and expectations that are implied in “proper” kimono attire. They do not convey their disapproval by openly protesting against traditionalist forces in Japanese society that elevate the kimono to a symbol of national identity but they do so by reinventing the garment in their own way. However, it is important to consider that Kimono de Ginza is confined to a limited locality and is too small in scale to be regarded a subversive movement. It remains to be seen whether scattered groups such as Kimono de Ginza can powerfully counterbalance established organizations such as Sōdō Reihō Kimono Gakuin that operate nationally and are characterized by a firm bureaucratic structure.

A person makes a deliberate statement by refusing to wear a kimono at all. But a person not only makes a statement by wearing a kimono, but also, through the manner in which a kimono is worn, a person expresses an opinion about the kimono as a national and cultural symbol. Unlike various interpretations of Western clothes, the kimono has become a symbol to convey an individual attitude towards societal conventions and national identity, which is an important reason why the kimono is being kept alive in contemporary Japanese society.

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Notes

1. A parallel distinction is also made between *washoku* (Japanese food) and *yōshoku* (Western food).
2. There were (and still are) very different forms of kimono. The *jūnihitoe*, the twelve-layer most formal kimono attire was worn by female members of the Imperial court during the Heian period. During the Kamakura period, *kosode* was increasingly worn by women. In contemporary Japan, formal kimono, such as *kurotomesode* as the most formal kimono for married women and *furisode* as the most formal kimono with long sleeves for young unmarried women, contrast with *fudangi* (everyday wear), more casual kimono wear.
3. More than a million yen can easily be spent on a kimono and *obi* made of silk (see Dalby 2001: 135–7).
4. This can be seen with the latest movie *Memoirs of a Geisha* [*Sayuri* in Japan], which is based on a book of the same title written by Arthur Golden (1998).
5. In her book *Geisha*, which is based on her fieldwork experience of working and living as a geisha in Japan, Liza Dalby has dedicated a whole chapter to kimono, which formed the basis for her book on kimono in 2001 (Dalby 1983: 281–300).
6. I am grateful to Nadin Heé for drawing my attention to this organization.
7. For more detailed data on the sales of kimono see: Kyoto Foundation for Promotion Japanese Dress (Kimono) Industry, <http://www.wasou.or.jp/wasou/01/0110/0110.html> (accessed April 28 2008).
8. I am most grateful to Kazuyuki Matsui, general editor at Yano Research Institute, for the resources made available to me.
9. The present name Sōdō Reihō Kimono Gakuin is the joint name of two organizations. The first organization, Sōdō Kimono Gakuin, is the name of the original organization founded in 1964. The second organization, Sōdō Reihō Gakuin, was founded in 1982 and is not a kimono academy but rather a finishing school that provides a more general education on manners and etiquette (Yamanaka, 2005: 161). These organizations were combined under the name Sōdō Reihō Kimono Gakuin in 1990, but continued to operate as separate schools for another twelve years (Yamanaka 2005: 168).

10. The English terms are taken from a Sōdō Reihō Kimono Gakuin brochure.
11. These data are taken from the homepage of Sōdō Reihō Kimono Gakuin (<http://www.sodo.or.jp/course/kimono.html>, accessed April 28 2008).
12. *Reihō* is another expression for *reigi*, which can be translated into English as “etiquette” or “courtesy.”
13. The first character can be read as “*yosou*,” which can either mean “to do preparations” or “to decorate.”
14. While the head of the affiliation stated that recently also men have expressed an interest in kimono wear, wearing a kimono seems to be an activity predominantly pursued by women and enjoyed in the company of other women while going out for a meal or to a tea ceremony.

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