

Japanese Fashion: Global Appeal & Future Prospects

By Haruka Kuriyama

The World's Eyes on Japanese Fashion

Manga, anime, character goods: the common thread running through such aspects of Japanese popular culture is *kawaii*, the Japanese word for “cute”. Indeed, it is this element of *kawaii* that is attracting interest in Japan's popular culture overseas, and fashion is no exception. Many students in Asia regard young Japanese as fashion icons and buy Japanese fashion magazines such as *vivi* and *Ray*. Indeed, many foreign tourists give “fashion” as one of the reasons for visiting Japan. Tourists converging on places like Shibuya and Harajuku to see what Japanese “fashionistas” are up to are a common sight. These fashionistas, whose styles are often not seen elsewhere, usually choose to dye their hair, forsaking the natural Asian black, and dress in primary and fluorescent colors matched up with outlandish designs.

One thing that I often hear when I travel overseas is that it's “fun to watch” and a question I often get is: “Why do they dress like that?” One perspective gained from talking to Japanese and non-Japanese is that they could have come up with such distinctive fashions as a result of the powerful Japanese sense of inferiority. Specifically, they have arrived at such colors and layered look-dominant styles in order to compensate for the Asiatic body type, with generally short and stocky lower bodies. Since the Japanese physique is increasingly becoming Westernized, though, it could well be the case that Japanese fashion is also becoming Westernized in the process.

Source: Japan Fashion Week Organization



The venue of Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week Tokyo (MBFWT) bustles with people involved in fashion and media.

Some People Can't Choose Clothes

I, as a Japanese myself, am also often impressed by how stylish the young people in Japan are. It is not just fashionistas; many office workers, students, and people outside the fashion industry, are also well-turned out. Apparel stores are everywhere to be seen. But most striking is the staggering number of the fashion magazines that provide information.

There are few pure fashion magazines in Europe. They do have many lifestyle and cultural magazines that feature snapshots of celebrities, tips on makeup and the like, but rarely does one come across examples of coordination of everyday attire. That is no surprise. Ask European women about fashion and they will tell you that they wouldn't follow such examples since they don't want to dress up like everyone else. In Japan, a garment presented on a popular model in a fashion magazine can run out of stock, while some people will buy a whole set of outward — pants, skirts and all — straight off the store display.

Perhaps it is true that there are many Japanese who are unable to make their own choices. In other words, Japan is a place where fashionistas with their unique sensibilities exist side by side with people who cannot even figure out what they want to wear.

Source: Japan Fashion Week Organization



Foreign brands such as Missoni participate in MBFWT.

Japanese Fashion Industry Behind It All

Japanese brands are increasingly popular internationally as overseas artists use them for costumery. And did you know there is an occasion in Japan for presenting domestic brands, a fashion week much like the Paris Collection? There are entertaining shows such as the Tokyo Girls Collection, wildly popular with young women, where the audience can purchase the outfits of the popular models on the catwalk by cellphone. But Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week Tokyo (MBFWT), whose public relations I handle in addition to my day job as a fashion editor, is the place where fashion houses can introduce new lines for the upcoming season on a regular basis. MBFWT is aimed at projecting Japanese brands to the overseas market, but that is not all.

One concern in recent years has been the overseas drain of Japanese learning the fashion trade. They gain catwalk, backstage and other experiences with major fashion houses overseas, then come home to find work in Japanese fashion houses or to jumpstart their own brands. However, some have to move on to totally different fields to secure jobs. Every designer will tell you that it is difficult to develop a brand on your own. Japan now has a reputation for being a difficult place for people who yearn to work in the fashion industry to make it big, a place where only a handful of people can actually make a decent living. I have come to believe that one mission of the fashion week presented as MBFWT is to change all this. After all, students of fashion cannot sustain their hopes unless creative work is compensated for accordingly.

Role of MBFWT & Challenges Ahead

The Japanese have long been known for their sophisticated skills. Japanese fashion designing has also been gaining recognition of late. Each year brings more overseas media coverage, drawing attention to up-and-coming Japanese designers. That said, the road to recognition for the numerous Japanese brands — to be recognized, purchased and awarded renown — is long and arduous. What we often hear from overseas journalists who come to Japan to cover MBFWT is the lack of presentation expertise on the part of Japanese fashion houses. There should be in place a full set of connections between the designer, buyer and journalist, but we are not there yet.

Not all fashion houses are like that, and different approaches will

Source: Japan Fashion Week Organization



The main venue of MBFWT, a hall in Shibuya Hikarie building directly connected to Shibuya Station.

be adopted for different brands. Still, it would be a shame if each MBFWT winds up being a one-off event. I take it as my personal mission to use the annual fashion week to create must-watch space that attracts worldwide attention.

Global Future of Japanese Brands

Collaboration between MBFWT and its overseas fashion week counterparts is growing. Beginning with New York, MBFWT has since promoted Japanese brands in fashion weeks in Indonesia and Russia in 2013, while fashion houses from Jakarta will take part in MBFWT 2014. With simplified visa procedures and (in the case of Thailand and Malaysia) visa waivers in place, collaboration in Asia is set to grow.

There is no question that taking this opportunity to expanding the overseas presence of Japanese brands will be the key to their future development. It is also significant to the Japanese fashion industry that consumption is surging in the emerging economies, given Japan's reputation as a global consumption leader. Expensive high-end brands are selling in places like Jakarta, Bangkok and Singapore. Generating fashion products in Japan aimed at these fast-growing markets will be a major determinant of the future of Japanese brands.

JS

Haruka Kuriyama is a member of the public relations staff of the Japan Fashion Week Organization (JFWO).