

# Putting on the Style

By Tatsushi Shiota

Japan's traditional apparel culture is as rich and varied as that of Europe and the United States, perhaps even more so. Even today, the wearing of kimono is not limited to famous geisha or to fancy Japanese dolls. Even ordinary people almost invariably have several kimono in their chest of drawers.

Moreover, there is a great variety of kimono. *Furisode* for instance, is formal wear for unmarried women. With its long sleeves reaching almost to the floor, it is worn mainly by single women on Adulthood Day (January 15) to celebrate their reaching 20. *Tomesode* is formal wear worn by married women to wedding ceremonies. Gorgeous patterns are painted on the lower part of the kimono near the hem. *Homongi*, made of single-color fabric with different weave patterns, is worn by women on auspicious occasions, while *mofuku* comes in black and is the formal wear for funerals. Each kimono has its own specific use.

Kimono accessories include the *obi*, a very wide sash which functions like a belt, *zori* footwear and a small handbag.



Beautiful *furisode* (long-sleeved kimono) on display at a department store

Undergarments come in different hues, patterns and designs depending on the type of kimono with which they are worn. All kimono and kimono accessories for

formal wear are silk with gold and/or silver thread.

A full kimono usually costs ¥500,000-¥1,000,000 (\$3,850-\$7,700 at the rate of ¥130/\$). When Japanese women marry, they take with them a wardrobe of several kimono of different patterns to wear on different occasions.

Most of the time, Japanese women wear Western clothes and not traditional dress. Yet even in the case of Western clothes, they wear different styles for different occasions.

## Formal wear fad

Like their European and American counterparts, Japanese university students like to party, and are always finding reasons to dress up. Recently, even formal wear has become a fad among young people, and many women students own their own evening and cocktail dresses for elegant gatherings. Most women students, however, borrow from "rental boutiques," which allow them to enjoy wearing different dresses for different parties without emptying their pocketbooks.

In Japan, Western and Japanese appar-

el coexist. This is nowhere better seen than in the custom of *o-iro-naoshi* at wedding receptions. At the start of the reception, the bride wears a traditional white overgarment called an *uchikake* over her white kimono. After a few minutes she retires, and when she returns she is wearing a full-length Western-style wedding dress. Some brides may change their Japanese kimono many times as well. They are almost like dress-up dolls. The frequent costume changes during the reception are designed to make the bride look more beautiful.

Yet it is not only women who are fashion-conscious these days in Japan. A young businessman in his 20s recently turned up for a magazine interview in a "D.C. brand" suit. It was the kind of smartly tailored suit favored by corporate executives in Europe and America. But on closer inspection, the lapels did not appear to match the body silhouette. They were on the low side, and the waistline, too, was low. The trousers had two tucks and were roomy. The total effect was soft, yet it was still unmistakably a business suit.

"D.C. brand" stands for "designer and character brand." It is a description cre-

Table 1 Imports of Foreign Products by Japanese Wholesalers and Retailers

Percentage of companies procuring imports		(%)
From industrialized countries	63.2	From developing countries 78.9
Reasons for procuring imports		
Characteristics lacking in Japanese products	83.3	Cheaper than Japanese products 80.0
Corporate and commodity image	70.8	Japanese products are insufficient to meet demand 43.3
Superior quality	29.2	
No equivalent Japanese products	20.8	

Note: Respondents were allowed to give multiple answers; total exceeds 100%.

Source: "Survey on Import Activities of Japanese Corporations, Wholesalers and Retailers," Ministry of International Trade and Industry



Scenes from the Tokyo Collection, which is now one of the top events on the international fashion scene.

ated by Japanese designers to mean "fashionable." Such well-known D.C. brands as "Men's Bigi" (by designer Takeo Kikuchi), "Y's" (Yoji Yamamoto) and "Comme des garçons" (Rei Kawakubo) are very popular with young businessmen who have patronized them since their university days.

## Executive fashion

Marui Co. is the retailer which has best grasped the fashion sense of Japan's young people, and it has profited enormously by capitalizing on D.C. brands. Marui has increased its sales by ¥140 billion in the past three years, of which ¥74 billion came from sales of more than 50 different D.C. brand lines. Marui's twice annual "D.C. brand bargain sale" is explosively popular. At last January's event, long queues formed in front of Marui stores long before opening time. In all, as many as 70,000 customers lined up in front of 30 Marui stores nationwide, while 810,000 shoppers visited Marui stores during the entire 11-day run. The bargain sale brought in ¥9 billion.

Young people always lead the fashion market. Judging from the way today's youth are carrying their fashion sense over into business, the dress of Japan's executive elite could be transformed in just two or three years. D.C. brands allowing the wearer to express his individuality and high-class women's apparel have at long last reinvigorated Japan's apparel industry.

The textile industry today has lost its old status, due primarily to a decline in its international competitiveness. The industry has been designated "structurally depressed" by the government, a state of affairs due partly to delays in modernizing plant and equipment that invited a drop in productivity, and partly to increased competition from newly industrialized countries (NICs). The percentage of imports has been increasing steadily.

Imports supplied less than 1% of domestic textile demand on a yarn basis from the 1950s through the first half of the 1960s. They have soared, however, since 1984 to claim more than 25% of the domestic market. Imports of textile products were worth \$3.9 billion in fiscal 1985, increasing to \$5.5 billion in 1986 and an estimated \$7.6 billion in fiscal 1987, nearly double the fiscal 1985 figure.

The textile industry has done everything possible to increase the variety of its products in order to adequately meet the diversifying demand for individualistic apparel. It has turned to small-lot production, producing higher value-added products and shortening product cycles. D.C. brand apparel was just one of the strategies that were devised to expand demand. However, D.C. brand products, too, are fashion goods, easily affected by changes in taste and mood. There are already signs of clouds on the horizon for these popular garments.

Retailers which are tied up with the apparel industry are already taking steps to cope. Takashimaya department store, for instance, is stressing brand image in developing a new range of upscale products. Some 22 years ago it concluded a licensee contract with Pierre Cardin, and today its sales of high-grade suits and jackets bring in ¥6 billion annually. Takashimaya has now gone on to conclude licensing agreements with such famous European prêt-à-porter boutique houses as Emanuel Ungaro, Leo Zozzi and Margit Brandt.

## Licensing deals

Seibu department store has also entered into licensing deals with the makers of such famous brands as Ralph Lauren and Benetton for which it enjoys sole marketing rights in Japan. Most of these famous brand products are supplied under OEM (original equipment manufacturer) agreements, with such Japanese apparel makers as Tokyo Style Co. and Kashiyama & Co. manufacturing them as sublicensees.

Apparel makers themselves have also concluded licensee contracts to manufacture famous brand apparel, with great

success. Sanyo Shokai, for instance, produces and markets Burberrys coats under contract with the British company. Today it has expanded its range of Burberrys products to women's suits and casual wear. Annual sales of the clothing have ballooned to ¥23 billion.

Sanyo's Burberrys coats are manufactured under an OEM agreement and retail for about ¥60,000, compared to ¥160,000-170,000 for the same kind of apparel imported from Britain. The material and sewing of the license-produced apparel is in no way inferior to that which is made in Britain.

Some of the world's highest quality, best-designed fashion goods now come from Japanese designers. The originators of D.C. brand apparel studied and worked in Paris, the center of high fashion, and their creations earn plaudits at the Paris Collection. Innovative clothing by Issey Miyake, Kansai Yamamoto and Kenzo Takada always makes a strong impression on any fashion show audience. Female designers Yuki Torii and Junko Koshino have been participants in the Paris Collection since 1975 and 1978, respectively. In the '88 Fall-Winter Paris Collection, Rei Kawakubo, creator of the "Comme des garçons" brand, was voted best designer in a poll of fashion journalists.

The latest creations of these designers are introduced every year at the "Tokyo Collection." The fifth Tokyo Collection, in November 1987, drew fashion journalists from Europe, America and Asia. Tokyo is fast emerging as the world's fifth fashion center after Paris, New York, Milan and London.

Fashion products are high value-added products the price of which can soar 10 or even 20 times over depending on their design, even if the materials and sewing are the same. They are products of the intelligence. Their value depends on originality. It must be said that there is ample room for European and American apparel industries to make inroads into the Japanese fashion market, in addition to supplying their goods under OEM agreements with Japanese makers (Table 1). ■

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