

# Fashion as Cultural Policy

## – The Path to Be a Brand –

By Fukai Akiko

### Japanese Culture & Fashion

*Manga* and *anime* have captured the hearts of young people worldwide, and the new PlayStation game console is so popular that the craze has led to incidents of theft. Meanwhile, *sushi* has become ubiquitous, sitting on prominent display in supermarkets in major cities around the world. This global spread of Japanese culture has its beginnings in the 1980s when “Japanese fashion” broke in on the world stage and exerted strong influence.

It was in the 1980s that Japanese fashion, representing Japan and its culture, stormed into Paris, the revered stronghold and control tower of the fashion world where none had dared set foot before. Consequently, in the fashionable streets of Paris, London, New York and Berlin, people welcomed the baggy, blackish clothes. The look was strikingly new compared to the clothes of *Yves Saint Laurent* or *Chanel* that were in line with more ideas of traditional beauty. The clothes of Japanese designers were sold in boutiques with interiors abruptly changed into black, monotone decorations, and people began to judge whether a street was fashionable based on whether it had a boutique selling Japanese designer clothes.

Now we are in 2007 and all that is a memory of a long-ago past. We ought, of course, to remember that the prelude to this phenomenon was the activities of Japanese designers in the 1970s such as Takada Kenzo and Miyake Issey whose works attracted much attention, but the world of fashion changes at a dizzying pace, and everything quickly becomes history. Nonetheless, it is worth recalling that in the late 20th century, Japanese fashion with its creative, avant-garde spirit challenged the absolute, unshakable power that Paris wielded as a fashion leader over Europe and the rest of the world. I analyzed this phenomenon more than 10 years ago, but studies on the subject have increased overseas in

recent years, and exhibits of Japanese fashion designers such as Kawakubo Rei and Yamamoto Yohji continue to be held at art museums.

### 1980s: Riveting Power of Japanese Fashion

In the 1970s, Takada used Japanese colors and patterns in a Parisian style, while Miyake attracted attention by incorporating the concept of *kimono*'s construction, namely the flat “a piece of cloth” (*A-POC*) look, into his designs.

In the early 1980s, however, Japanese fashion began to assert its riveting power, with clothes by Kawakubo (whose brand is *Comme des Garçons*) and Yamamoto appearing on the Paris runways. The clothes shocked the Paris fashion world. Seen from the European perspective, they were shapeless, asymmetrical and baggy. The clothes were described as looking as if they had been bombed. They were the opposite of European clothes that incorporated graceful silhouettes and colors. The “rag look” or the “crow look” was the term used to describe these avant-garde clothes, which were mostly made of black, gray and other “hueless” fabrics.

Instead of adding decoration, the clothes were stripped of decoration. And instead of beautiful colors, they were without them. The austere, ascetic appearance was perceived as expressing the Japanese concept of *wabi* (taste for the simple but refined) and *sabi* (for the old, quiet), and helped pave the way for the design trend of minimalism that began in the 1980s. Japan was then in the midst of remarkable economic growth, and the country as a whole was in the spotlight. The works of Japanese designers in areas such as architecture and graphics were remarkable, but it was the Japanese fashion above all that had the strongest impact.

Since then, Kawakubo has remained dedicated to “making clothes never seen

Photo: Kyodo News



Japanese designer Yamamoto Yohji's clothes characterized by pastel colors (from his 2005 spring/summer collection)

before,” staying as a source of inspiration for a new generation of designers worldwide. Yamamoto in recent years has collaborated with the international sporting goods label *Adidas* to create a line of sporty street clothes dubbed *Y-3*. Meanwhile, Miyake has gained acclaim for merging tradition with the newest Japanese technology to make unique, innovative clothes as in his *Pleats Please* and *A-POC* lines. The younger generation of designers such as Watanabe Junya and Takahashi Jun are also coming into their own. Japan has earned high regard for producing new and avant-garde forms that could not have been born in Paris or, indeed, in European culture.

### “Kawaii”: Fashion Term Borrowed from Japan

When it comes to contemporary Japanese culture, the world's interest is

in *manga*, *anime* and video games. Naturally, this interest has influenced fashion, with images and characters of *manga* and *anime* such as *Sailor Moon* and *Hello Kitty* affecting the details of clothes. The clothes reflect factors such as mass appeal, childishness, straightforwardness, bad taste and lewdness, and have captured the imagination of people around the world who share the same information. It is easy to surmise that the popularity of brands produced by a new generation of designers such as Takahashi (*Undercover*) and NIGO in cities such as Paris and New York is connected to the spread of Japanese pop culture. *Manga* has also made its mark on street fashion, having strongly inspired the unique *Gothloli* (from Gothic and Lolita) genre of clothing worn by the young in Tokyo's trendy areas of Shibuya and Harajuku. Such aspects of Japan have not escaped the attention of John Galliano (*Dior*) and other Paris fashion designers.

The fascination with Japanese pop culture was made still more visible in 2003 when the Paris luxury fashion house *Louis Vuitton* appointed internationally acclaimed Japanese contemporary artist Murakami Takashi to design patterns for its handbags. Murakami uses the so-called "superflat" style, reminiscent of the traditional Japanese method of painting flat areas of colors that so surprised European artists of the 19th century such as Edouard Manet, Claude Monet and Vincent van Gogh. It is this flat style, as well as the use of numerous colors favored by the generation raised in the age of liquid crystal displays, and above all, the *manga*-like "kawaii" (cute) taste of his work, that has endeared Murakami to fans worldwide. Incidentally, the Japanese *Kojien* dictionary defines *kawaii* as "having youth or childishness or the state of a small thing or person producing a desire in one to treat it or the person with care."

Led by Japanese fashion in the 1980s, the Japanese aestheticism of *wabitsabi* spread minimalist trends, and since the turn of the 21st century, the *kawaii* con-

cept and even "otaku" (anorak or geek), strongly associated with *manga* and *anime*, have been borrowed into the fashion world.

Combining tradition and a new sense of modernity, Japan's originality has been transformed into designs of universal nature, which have hence been widely accepted by people across the world.

## Conclusion

Today, people worldwide increasingly identify fashion with celebrities (not the kind of celebrities in their traditional sense) whose images are projected in enclosed, almost hobby-like genres in media such as magazines and television and who have been formed into objects of admiration. In such circumstances, it does not appear to be of much significance to hammer out creativity and originality of fashion itself, or of clothes themselves. It is an undeniable fact, though, that for today's young Japanese, the fashion icons are people such as magazine model Ebihara Yuri nicknamed "Ebi-chan" and pop singer Koda Kumi. Given this, the presence of fashion designers is little discernible.

In my view, what we are seeing today is excessively changeable and superficial. I believe – to be more exact, I hope – that when this current phase is over, we will see a return to real cultural creativity and fashion will be restored to its natural state. It is only through creative cultural activities that can produce values of universal nature. It follows that creative activities blossom in places that have culture, namely, those places blessed with the right combination of conditions, people and skills.

It is by no means a coincidence that France has so far led the world of fashion. Since the times of Richelieu and Colbert in the 17th century, French leaders have adopted cultural policies with fashion in mind. The French fashion brands that grew into international brands in the latter half of the 20th century not only had many years of experience behind them but also set out to be

innovative, continuously exploring new territories. On the other hand, we should take note of the observation by French sociologist Jean Baudrillard in "Symbolic Exchange and Death" that in the world of *mode*, various forms die out, but the instant a form is saved as a symbol into a reservoir that transcends time, it is circulated. As he put it, French brands have developed their own archives of fashion content, presenting them at fashion shows in art museums and letting the public see firsthand the cultural appeal of brands. Among such recent moves, *Chanel* held an exhibition in 2005 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and is planning to hold another in Moscow's Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in September 2007.

As I have already mentioned, the accomplishment of Japanese fashion in creating astounding designs in the 1980s has become nothing more than a page in the history books here in Japan. But outside of Japan, there are moves to reassess the feat of Japanese fashion, as seen in Europe and the United States (where fashion is perceived as the offspring of cultural activities), Asian countries, and Australia (the latter two searching for hints on direction for their growing fashion industries).

A quarter of a century has passed since Japanese fashion rose to the point of becoming the most useful tool to appeal for Japanese originality. And at long last, Japanese fashion is becoming widely known not among limited fashion circles but by many people across the globe. This illustrates the fact that the passage and accumulation of time is necessary for a brand to firmly establish itself. This is particularly true of fashion brands that are closely linked to a country's culture. Now that we have come this far, it may be time to consider policies to make use of the cultural aspects of fashion – or the reverse side of fashion business. **JS**

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