

How Foreign Journalists View Japanese Fashion (1)

Tokyo: A Laboratory for New Ideas

By Andrew Tucker

On a recent afternoon I bought a new shirt from *Uniqlo*, debated over whether to purchase a satchel at *Muji*, and ended up trying on a pair of sneakers in *Bathing Ape* – all on a rainy winter's day in London. Later I might pop down to Dover Street Market, a temple to avant garde fashion set up by Kawakubo Rei of *Comme des Garçons*, located on the edges of Mayfair and stocking the creme of Japanese design, as well as numerous hard-to-find international designers. Later still, I may end up watching a video of Gwen Stefani's *Harajuku Girls* in a pastiche of Tokyo style that may not bear much resemblance to reality but is yet another indication that, in the UK, Japanese style is now a fixture rather than a fad.

In fact, 2007 has seen the average British consumer finally becoming well accustomed to eating *sushi* off a conveyor belt, driving a Nissan or drunkenly singing along to karaoke. But, while we dabble in Japanese culture, our current understanding of the actual fashion climate in Japan is about as accurate as the costumes in *Memoirs of a Geisha*.

■ Fashion: Money Spinner

Some 9,000 km away, those Harajuku girls and boys that seem to crop up in pop videos and endless manuals on street style are enjoying a wealth of retail choice that continues to make London's West End look like pre-glasnost Russia. For just as Tokyo boasts more restaurants per square mile than any other city on earth, it surely cannot be far behind in fashion retail, with international flagships galore – department stores that occupy whole city blocks and teen-oriented bazaars such as “La Foret Harajuku” and “109 Shibuya” that easily put their Western equivalents to shame.

For one thing, domestically, fashion is a commercial money spinner. In 2005, street wear megabrand *Bathing Ape* paid the largest proportion of income tax to

the Japanese government as a clothing producer, outflanking arguably better known labels such as *Muji* and *Yamamoto Yohji*. And yet, with 18 self-owned shops in Tokyo and only three outlets overseas, more than 90% of its income is domestically generated, unlike its competitors. A similar story unfolds time and time again – brands that Western consumers would give their eyeteeth for are complacent about selling overseas because the domestic market is so buoyant, with a generation of twenty- and thirty-somethings happy to spend their disposable incomes on 100 pound T-shirts as they are still living at home with mum and dad.

■ Asia's Key Catwalk Event

But, things are changing, and rapidly too. Demographically, Japan has one of the fastest aging populations in the developed world, making it necessary for domestic brands to look overseas if they want to avoid producing collections geared towards the oldest clubbers in town. And as the Japan Fashion Week (JFW) is fast developing as the key Asian catwalk event, there is increasing emphasis on being able to sell to the West from an official as well as financial perspective.

“Japan is going through a period of economic transition,” says Matsumoto Akira, the event's senior executive director. “What we now refer to as the ‘80s economic miracle burst dramatically in the mid-90s, and although the economy has since recovered, everybody accepts that it will not reach those dizzy heights again. So, for the clothing industry, we must start to look overseas to expand our markets.”

One of the initiatives spearheaded by the JFW Secretariat is training young designers on how to export and work in a system that is radically different to the way Japanese retailers conduct business with suppliers. “We are consciously trying to attract more overseas buyers to

Tokyo, and crucially, ensure that during their stay they are able to conduct business efficiently here,” says Matsumoto.

■ Perception Problem

If all this sounds terribly positive, then why hasn't the Japanese clothing industry done something about it already? For one thing it is a problem of perception. “Japanese fashion was one of the last product categories to look overseas,” says Toda Hiromasa, Japan business adviser to the London office of JETRO (Japan External Trade Organization) and UKTI (UK Trade and Investment). “There was a popularly held misconception that our fashion was behind Europe and therefore of no real relevance to foreign markets.” A factor subsequently disproved by the prominence of Japanese designer brands showing in Paris, or anyone who has seen the queues outside *Bathing Ape's* London flagship will readily attest to.

Strangely, this period of creative isolation has done much to strengthen the identity of the design labels that are now emerging from the Tokyo scene. For example, Japanese street wear is very different in concept from what we would term the denim or casual market in Europe or the United States.

“You have to understand that young people in Tokyo have a high disposable income to spend on fashion, but don't necessarily want to spend it on high-concept luxury brands – as these are often too dressy or formal,” says Utsugi Eri, the designer behind *mercibeaucoup*, one of the key brands showing at the fast growing Tokyo Fashion Week. Blending a mix of high production values, idiosyncratic prints and judicious sprinkling of the ever popular *kawaii* (cute) aesthetic, *mercibeaucoup* is not only relatively inexpensive, but has a strong youth appeal, for customers who are not yet ready to exchange their jeans for the suit of a *salaryman*. (Photo 1)

Photo 1: mercibeaucoup



Photo 2: mint designs



Photo 3: THEATRE PRODUCTS



Models sport new clothes at fashion shows staged during the Japan Fashion Week, held in September 2006 at various venues such as a conference hall, a school and a department store.

Photos: Japan Fashion Strategy Forum

A Changing Japan Fashion Week

Similarly, the Japan Fashion Week is changing too, almost as rapidly as the trends that sweep this retail-obsessed city. Now approaching its fourth edition, it can already boast a roster of names that, despite being largely unknown in the West, are provoking international press and buyer attention, purely because they are unknown quantities beyond the domestic market – and therefore represent a holy grail for Western buyers desperate for something new.

Simultaneously, the event is fast making up for lost ground: Prior to the first edition in 2005, it was a loose affiliation of designers showing as and when they chose, rather than a structured and concise timetable. The upshot? – the best of the bunch decamped to Paris where they are now one of the mainstays of the French Fashion Week, but today's young guns such as *mint designs* (Photo 2), *Net-net* and *THEATRE PRODUCTS* (Photo 3) are choosing to stay put rather than be subsumed by the larger European event, making Tokyo more and more a fashion destination. And, with some of the best fashion education in the world and a culture that encourages small enterprise, there are plenty more potential stars following in their wake.

West Foresees Much More Japanese Fashion

Inevitably, all this sounds too good to be true, and as any habitue of the Tokyo shopping experience will tell you, as long as you do not buy imported goods, home-grown designer clothing is also surprisingly good value (for the British especially with the strength of sterling compared to the yen). However, when you try to bring these products back to a European retail environment, a different story emerges. Firstly, the positives, Japanese quality is uniformly very high; secondly, through increased manufacturing in China, prices have come down; and lastly, as the Japanese population grows physically bigger, sizing is not the insurmountable problem it once used to be. The downside, however, is the import/export system, and the process of doing business with companies that are unused to Western practices.

“It is challenge,” says retailer Matthew Murphy, co-owner of B-Store on London's Savile Row and a recent convert to buying Japanese. “You can't necessarily go by the price you get in the showroom because it does not incorporate shipping, insurance and import duty. So we tend not to deal

with suppliers that only offer an FOB (free on board) service, but those who will develop an inclusive CIF (cost, insurance, freight) pricing structure.” That said, according to Murphy, it is no longer just those Japanese brands which have long established distribution channels from exhibiting their collections in Paris that are geared up to work in this way.

“My experience has been very positive,” he says. “As long as you get the ground rules straight at the outset, it's not really that much different to buying from the United States. Plus, we've found that young Japanese brands are easily the most professional young designers we deal with and Tokyo is such a laboratory for new ideas that it constantly keeps us on our toes – I think we're going to see much more Japanese fashion in the West from now on – and not from just established brands like *Comme des Garçons* or *Uniqlo* – there's so much more.” **J.S.**

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