

Weaving, Dyeing and Kimono

By Sasaki Chigako

KIMONO is famous as Japanese traditional dress. But as with the indigenous clothing in many countries around the world, it is no longer the daily wear in modern Japan.

Though, the bulk of the traditional dyed and woven textiles described here of which kimono are made, continue to be created by local industry all over Japan to this day.

History of Kimono

Kosode (short sleeves), previously worn as undergarments beneath formal dress became commonplace as outerwear some 500 years ago, forming the prototype for what we call kimono today. Decorative techniques evolved, with *kosode* embroidered or tie-dyed in rich colors. Around 400 years ago, picturesque printed silk called *yuzen-zome* (yuzen dyeing) gained popularity. As Japan developed its economy and material wealth accumulated, people began to devote more of their money to personal appearance, and luxuriant brightly colored kimono came into fashion. Women with wealthy husbands would vie to be the best dressed at public events like cherry blossom viewing parties and theatergoings. Famous artists were commissioned to design the favorite kimono these women would show off. The numerous edicts issued against extravagance by the Tokugawa Shogunate did not stop the general public from playing with fashion, adding touches of quality to cotton or pongee* fabrics and exquisite patterns to linings. In fact, these restrictions only served to encourage refinements and greater individuality of style for a diverse range of local weaves and dyes.

Renowned Centers of Dyeing and Weaving

There are as many as 40 centers across Japan known for their traditional weaving and dyeing. The Nishijin area in Kyoto is the largest such center. Beyond kimono and *obi* sashes, Nishijin produces a wide array of items, from ceremonial costumes for the Imperial family and the robes of Buddhist monks and Shinto priests to fabrics that decorate rooms, theater curtains and wall hangings, ties and even seat covers for luxury cars.

Nishijin weaving (brocade) techniques are also extremely refined – *tsuzure-ori*, where the pattern is woven bit by bit using tiny shuttles and fingernails; *karami-ori*, where the silk threads are twisted as they are woven into gauze, gossamer and similar types of cloth; and *mon-ori*, a technique for weaving the elaborate yarn-dyed figured cloth for which the area is best known. Figured textiles were woven in the Edo period (1603-1867) by raising and lowering the warp by hand. Weaving by hand has since been largely replaced by mechanized devices, initially with the introduction of the Jacquard loom around 1900, and today with computerized controls. Hand-woven luxury goods, however, continue to attract a strong following today.

Mon-ori cloth is produced in Kiryu in the Kanto area and Hakata in the Kyushu area, two cities where traditional techniques have been faithfully handed down, but at the same time, continually vie for supremacy through technological innovations and new designs. Other regions throughout Japan produce hand-woven pongee and cotton to create unique items.

When it comes to dyeing, Kyo Yuzen leads in the amount of cloth production by far. In addition to the hand-drawn yuzen and stencil patterns that have been in existence since the Edo period, Kyoto also has a firmly established Yuzen printing technique using paper pattern stencils with printing paste made of synthetic dyes imported from Germany in the second half of 1870's. The general public was increasingly drawn to the brilliantly colored yuzen-zome fabrics, which became a driving force behind the rise of the kimono craze early in the 20th century.



Photo: Diamond Inc.

*Note: Lower quality silk fabric made from spun, not pulled, silk

Yuzen-zome fabric is mostly used in kimono. Dyers make designs on a kimono-shaped single uninterrupted canvas, creating miniature pattern samples called *hinagata*. Countless Edo period designs have been preserved in hinagata pattern books. This long history of finding inspiration in hinagata is perhaps the reason that yuzen dyeing remains closely tied to the kimono, even as weavers have broadened their creativity into new forms that are more useful to a modern lifestyle. Those yuzen fabrics not made into kimono are primarily fashioned into wall hangings or folding screens.

Yuzen was also perfected in Kanazawa (Ishikawa Prefecture), Tokyo, Nagoya (Aichi Prefecture) and other cities that grew into political and cultural centers in the Edo period. The designs from these areas feature motifs that suit the environment and preferences of people today, yet are based on these regions' distinctive uses of color. Okinawan *bingata* has developed into a unique stencil dyeing through an illustrated collection of designs called *Miezu*, which was created by court artists in the Ryukyu kingdom.

No discussion of Japanese dyeing techniques is complete without *shibori-zome* (a tie-dye technique). Shibori, the oldest method of pattern dyeing, evolved in both Kyoto and Arimatsu Narumi (Aichi Prefecture), prospered as a key junction strategically located in central Japan along the main highway, and developed into a myriad of techniques. In contrast to the elegant luxury and delicate craftsmanship of the silk shibori of Kyoto, Arimatsu dyers focused on an array of geometric patterns set in indigo *ai-zome* dyes on the cotton kimono used for daily wear for an original style that continues to impress today. The quality generated by the variety of textures created with shibori techniques has inspired modern dress designers to create new products that have been a great success with consumers across the globe.

■ Kimono and the Modern Lifestyle

More than 40,000 of the finest artisans in 40 regions continue the traditional skills of weaving and dyeing. While new uses for these arts are constantly evolving, kimono remains the primary avenue for these fabrics.

But where are all of these kimono to be found?

Firework displays in summer offer the best opportunity to see people dressed in kimono. Wearing *yukata*, a simple and convenient cotton kimono, has become a tradition among young women going out for the evening in summer, particularly to large public fireworks events. Yukata patterns are richly diverse, a whole range from chic indigo *ai-zome* designs offered by long-established shops to the colorful creations of today's fashion designers. Young women who take pleasure in transforming their mood by donning yukata and who understand the appeal of traditional ethnic costume form the broadest base of kimono-lovers.

It is at tea ceremonies held in gardens or in theaters with a traditional arts stage that one encounters the true aficionados of kimono. And the true value of the traditional dyes and weaves of Japan is fully demonstrated when they are worn as a kimono. There are full of pleasure to smartly dress it that have been cultivated over a long history.

The most basic element of dressing kimono is to express the season. Wearing a cherry blossom pattern when the cherry blossom buds begin to bloom is quite natural. Such a design worn as if vying with the full blooms on the tree would be seen as unsophisticated, though. True style takes a subtler form. Pongee for kimono, for example, would perhaps be dyed in a liquid extract from the branches of cherry trees cut just before the buds bloom. The obi sash painted with just a few cherry blossom petals scattered on the wind. This is a sophisticated and subtle fashion sense that gives life to the true pleasure of the cherry-blossom viewing season in Japan.

The Japanese season has also been defined through literary context. Deer, for example, symbolize the autumn, a reference with its roots in a *tanka* poem that every Japanese is expected to know:

*In the mountain depths,
Treading through the crimson leaves,
The wandering stag calls.
When I hear the lonely cry,
Sad – how sad! – the autumn is.*



Then a subtly elegant expression of autumn might feature an obi woven in the straight geometric lines of an *Arisugawa* brocade that have come to symbolize the deer motif – rather than painted with a literal depiction of a deer – tied over a kimono in an Edo-komon pattern sketched in red maple leaves. This type of sophisticated combination is the secret to true kimono style, a style that gives expression not only to the specific season, but refers subtly to a *tanka* that sets the seasonal scene. To create this particular style, pongee threads are dyed; sketches are made of the original for the hand-drawn yuzen; the brocade is designed; and several thousand designs are hand-cut into stencils.

Kimono are no longer a daily necessity of life. But, few other modes of dress offer the same potential as a canvas on which to express unlimited and individualistic stylish creativity. The same motivations that the endless edicts banning luxury of the Edo period and the difficulties during modern wars failed to deter will endure any inconveniences from wearing kimono in a modern life. The possibilities to be found in traditional arts of dyeing and weaving are indeed endless. **JS**

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