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May 6, 2015

Integrative Seminar 2: Fashion

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### **Fashion and Cultural Influences: A Conversation Between Japan and the West**

Once people started exploring the world, it was inevitable that there would be no land left unexplored and dissected. People with intentions of political or religious domination would seek out new lands and judge them based on their ability to benefit the motherland. Naturally, these cultures would have an impact on one another, but arguably the European nations would have more influence over the dominated culture rather than the Europeans being influenced to the same extent by the subjected country. With this rapid globalization, Japan quickly became a peculiarity, closing itself off to the rest of the world for two centuries and consequently maintaining a deep, rich, Japanese culture untainted by Western aesthetic and philosophies. Due to its strong foothold in its cultural roots, Japan became an even stronger influence on the West and its intrigue with the East when they decided to open its ports to the rest of the world in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Japan influenced the Western market only to the extent that the West could fit it into their pre-conceived notions of the East and Japan, being equally fascinated with the West, was consequently more impacted by this relationship in their cultural shift to a more Western culture and fashion.

Starting in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Japan outlawed Christianity, abolished any foreign influences and closed its doors to the rest of the world, only allowing a small amount

of trade with a few Dutch ships at one port in Nagasaki. Since the Netherlands were in contact with the rest of the world as well as Japan, she functioned as a messenger between the two. Goods like Kimonos that the Dutch obtained from Japan, soon rest of Europe and United States wanted as well. In turn, the Japanese received updates from the Dutch on what was happening in the rest of the world. Despite the laws forbidding foreign influence, there remained a group of progressive Japanese that studied the West and became interested in all the discoveries that the West had to offer them.<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Japan was still in its Edo Period (1603 – 1867) and the Tokugawa Shogunate feudal system was in place. In this system, there were four social classes one could be cast in – the warriors (samurai), artisans, farmers, and merchants. There were no opportunities to move within these established social classes, which led to dissatisfaction amongst groups. Eighty percent of the population was peasants who were restricted to agricultural work. In this feudal system, the agricultural work provided gains for the samurai, who owned the lands. The mercantile class prospered during this time, but the agriculture was not faring well, which led to famines. This led to more unrest amongst groups of people.<sup>2</sup> New intellectuals among the dissatisfied samurai emerged, who became critical of the system in place and became increasingly interested in Western learning from the Dutch. These groups of people became interested in the West's

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<sup>1</sup> Masaaki Kosaka and David Abosch, *Japanese Thought in the Meiji Era* (Tokyo: Pan-Pacific Press, 1958), 7.

<sup>2</sup> "Tokugawa Period and Meiji Restoration." History.com. January 1, 2009. Accessed April 23, 2015. <http://www.history.com/topics/meiji-restoration>.

new scientific discoveries, techniques, economies, and politics. Having been closed off from the Western world for two centuries, an air of mystery and curiosity surrounded the idea of the West. Various groups that focused on different areas of what the West had to offer began to form. The Yamanote group specifically focused on economic and political problems along with possible solutions the West had to offer them in regards to these areas. As a response, the government sought to arrest students of Western learning – this is known as the “Trouble of Barbarian Sympathizers.”<sup>3</sup> However, this did not put an end to Western learning, and, as events unfolded, Japan would eventually have to make some big decisions on how they wanted to treat their relationship with the rest of the world. Evidently, a significant amount of Japanese were interested in what the West could offer them in terms of betterment for their country and change for the current problems that were in place.

The West has always been fascinated by the east; the various cultures there, being so different from rest of Europe, beg for curiosity from the West. Dating back to the time of Napoleon in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Europe has loved the idea of the mystical east, filled with harems of women and interesting landscapes.<sup>4</sup> Out of these Eastern countries, Japan has had the most peculiar relationship with the West. Although incredibly small in comparison to the whole of Europe and the United States of America, Japan has commanded respect from the rest of the world, having never been occupied and surrendering their country to the full rule of another country up

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<sup>3</sup> Kosaka and Abosch, *Japanese Thought in the Meiji Era*, 7.

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Meagher, “Orientalism in Nineteenth Century Art,” *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, October 2004, accessed April 29, 2015, [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/euor/hd\\_euor.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/euor/hd_euor.htm).

to this period in time. Japan was considered the “West of the East,” having fought alongside the West in wars against China before closing its gates and sharing in virtues like loyalty, patriotism and endurance.<sup>5</sup> As a result of this respect, the West did not try to conquer Japan, but rather seemed interested in what Japan could offer them in terms of culture. This is problematic primarily due to the fact that the West already had an idea of what they wanted Japan to be like. Rather than desiring to learn about Japan’s culture, there was an element of escapism in the West’s desire to penetrate the ports of Japan.

At the same time that Japanese groups were becoming increasingly interested in what the West had to offer them, similarly, the West was becoming increasingly more curious about what Japan was like behind its closed ports. In 1853, Commodore Matthew C. Perry, under the orders of President Fillmore, sailed to Japan with the request that she open her ports for trade and offer a port for re-coaling American boats, as well as humane treatment to shipwrecked Americans. After this encounter, Japan signed treaties in 1854 and 1858 that re-opened some of its ports to foreigners. There were many in Japan that feared that not opening the ports would lead to conflict with much bigger and more able forces.<sup>6</sup> The treaties that the Japanese signed gave more advantage to the West in what they entailed and these ports became like miniature and premature forms of colonies.<sup>7</sup> In response to this re-opening of Japan, thousands of European travellers came to explore, write

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<sup>5</sup> Clark Worswick, *Japan, Photographs, 1854- 1905* (New York: Pennwick Publishing/Alfred A. Knopf, 1979) 9.

<sup>6</sup> Kosaka and Abosch, *Japanese Thought in the Meiji Era*, 20.

<sup>7</sup> Lorraine Sterry, *Victorian Women Travellers in Meiji Japan Discovering a New Land* (Folkestone: Global Oriental, 2009). 7.



about, and form businesses in Japan. This certainly became the case even more so with the Meiji Restoration in 1868 when the Meiji emperor replaced the Shogunate system of power. This influx of Westerners can be seen in multiple prints done by Japanese artists such as Utagawa Yoshiiku, Sadahide, and Yoshikazu.



Figure 1: Author's photograph. Utagawa Yoshiiku, "The Flourishing of an English Trading Firm in Yokohama," woodblock print. 1870.



Figure 2: Author's Photograph. Utagawa Sadahide, "Foreign Business Establishment in Yokohama," woodblock print. 1861.

Their prints, created during the Meiji Restoration, depict ports filled with European ships and men and women dressed in European attire talking with one another, with a few Japanese men walking around as well. Many Victorian women travelled to Japan with their husbands, who were there for business and political reasons. These women wrote about their experiences, which offers us a look into the Western perception of Japan at the time, one that parallels Japan to Western culture rather than looking at it for exactly what it is. In *Victorian Women Travellers in Meiji Japan Discovering a New Land*, Lorraine Sterry writes:

To better understand her experiences and to more clearly explain them to her reader, Mrs. Hodgson has sought Western parallels to her Japanese experiences, and the temple has been translated into a 'church', and the festival for the dead to 'All Saints Day'. As with all translations, the original is transformed into something new, with the Japanese experience consequently becoming altered to fit into a Western knowledge framework. This use of the familiar to explain the new was a common feature of the writing of Victorian women travellers, even up to the end of the Meiji Period.<sup>8</sup>

It is natural for any culture to try and parallel itself to another in order to try to understand the new culture. Europe has been influenced by the rest of the world for so long already that fashion, art and aesthetic is the extent of Japan's influence on Europe. On the other hand, Europe influenced Japan in a way that completely shifts the cultural, political and economic ways of Japan.

In the 1868, after 1,500 peasant revolts and the death of the Shogunate emperor, the progressive groups occupied Edo, which is today Tokyo, and the Meiji Emperor took the seat of power.<sup>9</sup> The Meiji Restoration is the main force behind Japan's rapid modernization. The new Meiji emperor was taught by two western thinkers and was

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<sup>8</sup> Sterry, *Victorian Women Travellers in Meiji Japan Discovering a New Land*, 89.

<sup>9</sup> Worswick, *Japan Photographs*, 25-37.

backed by the progressive movement. This resulted in a myriad of Western policies and implementations:

Waves of reform followed the Emperor Meiji's assumption of power: the shogun and feudal samurai were stripped of their power; Tokyo became the seat of a centralized government and hundreds of European advisors imported to help Japan modernize. New role models were selected – Britain for a modern navy, France for an army, and Germany for a general staff. Although the progressives' proclaimed goal was to modernize not Westernize, it became apparent that the two were interchangeable when government officials took up the waltz and quadrille as emblems of modernity.<sup>10</sup>

This modernization began to influence all of Japan's former cultural ways and shifted the culture of the time. Railways and ships began being built and meat-eating was endorsed by the emperor – something that was formerly forbidden under the Buddhist nation. European clothing, dancing and athletics were introduced to the nation. In these ways, Japan sought modernization in order to become a nation on par with influential European countries. Simultaneously, Europeans who travelled to Japan returned home with photographs, similar to postcards, as well as with mementos to show to those back home who were eager to learn about the "Orient."<sup>11</sup> While the Japanese began adopting Western clothing, Japanese garments began being appropriated for Western markets. The kimono became increasingly more popular among Europeans as various night dressing gowns. The fabrics and dyes used for kimonos became precious to Europeans and some kimonos became re-tailored into Western dresses. Japan, in attempts to globalize their market, began creating items specifically for export to Europe.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>11</sup> Worswick, *Japan Photographs*, 131.



Figure 3: Emperor Meiji dressed in Western attire.

This included everything from buttons and shoes to full on Western style garments that incorporated Japanese textile designs, and fans that depicted Japanese motifs of flowers and nature. These items crafted for the European market fit Japan into the pre-ordained box of the Orient that fascinated Europe.<sup>12</sup> Other aspects of the culture -- such as samurai wearing their traditional topknots and carrying swords -- that did not agree with European norms, were stripped away and replaced by new norms.

This re-defining of Japan is just as curious as the country itself. Can it be considered a success? Thanks to Japan's new relations with the West, Japan was able

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Figure 3 Unknown, "The Emperor Meiji," 1872. *Japan Photographs 1854-1905* by Clark Worwick, 41.

<sup>12</sup> Akiko Fukai, *Fashion: The Collection of the Kyoto Costume Institute : A History from the 18th to the 20th Century* (Hong Kong: Taschen, 2006), 153, 286.

to create an army able to take on Russia on equal footing. Japan's economy flourished and it now had access to the West's modern discoveries as well. However, Japan remained the only country untainted by other cultures, making it rich in its roots and aesthetics. Today, Japan's rich culture has been stereotyped into cute Buddha statues and westernized sushi. It seems that today aspects of Japan's culture are still taken to fit into Western culture without full appreciation or understanding of Japan. Japan continues to modernize with its enthusiasm for Western culture that can be witnessed in the popular Japanese boy-bands and the multiple McDonalds stationed in Tokyo. It is true that we can learn from other cultures and it is best that we do. It is important to look outside of ourselves and into other cultures and ways of living, but when some cultures become lost in the consumption of other cultures, the world is left lacking.



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