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Abstract

This paper seeks to examine the degree to which Meiji era Japan adopted Western fashion. It uses written and photographic sources to understand the attitude of Meiji era Japanese towards the introduction of Western fashion into everyday life, and the changing of said attitudes throughout the Meiji era and its implication on Japan's national identity.

Keywords

Japan, Asia, Modernity, Meiji Era, Victorian Era, Imperialism, Colonialism, Material Culture

“Kittenish Appearance:” Western Fashion in Meiji Japan – *Harry Zhang, College of William and Mary*

The Meiji Restoration of 1868 restored political power to the Japanese emperor, and ended the Tokugawa Shogunate government that lasted for over 200 years. The arrival of the Commodore Mathew Perry’s gunboat on Japanese shores and the subsequent opening up of Japan to Western trade sounded the alarm of a new era. As a result, leaders of the Meiji Restoration constructed an imperial government that was radically different from the old as they sought to modernize and integrate Japan in a world of Western powers. During the Meiji Era (1868-1912), Japan embarked on a unique period of national development. On the one hand, Japan engaged in “full-package” Westernization, imitating the West in cultural, political, and social aspects. The scale of Westernization in Meiji Japan was unprecedented in nineteenth-century Asia. On the other hand, Japan had also begun to develop its own national identity that eventually led to its rejection of the West. In the Meiji era, the enthusiasm for Westernization led not only to a new form of government, but also to changes in the social lives of the Japanese people. According to Basil Hall Chamberlain, a British scholar in Japan at the time, “to have lived through the transition stage of modern Japan makes a man feel that preternaturally old; for here he is in modern times, with the air full of talks about bicycles and bacilli and ‘spheres of influence,’ yet he can himself distinctly remember the Middle Ages. . . . Old things pass away between a night and a morning.”¹ One of such social changes was the Japanese adaptation of Western fashion. The notion that Meiji-era Japanese, especially the elites, widely adopted

¹ Irokawa Daikichi, *The Culture of the Meiji Period*, ed. Marius B. Jansen (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 71.

Western clothing is enshrined in our popular modern memory via eccentric period images of Asian faces in Victorian clothing. The reality is more complicated. In Meiji Japan, Western fashion was widely understood as a symbol of modernity and civilization along with other things Western. However, the regular wearing of Western fashion was only adopted selectively into Japanese society both among the elites and the commoners.

Before we examine the degrees to which Western fashion was accepted in various groups of Japanese, it is helpful to first understand the reason Western fashion did not take over the Japanese wardrobe: Western fashion was not the only hanging fashion in Meiji Japan. Domestic fashion was not stagnant. During the Tokugawa period, the development of cotton production and indigo dyeing had already brought a sensitivity of colorful clothing to the masses. However, free use of colors had been forbidden in order to maintain feudal social status. The Meiji Restoration abolished privileges of the Samurai class, which included their exclusive rights to certain colors. As a result, “people’s power of imagination regarding color developed to a dazzling degree.”² The influx of new, colorful fabric into the domestic market had undoubtedly offered the Japanese people many new choices in fashion that are not Western, thus minimizing the shock of Western fashion.

Clara Whitney, the daughter of an American missionary and teacher came to Japan in 1875 at the age of fifteen, and left behind a diary about her experience in Meiji Japan. The paper will draw extensively from this valuable source. Clara wrote in February of 1880 about a conversation her mother had with Mrs. Katsu, the wife of the Japanese Navy Minister, on the topic of contemporary Japanese fashion. According to Mrs. Katsu, although Japanese clothes changed little in the cut, the color as always changing. In addition to color, length of sleeves, cuts

² Daikichi, *The Culture*, 32.

of the neck, and the wearing of hair, hair ornaments also changed frequently. “Sometimes the marumage [was] fashionable, and sometimes no one but coolies’ wives [would] wear it.” When Mrs. Katsu went to visit a certain Mrs. Tomita, whom she described as a “very stylish lady,” Mrs. Katsu attempted to warn her about a dangling hairpin. Mrs. Tomita then told her that it was the latest fashion “for hairpin to look gracefully and carelessly stuck in, as if about to fall.” In fact, domestic Japanese fashion changed so quickly that Mrs. Katsu “disliked the new styles for they soon become old.”³ Among the rapidly-changing domestic fashion, Western fashion was merely another (and much stranger) choice among many. This may partially explain the Japanese people’s selective attitude towards Western fashion throughout the Meiji period, in addition to the high financial cost of Western clothing and the national identity associated with Japanese clothing.

Although Western fashion had only limited influence in Meiji Japan, there were still many incentives for some to adopt Western fashion. The most important reason being Western fashion’s symbolic value of “civilization and enlightenment.” This incentive was the most obvious in uniform designs for government agencies. Desiring to demonstrate the modernity of the new Japan, government workers deliberately showed off Western fashion to foreigners as a symbol of Japan’s civilizing process. In 1873, the Meiji emperor and the empress themselves appeared in official portraits dressed in Western clothing. In one of such photographs, the emperor appeared in a military coat with epaulettes, trousers, and a Western haircut, while the empress appears a low-neck line evening gown with a pair of long white gloves. The army and the police forces began adopting Western uniform as well. In an 1877 engraving that appeared in the *Illustrated London News* (fig 1), Japanese policemen armed with clubs were wearing long

³ Clara A.N. Whitney, *Clara’s Diary: An American Girl in Meiji Japan*, ed. M. William Steele and Tamiko Ichimata (New York: Kodansha International Ltd, 1979), 9, 302, 340.

coats, leather, belts and shakos – equipment and dress not so different from that of a nineteenth-century Western policeman. However, their clubs were in the shape of Japanese swords and were carried in such style.⁴

Among the citizens, “a man with a short haircut, gold watch and chain, carrying a black bat umbrella, and especially if seen in one of the new restaurants serving beef, would truly be a man of civilization and enlightenment.”⁵ In fact, Western fashion was so intertwined with broader social changes that a Japanese man returning from San Francisco in 1863 was advised not to carry his umbrella in order to avoid assassination by the opponents of Westernization⁶ Since opening of Japan in 1858, Japanese traditionalists and nationalists had perceived the ongoing reforms as a sell-out to the West, and sometimes took out their frustration on the external manifestation of Westernization. Narsume Sokeki, the first Japanese lecturer in English at Tokyo Imperial university in 1903 noticed a decline in English proficiency at this time, but it was a different story during Sokeki’s own days as a student. He recalls men who “would show off by dangling gold watches, wearing Western dress, growing beards, and interjecting English phrases when speaking ordinary Japanese.” In 1887, Foreign Minister Inoue Kaoru gave balls and garden parties to foreign diplomats in the Rokumeikan, “the center for Western manners and customs.”⁷ Despite the Japanese showing off some Western fashion as a symbol of civilization, the real influence of Western fashion was much more limited. Most Western elements adopted by the Japanese were only convenient fragments of Western fashion, such as watches and

⁴ Harold Bolitho, *Meiji Japan*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 29, 41.

⁵ Whitney, *Clara’s Diary*, 12.

⁶ Bolitho, *Meiji Japan*, 41.

⁷ Sukehiro Hirakawa, *Japan’s Love-Hate Relationship with the West*, (Kent: Global Oriental LTD, 2005), 117, 120, 127.

umbrellas. Even in the case of fully-uniformed policemen, who had little choice about their clothing, their clubs still took the shape of a Japanese sword.

It is a known fact that diplomats, government officials, scholars, and others who interact regularly with foreigners did wear full suits of Western clothing. However, even elites did not accept Western fashion as much as we might have imagined them to. They only wore Western suits ceremonially in most occasions, and had little personal fancies in Western suits. In the personal life of the Japanese elites, or sometimes even in their public life, they wore Western fashion selectively. When the elites fully clothed themselves in Western suits, they often wore them so improperly that it gave glaring suggestions to their personal unacquaintance with Western fashion. These improprieties often go unnoticed to modern eyes, because nineteenth century Western fashion is archaic to us, and might lead us to the mistaken conclusion that Meiji Japanese elites were masters of Western fashion. Clara Whitney provides valuable insights into the inexperience of Japanese elites with Western fashion.

In her diary, Clara Whitney notes the occasions where Japanese elites wore Western clothing and pokes fun at them when she finds their effort laughable. Clara's diary can confirm that Japanese elites mostly employed Western fashion ceremonially. For example, Arisuke, the nephew of the Japanese prime minister, wore Western clothes to Clara's fifteenth birthday retreat. At the opening ceremony of the Imperial Academy of Music, to which Clara's family was invited, Clara noticed "the hall was crowded with gentlemen in European dress which gave them a very learned appearance and which made me quite shy." Even in ceremonial occasions, the Japanese did not wear Western fashion exclusively, especially when the ceremony was not a planned exhibition of Japan's civilizing achievement targeting important foreign audiences. Clara was invited by Iwaka Tomomi, one of the chief advisors of the Meiji emperor, to witness a

balloon ascension put on by the Japanese navy. Here, all of the officials in Iwaka's party were dressed in Japanese hakama.⁸

When Clara saw Japanese elites wearing Western fashion improperly, she was not hesitant to make commentary in her diary. At the 1875 Japanese National Day parade, Clara notes government officials in broadcloth pants and swallowed-tailed coats and beaver fur hats looking "comical enough. . . the space between the vest and pants was often too great and as they seldom wear suspenders their snowy shirts often protruded. Some had no collars or cuffs, which deficiency is more remarkable with ballroom costumes."⁹ A similar sight reappeared at the closing ceremony of the National Exhibition in 1877. "The petty Japanese officials looked so funny in their 'court dress.' It consisted of a swallow-tailed coat, having in front a great space between the nether garments, from want of suspenders, which is usually supplied by an immense Japanese girdle of white or blue crepe, some ten feet long, wound round and round the body." The stovepipe hats also seem too large and heavy to the uncomfortable wearer. Clara's diary also tells us the reason for such ill-fitting clothes: the suits and hats did not belong to the courtiers, but were rented to them at a cost, "and it [was] sometimes unfortunately the case that a little man [got] a large suit or a tall man a small suit."¹⁰ The rental suits indicate that Western fashion was mostly utilitarian and not a personal fashion choice even among government officials. Not only were the Japanese officials inexperienced in the wearing of Western suits, they also had a special dislike for Western suspenders. Fukuzawa Yukichi, the reformer famous for introducing the idea of "Leaving Asia," would have agreed with Clara's observations. In an 1867 publication titled "Western clothing, food, and homes," Fukuzawa himself complains about suspenders for being

⁸ Whitney, *Clara's Diary*, 30, 213, 137.

⁹ Whitney, *Clara's Diary*, 62.

¹⁰ Whitney, *Clara's Diary*, 153.

“clumsy and troublesome.”¹¹ More evidence for selective adaptations of Western fashion by Japanese elites could be seen in photographs as well. A 1908 photo of managers in front of a mineshaft in Waga-gun, Iwasaki-mura (fig 2) shows several of them wearing Japanese sandals with their Western suits.¹²

The private lives of Japanese elites suggest even more about their unacquaintance with Western fashion. Mr. Tsuda, a Christian convert and scholar who accompanied the first Japanese embassy to the U.S. in 1860, appeared at a picnic in 1878 “flushed and perspiring,” dressed in Western clothes. Unfortunately, Clara was there to observe and wrote down a detailed description of his attempt at civilization: “His ankles several inches out of his trousers, his diaphragm several inches below his waistcoat, showing to advantage an amount of linen quite astonishing. His collar, not being fastened properly, had slipped around to the side, and his cravat thus being tied under his left ear gave him quite a kittenish appearance” In Clara’s opinion, the Japanese looked roguish and silly in their ill-attempts at Western fashion, but more graceful in traditional Japanese garments. While dining at Mr. Mori’s new mansion in that same year, Fukuzawa Yukichi wore a Japanese hakama, which makes him “far more dignified and at ease. . . than did those loose-jointed, heated gentlemen in ill-fitting European dress.”¹³

Among the common Japanese citizens, acceptance of Western fashion was more selective than among the elites. There is currently little doubt to this statement. However, it is worthy to note just how little Western fashion was incorporated into the everyday life of Meiji Japan. The common Japanese man often possessed only three elements of Western fashion: haircut, hat, and

¹¹ Yukichi Fukuzawa, “Seiyô ishokujû (Western clothing, food, and homes, 1867) by Fukuzawa Yukichi,” University of Delaware, Accessed April 26, 2021.

¹² “東宮行啓紀念写真帖,” National Diet Library Digital Collections, 2011, <https://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/780856/90?contentNo=90&itemId=info%3Andljp%2Fpid%2F780856&lang=en>.

¹³ Whitney, *Clara’s Diary*, 240, 270.

umbrella. These three elements have one thing in common: they are relatively easy to acquire. More importantly, Meiji-era Japanese men incorporated these selective items of Western fashion into their Japanese attire instead of the other way around.

Western haircuts were almost universal in the Meiji period. It is the easiest trend to catch – a trip to the barber would suffice. Western haircut was so prevalent in Meiji Japan that Fukuzawa Yukichi mentions it in his book *An Outline of Civilization*. “Can we say that the current Western styles seen more and more in daily Japanese life are a proof of civilization? Can we call those men with Western haircuts whom we meet on the street civilized persons?” Fukuzawa is not specifically discussing fashion here, but is rather using Western haircut as an example of the “exterior spirit of civilization” as opposed to the “interior spirit.”¹⁴ Nevertheless, we can see through his writings that Western haircut was the most popular element of Western fashion. It is also worth noting that not all Western haircuts were done out of the citizens’ personal desire. In the 1870s, the Japanese government forced all citizens to adopt some type of Western haircut by prohibiting the topknot. As a result, traditional Japanese barbers had to either give Western haircut or be put out of business.¹⁵

Although men’s Western haircut was universal in Meiji Japan, people still adapted to it with different levels of enthusiasm. This can be seen through different conditions people kept their hair in. Those that took pride in their new token of civilization might oil their hair and keep it neatly parted, while others left it mussed. Some, perhaps having no personal desire to adopt Western hairstyle, simply kept the base of old topknots. Contemporary photos taken by Globetrotters, a foreign photographer in Meiji Japan, show the diverse conditions of Western

¹⁴ Yukichi Fukuzawa, *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization*, Trans. David A. Dilworth and G Cameron Hurst III, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 21.

¹⁵ Bolitho, *Meiji, Japan*, 28.

hairstyles among Japanese. In a photograph titled “Boys Playing a Game,” (fig 3) six boys sport a variety of “Western hairstyles.” Some boys have their hair neatly parted in the middle. Other boys simply cut their hair short in accordance with the new law and left it to its own accord.¹⁶ In another photo titled “Farmers Threshing Rice,” (fig 4) a farmer’s shaven hair thickens in the middle – an obvious remnant of a former topknot.¹⁷ In “Farmer Pounding Rice,” (fig 5) the subject’s short hair has become so out of shape that it could only be called Western as far as length concerned.¹⁸ Clara Whitney had an encounter with a common Japanese man on her fifteenth birthday. The stranger came up to her in Western haircut and Japanese clothes, bowed and greeted her family in English, and presented Clara with a bouquet of flowers while saying “This, I give to you, lady.” Clara was quite flattered by this presentation and wrote in her diary, “such is the beau ideal of my fifteenth birthday! Was he not handsome?”¹⁹ The man who greeted Clara in broken English probably cared more about his Western haircut than the rice farmer who simply cut off the topknot in accordance with the law.

In addition to haircuts, Western hats were also popular in Meiji Japan. Just as a haircut, a hat sits on the head and leaves the rest of the Japanese attire undisturbed, making it another ideal choice for selective adaptation. Similar to Western haircuts, Western hats were usually thrust awkwardly upon an entirely Japanese outfit. In a photo titled “Funeral Procession,” (fig 6) an astonishing number and variety of Western hats appears: toppers, bowlers, slouch hats, and straw hats. At the same time, there was only one man who has a Western suit to go with his hat.²⁰ In

¹⁶ “Boys Playing a Game,” Globetrotters’ Japan: People, MIT Visualizing Culture, 2008, https://visualizingcultures.mit.edu/gt_japan_people/ga1_visnav14.html.

¹⁷ “Farmer Threshing Rice,” Globetrotters’ Japan: People, MIT Visualizing Culture, 2008, https://visualizingcultures.mit.edu/gt_japan_people/ga1_visnav03.html.

¹⁸ “Farmer Pounding Rice,” Globetrotters’ Japan: People, MIT Visualizing Culture, 2008, https://visualizingcultures.mit.edu/gt_japan_people/ga1_visnav03.html.

¹⁹ Whitney, *Clara’s Diary*, 34.

²⁰ “Funeral Procession,” Globetrotters’ Japan: People, MIT Visualizing Culture, 2008, https://visualizingcultures.mit.edu/gt_japan_people/ga1_visnav11.html.

another street scene taken in 1906 Kobe (fig 7), three men in Japanese clothes gather around the booth of a rope merchant, two of them in slouch hats and one in a flat cap.²¹ The trend of out-of-place Western hats accompanying Japanese clothes certainly did not escape the scolding pen of fifteen-year-old Clara Whitney. A Japanese preacher, whom Clara declares “the handsomest I have seen among all the black eyes in Japan,” had his charm immediately distinguished when he put on an “unsightly foreign straw hat.”²²

Thus far, the discussion on the selective adaptation of Western fashion mostly concerns men. This is because Western fashion was even less accepted among women of Meiji Japan. Nowhere in Globetrotters photographs could a Japanese woman be seen with a trace of Western fashion. Even at public ceremonies, where elite Japanese men and women appear in front of foreigners, it was common for women to wear Japanese attire. At the 1879 welcoming ceremony for the former US president, Ulysses S. Grant, only five Japanese ladies wore Western dress. The majority being “handsomely dressed. . . in the elaborate court costume.”²³ Japanese women sometimes appeared in Western clothing while taking still portraits. In one of such portraits (fig 8), two Japanese women were posed side by side. One in Japanese clothes, and the other in an ill-fitted Western bustle dress. The woman in the Western dress also wears a tattered-looking straw hat – a very irregular appearance in Western portraits at the time, in which people tend to appear in their best clothes.²⁴ It is very likely that the woman pictured did not own these articles of clothing, and was simply playing dress-up in the photo studio.

²¹ “New Year Celebrations 5,” Old Photos of Japan, MeijiShowa, 2007, <https://www.oldphotosjapan.com/photos/678/new-year-celebrations-5>.

²² Whitney, *Clara's Diary*, 46.

²³ Whitney, *Clara's Diary*, 256.

²⁴ Meiji Japanese Carte de Visite photo, in private collection of Harry Zhang.

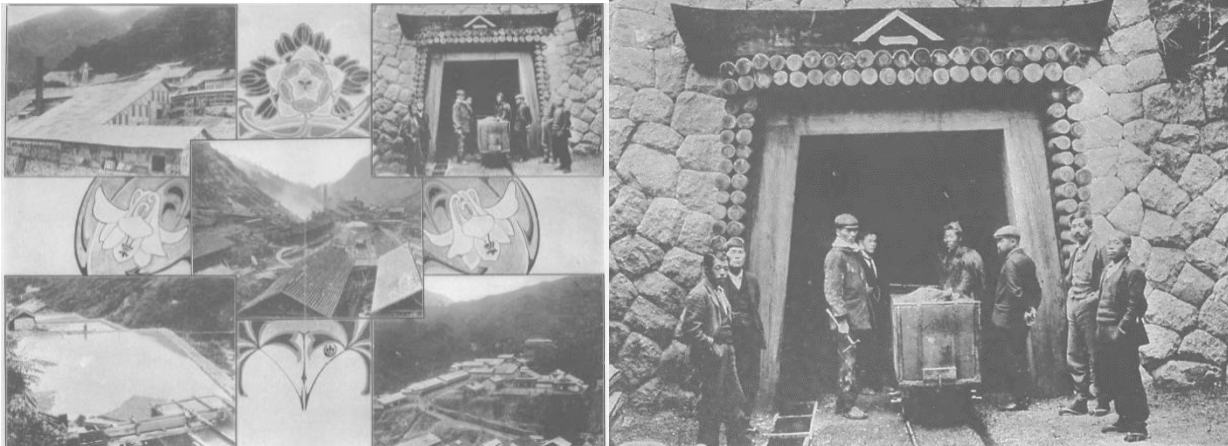
Fukuzawa Yukichi describes Japan's encounter with the West in the nineteenth century as "a blazing brand [having] suddenly been thrust into ice-cold water" that resulted in Japan's dissatisfaction with its own civilization and enthusiasm for Western civilization.²⁵ Western fashion was one of the many changes that entered Japan under such dissatisfaction and enthusiasm. Hence, it is commonly believed that Meiji-era Japanese became very fond of Western fashion. The reality is that both the elites and the commoners adopted Western fashion very selectively. Although Meiji Japan was the most Westernized country in Asia at the time, it still retained many elements of Japanese identity. The clashing of foreign and domestic cultures also led to efforts to define foreign and Japanese objects, and contributed indirectly to the consolidation of a modern Japanese identity.

²⁵ Fukuzawa, *An Outline*, 2.

Appendix



1. 1877 Japanese police in Western uniforms (Harold Bolitho, *Meiji Japan*).



2. Detail, “東宮行啓紀念写真帖.” Mine managers in 1908 (National Diet Library Digital Collections).



3. “Boys Playing a Game” (Globetrotters’ Japan: People, MIT Visualizing Culture).



4. “Farmers Threshing Rice” (Globetrotters’ Japan: People, MIT Visualizing Culture).



5. “Farmer Pounding Rice” (Globetrotters’ Japan: People, MIT Visualizing Culture).



6. Detail, "Funeral Procession" (Globetrotters' Japan: People, MIT Visualizing Culture).



7. “New Year Celebrations,” Kobe, 1906 (Old Photos of Japan, Meiji Showa).



8. Carte de Visite of two Japanese women, ca. 1870 (Harry Zhang's Collection).

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