From Duty to Fashion: The Changing Role of the Kimono in the Twenty-First Century

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From Duty to Fashion: The Changing Role of the Kimono in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract

In this article, I argue that the role and significance of the Japanese kimono are changing in twenty-first-century Japan. When the Japanese economy prospered after World War Two, the kimono became a prestige item that was worn mainly for ceremonial occasions such as weddings and coming of age ceremonies, and it was also bought to fill the trousseaus of daughters who were about to get married. These kimonos were mainly worn out of a sense of duty and social obligation. These “duty” kimonos were the mainstay of the kimono industry until the economic crisis of the 1990s. I argue that the economic recession, combined with changing social patterns in Japan surrounding marriage, led to the fall of the formal “duty”
kimono but enabled the kimono to fill in a new role: that of fashion item. I demonstrate how Japanese people, through kimono fashion blogs and kimono fashion icons, second-hand shops and new kimono providers, are reinventing the kimono’s role as fashion in the twenty-first century.

KEYWORDS: Japan, fashion, kimono, traditional industry, cultural change

The kimono is now Japan’s traditional costume, but it used to be everyday dress for both women and men before the arrival of Western clothing in the late nineteenth century. Despite the development of a modern and Westernized lifestyle, women continued to wear the kimono well into the twentieth century. In this article, I demonstrate how the role of the kimono has changed in the latter half of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The kimono endured in part because the kimono industry cemented the role of the kimono as formal dress for key life events, such as coming of age ceremonies, weddings and funerals. The industry also marketed the kimono as the epitome of femininity: elegant, refined and quintessentially Japanese. During Japan’s postwar economic boom, this formalization led to astronomical sales, but it also fixed the kimono’s image as expensive, uncomfortable and, above all, as a duty, quite separate from personal choice or fashion. Changing social and cultural mores and the economic crash of the 1990s almost doomed the expensive formal kimono to extinction. The kimono industry’s single strategy of focusing on the formal kimono made it harder for people to buy and wear the kimono, but paradoxically it is this very decline that has made it possible for Japanese people in their 40s, 30s and 20s to dissociate the kimono from duty and integrate the kimono into their wardrobe as a fashion item. In other words, the kimono’s role has changed from a duty, a necessary item for formal occasions, to a fashion item that women as well as men chose for themselves.

Based on 12 months of participant observation in kimono shops and retailers, combined with 21 home visits to women’s homes in Aichi prefecture (central Japan), I will first demonstrate how the kimono retail industry grew thanks to the formal silk kimono in the second half of the twentieth century. Then I will go on to explain how two factors, social attitudes to marriage and the economic crisis of the 1990s, caused the kimono industry’s one-item sales strategy to fail. Finally, I explain how this apparent disaster for the kimono paradoxically enabled the kimono to start becoming a fashion choice.

From Everyday Wear to Formal Dress: Formalization in the Twentieth Century

In *Kimono: Fashioning Culture*, Liza Dalby writes that we are unaccustomed to associate clothing and politics (Dalby 2001, 65), but in Japan the two could not be more intertwined. *Wafuku*, or Japanese dress, was
customary until the momentous events of the Meiji Restoration in 1868. Margaret Maynard notes that, in many cultures across the world, it generally seems to be men who adopt Western clothing the quickest (Maynard 2004, 5). Japan is no exception, and in the race to “catch up” to the West and become a modern nation with the trappings of a Western-style military, national education system, industry and government (Pyle 1996, 92) men were encouraged to wear Western clothes as a sign that they were
embracing not just the new modern age but a new modern Japanese identity (Koike, Noguchi, and Komura 2000, 102). By contrast, women continued to wear Japanese dress in the twentieth century, with the lasting effect that the kimono is now primarily associated with women (Hanley 1997, 167).

With the rapid introduction of Western goods after the Meiji Restoration, Japanese people began to categorize clothes, food and objects according to a West/Japan binary. Things Japanese were categorized as wa, and things Western were categorized as yō (Tobin 1992, 25). These categories
are very much still in use today. Based on this distinction, parallel industries emerged for both types of clothing, *wafuku* (Japanese clothes) and *yōfuku* (Western clothes), producing competing clothing cultures. Atsuko Tanaka, in her work *Kimono no Hanasaku Koro* (When the Kimono Flourished), analyzes 90 years of kimono advice in the magazine *Shufu no Tomo* (The Housewife’s Friend). Tanaka asks the question: “when did the Japanese come to see the kimono as something special, out of the ordinary?” (Tanaka 2006, 96). It seemed that the answer lies in the materiality of the kimono. Whereas Western clothes are tailored to fit the contours of the human body, the kimono is made from panels of cloth cut from a single bolt of fabric. It has to be wrapped around the body, held in place with multiple belts and other items, and adorned with a wide obi (sash) (Milhaupt 2014, 21). There were already voices following the Great Tokyo Earthquake in 1923 criticizing the kimono, accusing its *tamoto* (long sleeves) and *suso* (long hems) of getting in the way of people fleeing, even causing their wearers injury or death. After the war, the kimono was further criticized:
It became painfully obvious during the War just how much the kimono gets in women’s way. We have to remind ourselves that the kimono’s form became fixed during the Tokugawa period. Our standards for lifestyle, morality and beauty have changed immensely since then. It is an impossible task to bring into our age an item of clothing that belongs to an era when women were largely confined to the home. (Tanaka 2006, 96)

The practicality of Western clothes appealed in an age where economic growth was the name of the game. At the same time, trades such as the kimono industry, which had been shut down during the war, resumed their
activities. The Korean War gave Japan’s economy a boost, and, although kimonos were being sold, Tanaka writes that “by then, the era of the kimono was over” (Tanaka 2006, 97). Throughout the postwar period, the number of women who did not know how to wear the kimono increased, and in response kitsuke (kimono dressing) schools started to open and dressing services began to emerge (Tanaka 2006, 126). While many of my participants in their 60s remember their mothers wearing wool kimonos at New Year or at parent days in schools during their childhood, the postwar period saw the rise of the formal, silk, dyed kimono as the epitome of formal wear for women. With the leveling of the economic disparity and the rise of the wealthy middle class, people were looking for symbols of their new-found wealth and stability. In the 1950s there were the three treasures, black and white television, refrigerator and washing machine (Yoshimi in Wasko 2005, 546), all of immediate practical use, but owning expensive silk kimonos and finely woven obi was the ultimate sign of prosperity and sophistication, an image of elegance and cultural refinement that every woman could, nay, should aspire to. It became possible for women to, quite literally, wear works of art on their bodies.

I spoke with a kimono shop manager in a regional chain store called Yoshizuya in Tsu. As is very often the case in Japan, department stores such as Mitsukoshi and Takashimaya originated from famous kimono shops (Wah in Macpherson 1998, 255), and Yoshizuya is a department store that grew out of a kimono shop. Nowadays, however, Yoshizuya’s kimono shop is fitted in between sprawling displays of home furniture and Western clothes. The manager told me that these days the things you can get from a kimono shop are limited. There are no more fudangi (everyday kimonos). But Japanese people treasure their kankonsōsai (important life events) so they want to wear the kimono for weddings, funerals, graduation ceremonies and the like. These are the only kimonos we can sell.

The kimono’s retreat from everyday life was not, initially, a blow to the industry. Formal kimonos are very expensive, and the kimono industry put its full force behind making formal kimonos. Yoshihide Shibakawa, the owner of a kimono shop called Azumaya, recalled the formal kimono’s glory days: “the shops could rely on selling kimonos that cost a million yen (8695 dollars) regularly. If you can sell just one, then you can live comfortably for three months. So why would you bother with anything else?”

And the formal kimono did sell extremely well. The Committee for the Study on Japanese Dress, organized by the Ministry for Economy, Trade and Industry (METI), found that demand for the silk dyed kimonos boomed in 1955, steadily increasing in the second half of the twentieth century. In 1975, the industry peaked, with sales reaching 1.8 trillion yen. The kimono industry relied on two types of formal kimono (Ministry of Trade, Economy and Industry 2015). The first was the bridal trousseau containing many formal kimonos, which most parents provided for their
daughters. The matter of bridal trousseaus is rarely discussed in academic literature concerned with the kimono, but as I conducted my doctoral fieldwork, I came to realize that the amounts of kimonos that had been sold as trousseau-fillers were truly colossal. The second was the furisode, or swinging sleeves kimono worn by young women at their coming of age ceremonies, and it quickly became one of the pillars of the formal kimono industry. Riding on the rise of the middle class, the industry made buying a furisode for their daughter seem like a duty for parents, a demonstration of love encapsulated by the word oyagokoro (parental “heart,” parental love).

I conducted 21 home visits in my neighborhood (mostly Toyota city, Nagoya and the Mikawa and Owari areas) during which I asked my participants, mostly women in their 50s and 60s, occasionally 40s and 70s, to show me their kimonos. Regardless of whether they actually wore them or not, all of them possessed large collections of kimonos, most of which had been purchased for them by their parents before they got married. The practice of putting together a full trousseau for daughters who were getting married, known as oyomeiri dochu (literally “items for brides”) is very old, dating back to the Edo period (1600–1868) and earlier (Francks 2009, 33). This tradition enabled women to both display the status of their family once they got married and changed household, and to retain wealth and currency of their own once in their husband’s home. Kimonos were a safeguard against hardship since they could be exchanged for rice or food. With Japan’s economic success, this practice reached unprecedented levels in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, although by then it was more as a symbol of wealth and a gauge of the bride’s family’s status than as a safeguard against hardship. The practice involved giving the bride a full kimono set. There are multiple types that the wearer chooses according to their role, the season, the place and the occasion she is to wear the kimono. I will take a moment to explain the range of formal kimonos:

- 喪服 (mōfuku): an entirely black mourning kimono and obi.
- 黒留袖 (kurotomesode): an entirely black kimono with a bold pattern around the hem. It is typically only worn by the mother of the bride and the mother of the groom at a wedding.
- 色留袖 (irotomesode): essentially the same as the kurotomesode, but dyed a different color than black. It is appropriate for a relative’s wedding.
- 振袖 (furisode): a long-sleeved kimono typically with bold patterns and bright colors. It is the most formal kimono an unmarried woman can wear, and once married the furisode is no longer appropriate.
- 訪問着 (hōmongi): literally “visiting wear,” this can be quite an ambiguous kimono. It is very formal, and appropriate for weddings and formal parties. It usually features traditional patterns on the hem and shoulder.
- 付け下げ (tsukesage): an understated version of the hōmongi. It is appropriate for weddings but also tea ceremonies, museum visits, etc. It is a favorite of kimono aficionados in their 60s.
色無地 (iromuji): a plain kimono with no pattern. It is appropriate for tea ceremonies and other semi-formal occasions.
小紋 (komon): a kimono with patterns all over. The least formal of all the silk kimonos.
織物 (orimono) Kimonos that are woven rather than dyed. Famous examples include Oshima pongee and Yuki pongee. The vast majority of these kimonos are considered casual wear, and would not be appropriate for formal occasions or tea ceremonies.

Add to this obis and underkimonos, shoes and bags, and socks and belts, and all the various dōgu (items) that are necessary for putting together the kimono outfit, and the kimono wardrobe is formidable indeed.

By now I am certain you are wondering why there are so many categories and sub-categories. They key to understanding why lies in the emic categories of hare and ke. Yoshio Sugimoto explains these emic concepts as follows:

Hare represents situations where formal, ceremonial, and festive sentiments prevail. On these occasions (hare no hi), people dress in their best clothes (haregi) and eat gala meals (hare no shokuji). In contrast, ke stands for routine life in which people do things habitually, conventionally and predictably. (Sugimoto 2014, 263)

As such, kimonos became separated into formal wear and casual wear along the lines of hare and ke. The kimono carries an entire code in terms of appropriateness for place, occasion and season. As Liza Dalby writes, “without exaggerating, we can say that kimono are coded for messages regarding age, gender, season, formality, and occasion—not to mention wealth and taste” (Dalby 2001, 7). The industry, of course, actively encouraged this concern with appropriateness and social grace, knowing that formal kimonos, requiring complex techniques to make, brought in the most revenue. Although the boundaries of these social rituals have become blurred at the end of the twentieth century and not everyone adheres to the same rules, the notions regarding the appropriateness of formal kimonos to a given situation have remained deeply entrenched. One of my key participants and friend Kyoko Onoda, a part-time worker at the kimono shop Azumaya mentioned above, and passionate about kimonos, explained the sentiment behind the rules of propriety:

The kimono isn’t just for you, after all, it’s also for the people around you. It’s for the person that the event is about. Your clothes express your feelings towards the person and the event. They express your wish to celebrate the person. Kimono rules are like a barometer to express your feelings. If you wear jeans and a T-shirt to a wedding, your feelings won’t come across properly. You could be carrying a hundred roses, you’ll still be insulting the bride and groom because
of your clothes! Japanese people want to look proper and smart in front of others.

Postwar Japan was the perfect breeding ground for the formal kimono. Women became less and less familiar with the kimono, and thus relied heavily on the recommendations and knowledge of kimono shops. Paradoxically, as women slowly but surely lost the ability to wear the kimono, sales boomed. The kimono was the essential tool for becoming a bride, a key part of the “bridal curriculum” of bridal schools in which women learned tea ceremony, flower arranging and good manners. Parents enrolled their daughters in these schools, hoping to foster the ideal genteel femininity perceived as essential to find a good husband. Meanwhile, parents (mostly mothers) carefully put together kimono trousseaus composed of all the kimono categories detailed above, so that their daughters would not have to worry about not having the right sort of kimono.

The trousseau was meant to provide the daughter with a lifetime’s worth of kimonos. I spoke with the mother of a kimono shop owner in central Toyota, who witnessed this trousseau frenzy in action, and she told me that, typically, a full kimono trousseau was 10 million yen—almost 100,000 dollars, a figure I have repeatedly heard from other kimono shop owners. Many of my participants told me that it was a matter of pride to put together a riippa na (splendid) trousseau, so that the bride would not feel shame in her new home. Particularly in Nagoya, where tastes are said to tend towards the garish, the drawers of the new bride’s tansu (kimono dresser) would be opened for the in-laws and neighbors to inspect. Large trucks with glass sides would take the bride’s belonging to the new home, so that everyone could see how well-prepared she was and that she came from a “good” family, who cared for her and provided for her. The formal kimono, then, was not so much an item of clothing as a vehicle for social standing and a symbol of parental love and devotion.

Very few of my participants actually chose these kimonos for themselves, and expressed mixed feelings about these “duty” kimonos. Frequently, they bemoaned their parent’s choice of color, often bright pink or orange. Women usually had no say in what their parents bought. One participant’s mother’s tastes were so specific that every single one of her 60 or so kimonos in her trousseau was embroidered with geometric and/or bamboo leaf patterns. Two other participants joked about how their mothers would just buy kimonos without consulting them, but expressing mixed feelings of gratitude and guilt: “looking at all these kimonos now makes me realize just how much trouble they went to for me.”

Inevitably, the formal kimono spelled trouble. At the same time as Western clothes triumphed over wafuku as everyday wear, the kimono’s formalization proceeded with an unstoppable momentum. Women wore the kimono less and less, and the formal kimono became harder and harder to wear. Not a fold out of place, not a poorly tied obi, nor an error of judgement in coordinating obi and kimono could be tolerated. There is a
long list of things that are considered *mittomonai* (shabby or undignified) for kimono wear. The kimono is also highly seasonal: both materials and patterns are different in summer and winter, and there is a strict separation between lined and unlined kimonos. Kimonos appropriate for May and September are not appropriate for July and August. Wearing the kimono became a considerable hassle: a financial burden, a source of social anxiety and requiring skill and understanding to wear, the kimono also requires aftercare. It has, at the very least, to be aired out after being worn, and the industry actively encouraged women to have their kimonos professionally cleaned after wearing them even just once. Kimonos are not hung up in a wardrobe like Western clothes, but folded along predetermined lines and therefore need to be stored folded in a dresser. The knowledge of how to fold kimonos also started to lose ground, meaning that women became afraid to take kimonos out of their drawers for fear of not being able to put them back afterwards. Silk kimonos are also at risk of developing mold in Japan’s humid climate.

Then, there is the very nature of formality itself: *bare* days do not come around that often, and when they do, the practical advantage of Western formal wear became very appealing for women burdened with heaps of difficult, uncomfortable silk kimonos that they had not chosen for themselves. For those women who did want to wear kimonos at weddings and other occasions, many venues and hotels started to provide a *kitsuke* (kimono dressing) service. According to my sources in the kimono industry, rental industry took off in the 1990s. These services became popular because, by using them, women could wear the “right” kimono to a wedding or any other occasion, without going to the trouble of putting kimonos on themselves or having to buy a kimono.

At the end of the twentieth century, social and economic conditions aligned in such a way that a huge blow was dealt to the formal kimono, triggering the kimono’s role to shift away from duty towards fashion.

### The Fall of the Formal Kimono

Three conditions lined up to undermine the duty kimono. First of all, the generation of women, now in their 50s and 60s, for whom all these kimonos were bought, were, for the most part, uninterested in the kimono, and for the most part they failed to pass on knowledge about the kimono to their daughters. Secondly, social norms surrounding marriage changed considerably in the latter half of the twentieth century, and the custom of bridal trousseaus declined sharply. In addition, the economic crisis put expensive kimonos out of reach for the average Japanese family. Finally, not only had the kimono industry backed itself into a corner from which it could not escape by focusing exclusively on the formal kimono, the industry lost customer trust through its notoriously aggressive sales techniques, pushing demand ever lower.
First of all, then, the last generation of women who systematically received kimonos was also the one to experience the total normalization of Western lifestyle. The kimono was not something, after all, that they had chosen, and it was typically associated with something they had to wear, rather than something they enjoyed wearing.

I spoke to Atsuko Tanaka (2012), author of *Kimono no Hanasaku Koro* and *Kimono Jibun-ryū Nyūmon* (An Introduction to Kimono, My Way). A sophisticated woman in her mid-50s, Tanaka-san used to work as an editor for a kimono magazine called *Nanaoh*. Having rediscovered the kimono in her late 30s and early 40s, she recalled how she felt about it as a young woman:

I hated the kimono. I grew up in a time when Western clothes were at their most fun, their most interesting. There were lots of fashion magazines, and lots of new styles, and it was just far more enjoyable to engross myself in Western clothes and fashion. In contrast, the kimono seemed dull and conservative. I grew up in the 1960s and 1970s when Japan’s economic growth really took off, and it seems to me that traditional things like kimono during that period became almost chemical, and they seemed just, well, cold. They seemed ugly and old-fashioned. For people who grew up in high society it might have been different, but I just didn’t like the kimonos that were typical in the ordinary middle-class household.

She recalled a particularly unpleasant example of the “duty” kimono:

I worked in an investment bank when I was young, and there was a custom whereby the young women who worked there would wear a kimono to the company’s New Year party. I had an older woman from my neighborhood dress me, and she tied the kimono belts so tight ... it was awful, it was so painful. I had to be driven to the bank, and there was no way I could fix it myself. Because I went through that, I had no desire to wear a kimono for my coming of age ceremony. I was the kind of girl who was more interested in getting my driver’s license. I had no interest whatsoever.

Her experience of the kimono as formal-only echoes that of many women at the time. The discomfort of coming of age ceremonies and New Year parties for which they were dressed by someone else, whose technique involved tying the *himo* (thin belts that keep the kimono in place) very tight, caused an enduring perception that the kimono is uncomfortable, even painful, as it was for Tanaka-san. Ironically, women in Tanaka-san’s generation owned the most kimono per head compared to any other generation, but they were the ones who truly distanced themselves from the kimono. Already unsure of how to put the kimono on themselves, few managed to teach their daughters about it, or even wanted to. For their generation, it...
was for the most part mandatory to have a bridal trousseau, but their own daughters often refused offers by their parents to follow the same custom.

This brings us to the first reason the formal kimono declined. Quite simply, social mores have changed. Women grew up in the 1960s and 1970s with the understanding that they would marry into a household (oyome ni iku), in many cases joining their husband’s family and parents, particularly if he was an elder son (Hendry 1981). Traditionally, households were referred to as an i.e. in Japan, a patrilineal kinship system in which the eldest son takes over the position of family head and the responsibility of perpetuating the i.e. (Fukutake 1982, 25; Sugimoto 2014, 164–165).

For the daughters of this generation, however, this idea of marrying into a man’s family has weakened. Although the ideal of getting married and becoming a housewife remains strong, younger generations have usually stayed in education longer than their mothers and have greater ambitions towards employment. They also have a stronger tendency to remain single, and if they do marry they do so much later than their mothers (Tokuhiro 2010; Vogel and Vogel 2013). While it might be premature to say that all characteristics of the i.e. system have vanished completely, it is clear that by the 1990s Japanese society had moved away from the multi-generational i.e. towards a model of family based on the nuclear family centered around the couple. Accordingly with this shift in social patterns, what is deemed acceptable to wear to important events such as weddings and funerals has changed. It is now perfectly acceptable to wear a dress to a wedding and a black suit to a funeral, and as a result the formal kimono seems less of an obligation and more of an unnecessary complication, particularly when invitations arrive at short notice. Some of the women in their 50s and 60s that I spoke to felt the need to prepare at least a few kimonos for their daughters when they got married, out of a lingering sense of parental obligation, but in most cases these were not the formidable tansu laden with dozens of silk kimonos that their own mothers prepared for them. Women were no longer required to attend bridal schools in order to prepare for getting married, and the training to become a proper Japanese woman now no longer seemed so necessary.

The only remaining bastion of the formal kimono is the furisode, literally “swinging sleeve” kimono due to its long sleeves, which is the most formal kimono an unmarried woman can wear. Once she is married (or if she is considered to look too old), the furisode with its long sleeves and bold, bright patterns will no longer be considered appropriate. Nowadays young women wear furisode at their coming of age ceremony. Due to its visibility and its unique status among kimonos, it is among the better-studied aspects of kimono culture. Based on her fieldwork in kimono shops, Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni argues that the reason men dress in suits and women are dressed in furisode for their coming of age ceremonies is to prepare them for their different roles in society: active, professional lives for young men, and a life embodied by the Meiji-era adage of “good wife and wise mother” for young women (Goldstein-Gidoni 1999, 352):
on the formal occasion that represents their entry into adult society they should adopt a Japanese appearance. In other words, they are molded into a model of Japaneseness, which is strictly opposed to the model for the rational world of work represented by boys on the same occasion. (Goldstein-Gidoni 1999, 357)

It is certainly true that the kimono can and does embody an image of Japanese femininity, but many of my participants spoke of young women’s need to fit in with their peers on the occasion, and how their daughters would seek out this year’s most popular colors so as to secure a furisode with the trendiest color. As a result, the trends for furisode, especially ink-jet printed furisode (as opposed to traditionally hand-dyed kimonos) tended to move faster than regular kimonos. Furthermore, taking the view that the wearing of furisode is driven by the Meiji-era “good wife, wise mother” maxim is to ignore the role that the industry played in encouraging parents to buy, and subsequently rent, furisode as an expression of oyagokoro (parental love). Participants in their 60s have told me that for a young woman in their generation not to wear a furisode for their coming of age ceremony meant shame for her family. Some young women apparently did not attend the ceremony if their parents could not afford the furisode. A young woman without a furisode would be considered kawaiisō (unfortunate, an object of pity) if she appeared at her coming of age ceremony without one. The politics surrounding the furisode’s role in the coming of age ceremony cannot be reduced to the idea that the adage of “good wife, wise mother” is being acted upon passive young women. The sense of parental obligation felt by parents, the color and pattern selection made by young women and their desire to fit in with the group, and, perhaps most importantly, the motivation of the industry to keep this practice going cannot be overlooked.

When the Japanese economy was growing in the 1960s and most strata of Japanese society were relatively affluent, families would purchase a full furisode set (kimono, underkimono, obi and accessories), which could range from 250,000 yen to over one million yen (2174 dollars to over 8700 dollars).

Nowadays, the furisode industry is largely rental. I spoke to the owner of a small shop called Kyorei, 10 minutes from my house in Toyota. Takie Nagasaka has been running her shop for 35 years after taking it over from her husband’s family. She told me that up until 15 years ago, most people would buy furisode from her, and some still do when they feel that they need to provide one for their daughters. “Now, mothers can’t do kimono aftercare. They can’t even fold a kimono properly. And since you’ll probably only wear a furisode once, some people say its mottainai (a waste) to buy a furisode.” Renting is an easier option than buying a furisode, particularly if the daughter has no wish to wear a kimono aside from her coming of age ceremony. The popularity of the furisode for coming of age ceremonies shows no sign of declining, however, and many kimono shops like Kyorei find it necessary to enter the rental business, which means
setting up business contacts with beauty parlors and photographers. The process can be costly, and not necessarily to the benefit of the shop in terms of profit margin. They have to stock a considerable number of *furisode* in different colors and patterns, and only some will be chosen. Only after it is worn three times does a rented *furisode* bring in any profit. Shops involved in the *furisode* rental industry also need to be prepared long in advance of the actual coming of age ceremony that takes place in January every year, setting up special events a year in advance. This means advertising well in advance and renting a special venue if the shop premises are too small. As far as the consumer is concerned, renting a *furisode* is still expensive, costing around 250,000 yen (2185 dollars), but it can be much more expensive as well. The *furisode* is the ultimate duty kimono and is in a sense the last remaining bastion of the duty kimono, but with Japan’s aging population and declining birth rate, each generation of new adults is shrinking, so the *furisode* too is an endangered species.

The sense of *oyagokoro* (parental love) as expressed through the duty kimono turned out to have peaked and fallen with the generation of Japanese people now in their 50s and 60s. This brings us to the second reason that the duty kimono faltered: the changing attitudes to marriage and the economic crisis of the 1990s.

The social and cultural mores surrounding an item of material culture like the kimono and the consumption thereof are fundamentally connected to political and economic environments and fluctuations. These connections have been well-studied, and Japan makes for quite a dramatic case study. The so-called Bubble economy of the 1980s encouraged lavish spending and many well-to-do housewives who pursued tea ceremony, *kitsuke* classes or flower arranging had money to spare on kimonos. However, the Bubble burst in 1991, dragging down people’s income and putting a significant brake on consumption practices (Yoshikawa 2001). Secure employment, which had previously been taken for granted, was now much harder to achieve, and young Japanese generations became more conservative and likely to save money (Francks 2009, 208). The children of the wealthy postwar generation were coming of age at this time, and the economic crisis deeply affected both their social mores and their consumption practices. Whereas their mothers were often housewives who had the freedom to buy lavish kimonos and spend on leisure and hobbies, this generation of women is concerned with practicality and thrift. Nagasaka-san told me that “now people use their money differently. They would rather use it on school fees or use it to buy a car. It’s a *kibishii* (tough) situation. We have a very small profit margin. It’s worrying for the future.”

The kimono was becoming less and less of a mandatory item for women. Instead of moving into the family house with the husband’s parents, couples are likely to move into an apartment, in which there is usually no room for a *tansu*. Many of my participants had asked their daughters if they wanted kimono trousseaus, to which most replied that they did not want one. Still, some of my participants bought some kimonos for their
daughters, but mostly the daughters do not take the kimonos with them, preferring to leave the kimonos with their mothers, particularly since they are usually even less sure than their mothers about how to wear the kimonos. So their mothers keep their daughters’ (often unworn) kimonos at home, and at the same time their own mothers, now elderly and rarely in need of a kimono, give them their own kimonos. Other elderly relatives may well do so too. Women in their 50s and 60s often end up being a kind of kimono caretaker, storing the kimonos of three or more women in their home. This could mean anywhere between 10 and 300 or more kimonos under one roof, depending on lifestyle and wealth. For many women, these kimonos are quite simply a burden. Mostly unworn, the kimonos take up a lot of space. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, second-hand kimono shops sprung up all over Japan as women all over the country started to sell kimonos (Okazaki 2015, 12). However expensive they might have initially been, a second-hand kimono will only sell for about 500 yen (less than 5 dollars) since they decrease dramatically in value if they have been previously owned, making this a very painful sale indeed. Many people simply do not know what to do with the kimonos belonging to their elderly relatives when they pass away. These duty kimonos, then, have become a burden. They are often referred to as “sleeping” or “slumbering” in their tansu, but other people, rather less charitably, call them tansu no koyashi, literally “tansu fertilizer.” This used to be taken in a positive sense, given that the tansu was part of female wealth and status, a symbol of the economic success of postwar Japan with roots in the traditions of upper-class Edo women, but the expression simply means that they are left unused and unwanted.

The final reasons that contributed to the decline of the formal kimono are the manufacturing choices and sales strategies of the kimono industry itself. The industry cornered itself into a one-product strategy by focusing almost exclusively on the formal kimono. They relied on the furisode, bridal trousseaus and the appetite of middle-aged women for tea ceremony and other traditional arts that require wearing a kimono in order to practice. Until the economic crash, the industry relied on a complex, rigid and opaque system of distribution completely separate from the apparel industry. The kimono industry is comprised of an intricate chain of wholesalers (known as tonya) working with “makers” or manufacturers who place orders with the craftspeople and finally the craftspeople themselves. The finished products then made their way back to the tonya, who sell the products on to local wholesalers, who then sell them on to kimono shops. Finally, the kimonos would then be sold to customers. Takaharu Goto, the owner of Goto Gofuku, a kimono shop in Kasamatsu, and Go Ichi Maru, a second-hand kimono shop in Toyota, explained the system to me this way: “if the kimono industry was the film industry, the tonya are like the producers. The makers are the directors, and the craftspeople are the actors. The shop is the cinema, and then you have the consumers.”
This system meant that the kimono shop owners, let alone consumers, almost never encounter the craftsmen who make kimonos and obis. It also meant that, at every stage of the chain (and sometimes there could be more than just one tonya involved), the kimono acquired an extra price tag. The kimono is open priced, and shops are free to sell them for the price of their choosing. The industry deliberately kept their chain of distribution secret in order to allow shops and tonya to take large profit margins. Furthermore, according to an analysis conducted by METI, since 1975, the industry has increasingly relied on commission sales. This means that shops “borrow” kimonos and obis from the tonya rather than buy them. As a result, prices increase since the tonya have to cover the risk of the borrowed goods being returned to them if they are unsold. Customers do not really know what the price of the kimono and obis actually covers, and they became increasingly mistrustful about what they were actually paying for. Teruko Nakasaka, a participant in her 60s who lives in Toyota and an avid kimono consumer, estimated that the price could quadruple in the process of distribution. As a result, she cuts out the middle-man and acquires her kimonos straight from a designer in Kyoto, thus avoiding the tonya completely. Most customers are not as savvy or as well-connected as Nakasaka-san, however, and kimono shops acquired a reputation for being not just expensive, but also as intimidating and untrustworthy. Many women in their 50s and 60s in my neighborhood admitted to visiting kimono shops in groups rather than alone, drawing strength from numbers. Clearly they liked kimonos and enjoyed purchasing them, so why were they so afraid of visiting the shops?

This is partly down to the way kimonos are sold. Unless the shop sells ready to wear kimono, a kimono is not actually sold in its finished form, but as a tanmono, a bolt of kimono fabric usually 13 meters long and 38 centimeters wide. Clients must first buy a tanmono, which can range anywhere between 20,000 (174 dollars) and 3 million yen (26,106 dollars), depending on the type of fabric, where it was made and who made it, and, importantly, who priced it. Then the client must pay for it to be sewn to order. Measurements are not made using the metric system (which Japan uses in almost every other circumstance) but the old measurements of shaku, sun and bun, which only the most hardened of kimono aficionados understand.

Then comes the matter of what obi the client will wear with the kimono, what nagajuban (underkimono) she will wear, what shoes and finally, what obi-age (obi sash) and obi-jime (obi belt). She has to imagine whether what she owns already will work with what she has bought. In many cases, shops try to sell kimonos and obis together, offering a special price if they are bought together. These prices are presented as being a bargain, but customers have no way of knowing what, exactly, these prices represent. Furthermore, many kimono shops began to add services for their clients, adding prizes such as rice or premium quality meat to their wares in order to entice their clients. Many also organized trips for their clients which

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usually ended in visiting a kimono exhibition to encourage their clients to buy more. But perhaps the most egregious offender in the arsenal of dubious sales techniques was the *kakoikomi* strategy. This means, literally, to enclose, to hold captive. In practice, the strategy relied on multiple staff members surrounding the customer and pressing them to buy the item in question by telling them that it was a once in a lifetime opportunity, or that the craft is excellent, offering advice on when/where to wear it, gradually wearing down the customer’s defenses by insisting that one million yen (8700 dollars) for the item in question is a reasonable price. This may seem fairly innocent as sales strategies go, but in fact the customer would be put under tremendous pressure, fearing that she would not be able to leave if she did not buy anything. Furthermore, the customer cannot be completely sure she is making the right decision. Are the staff telling her the truth about the quality of the craftsman’s work? Will she really be able to wear this kimono at her niece’s wedding without people talking behind her back? What if, at the end of it all, it does not even suit her? If she cannot wear it herself, who will dress her? A huge amount of anxiety surrounds these purchases, particularly when the price tag goes anywhere from 200,000 (1740 dollars) to 3 million yen (26,106 dollars).

Even now, participants speak of *kakugo* (being prepared) when they go to kimono shops, or deciding beforehand that they definitely will or will not buy anything. Takaharu Goto told me that there are two types of kimono shops: those that will try to reduce costs as much as possible to sell their wares as reasonably as possible, and those who feel that they could and should make a profit by pricing their wares highly and adding services and trips for their clients. He included his shops in the first category: “I might sell a *tanmono* for 100,000 yen (874 dollars), but elsewhere you might find exactly the same one for 500,000 yen (4372 dollars).” The industry never adapted its prices to the post-Bubble economy, and fewer and fewer families could afford to spend money on clothes that could be spent on a car, a house or school fees.

The combination of changing social mores surrounding marriage and the economic crisis and its effect on consumption, together with the industry’s own strategy of focusing solely on formal kimonos, dealt the formal “duty” kimono a blow from which it has not recovered. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, it became impossible for the industry to sell the huge sets of formal kimonos that it relied on for stable sales during the 1970s and 1980s. The economic decline forced the Japanese population to focus on practical needs first and foremost, rendering the kimono far less of a necessary duty than it used to be. Finally, the industry backed itself into a corner by focusing almost exclusively on formal kimonos and obi, but also lost the trust of its customers through its high prices, nebulous pricing system and hawkish sales strategies, making kimono shopping a stressful, uncomfortable experience. Given this overwhelmingly negative picture, it seems hard to imagine that the kimono could undergo any sort
of revival. In the next section, I will discuss how the kimono’s new role as a fashion item could secure its survival against all the odds.

Kimono Revival in the Late Twenty-First Century

Given the rather negative overview I have given so far, it might be difficult to believe that the kimono could be enjoying any kind of popularity in Japan. And yet, the kimono has undergone a revival in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century. In this final section, I explore four key reasons as to why it has. This first cause is, in fact, paradoxically, the very distance women in their 40s and younger feel towards the kimono. The second is the availability of new knowledge about the kimono through blogs, YouTube and magazines. The third is the rising popularity of second-hand shops. Finally, the fourth is a growing network of shops, writers and government incentives promoting the kimono as casual, fashionable wear.

Absence Makes the Heart Grow Fonder: Women in Their 40s and 30s

Many women in their 40s and younger are unlikely to have much hands-on experience with the kimono, other than at their coming of age ceremony at 20 years old, weddings or shichi-go-san\(^1\) ceremonies. In some cases, they may well have rented a kimono for each of these occasions. This phenomenon of the kimono’s removal from day-to-day life is known in Japanese as *kimono-banare*, or separation from the kimono. But it is in fact this separation that enables women and men both to “rediscover” the kimono and wear it their way, rather than because they have to. The second-hand industry took off partly because young women were interested in the kimono as vintage fashion that could be acquired very cheaply and accessorized. A small but significant number of women and, indeed, men, find that, for a variety of reasons, the kimono has entered their lives. During my fieldwork, I heard a variety of stories from my research participants: one woman walked past a second-hand kimono shop and decided to have a look. A man decided to have a kimono made for himself after accompanying his wife to a kimono shop and seeing her purchase her own. Conversely, a woman told me that she had decided it “wasn’t right” that her husband wore kimonos but she did not, and started to learn how to wear kimono as a result. In yet another case a young woman looked inside her mother’s *tansu*, which was bursting with kimonos, and decided it was *mottainai* (wasteful) not to wear them. Quite often, people could not pinpoint exactly why they decided to wear it, but the answer was deceptively simple: they *wanted* to.

There are many ways in which the kimono can take hold in someone’s life and inveigle itself into their wardrobe, but the appeal seems to be quite
simple: it is different from what people usually wear. People in their 40s and younger know of the kimono as formal wear associated with duty, particularly through the coming of age ceremony, but the possibility of wearing kimono as fashion comes as a huge revelation to many. Some in their 50s or older may well remember their mothers and grandmothers wearing it every day. The cut-off point for kimono as everyday wear is still a fairly recent one. In a conversation with a doctor in his early 60s in Nagoya, he told me that “our generation is the one when things really changed. We became Westernized, and we had lots of money. Before, Japan was poor, families were poor, and the kimono was nothing special.” But now the kimono is special, and more than being special, it is different. And it is different because of *kimono-banare*, the drift away from the kimono. Clothing has attracted a great deal of attention in anthropology, and rightly so, for its unique position quite literally on the boundary between the internal self and the outside social world (Turner 1980, 112). The communicative ability of clothing could not be more clearly manifested by the duty kimono’s messages about the wearer’s status: as a young unmarried woman, as the mother of a bride, as a tea ceremony practitioner, etc. Western clothes, of course, also have this communicative function. Japanese shoppers bring to the table something new when they shop for fashion kimonos: they choose them not because they need them, but simply because they want them. The motivation is the wish to own a kimono for oneself, one’s own sense of fashion, rather than provide a daughter with a *furisode*, or to have the correct kimono for a New Year’s tea ceremony. The people who choose kimonos do so because they want to have the object; to wear it, and possibly, to collect it.

By choosing to sometimes wear the kimono, Japanese people are not so much moving away from their Western wardrobe, but integrating the kimono into the Western wardrobe, buying kimonos in much the same way as one would buy Western clothes: looking for something which pleases a personal sense of aesthetic, something that fits, physically and emotionally, something that “feels like me.” Daniel Miller argues against a Eurocentric perception of clothing which views clothes as “superficial,” serving to hide or disguise the real self. Rather, he argues that “clothing plays a considerable and active part in constituting the particular experience of the self” (Miller 2010, 40). By getting to know the kimono, learning to wrap it around their bodies and securing the obi around their waists (women) or hips (men), looking at themselves in the mirror, getting frustrated, experiencing joy and satisfaction, giving up, starting again, creating communities of enthusiasts and turning to like-minded peers for reassurance, advice or inspiration, challenging or respecting convention, fearing or enjoying the gaze of others, people who choose the fashion kimono are engaged in an exploration of the self that cannot be accessed through Western clothes because the materiality of the kimono, its parts and its cultural associations are so very different from Western clothes. By taking Miller’s argument that clothes are an exploration of the self, it becomes more readily
apparent why the kimono appeals: it has a wealth of meanings it can express: a borrowed obi is a link to a friend, a mother’s kimono is a legacy, a second-hand kimono is both vintage chic and bargain, the bright lining depicting tigers and hawks on a man’s dark haori overcoat is a bold statement of individuality that men have been making for over a hundred years. A kimono is also indubitably Japanese, a link to past generations. It looks and feels different. It has to be wrapped around the body and secured through a host of processes that, even for a casual fashion kimono, are quite complex. This way of wearing clothing feels alien to most Japanese people for whom Western clothes are the normal. Men even more than women are at risk of kikuzure (wardrobe malfunctions), since their kimonos are not fastened as tightly as women’s.

But to speak only of what meanings kimonos convey would be to limit our understanding of the kimono to its communicative qualities. I would argue that, hand in hand with this communicative power, the very materiality of the kimono is also what intrigues Japanese people and draws them to engaging with kimonos further. The kimono is, paradoxically, both rigid and fluid in terms of what it is as a material item. A kimono is always made the same way: panels of cloth cut from a single bolt, and, though tailored to fit the individual, there can be little to no compromise on the form of the kimono itself. However, the kimono is like a canvas. In terms of design, the sky is the limit. Its fixed form means that the kimono has to be tamed, or, possibly more accurately, you have to adjust to it, and wait for its logic to seep into the body. As Toby Slade writes, the kimono creates an understanding of the body as something to be wrapped (Slade 2009, 54). It cannot be easily worn, and anyone new to kimonos has to go through a phase of learning. Shop owner Yoshihide Shibakawa described this difficulty: “it’s quite mendokusai (a hassle). But some people like it because it is mendokusai, and they enjoy taking the time and making the effort to put their kimono outfits together.” The kimono requires work and effort, and that has an effect on the wearer’s feelings towards it, be they of frustration at failure or joy at success, or the quiet satisfaction of knowing what you are doing, of mastering a world that others have not accessed.

The kimono also changes the silhouette quite radically, and to look into the mirror while wearing one is to see a different self altogether. It can delve into the self and bring out feelings that the wearer did not know he or she had. In her book Why Women Wear What They Wear, Sophie Woodward argues that women go to considerable lengths to align “how I look” and “how I feel”: “aspects of a woman’s self-identity are externalized in the items of clothing in the wardrobe” (Woodward 2007, 67). Woodward draws on Alfred Gell’s concept of “personhood in aesthetic form” and the idea of partible personhood to explore how interpenetrated women’s clothes and their sense of self are. For Japanese people, choosing to wear a kimono, deciding to learn how to wear it and then make choices about “what looks right” is a phenomenally rich exploration of the self through clothing. The materiality of the kimono, its fluidity in terms of
what it can express through its patterns combines paradoxically with the uncompromising, unchanging nature of its shape. This paradox may well be what attracts people to the kimono. That sense of difference would not be possible without the phenomenon of *kimono-banare*. And because the kimono is wrapped around the body and like clothing and adornment everywhere forms the social skin, it affects the way people look at the wearer. The wearer may feel pride, worry, trepidation or any number of emotions. Wearing the kimono, whether casual or formal, is to stand out: “a decision to wear kimono is not casual. Kimono-clad women on a Japanese street reflect neither the nonchalance of Hindu housewives in saris nor the set-piece sentimentality of Heidis-in-dirndls. To wear a kimono is, inevitably, to make a statement” (Dalby 2001, 126). Wearing the kimono means negotiating the canon of kimono rules, and taking a stand with regard to the extent to which the wearer will respect them. Kyoko Onoda expressed this ambivalence towards the kimono rules: “I used to find [the rules] stressful when I was learning. It’s like an overgrown garden, rules everywhere! But they can actually be fun once you understand them.”

In an interesting turn of events, men are making a tentative but steady return into the kimono world, and they discover that they have a distinctive advantage over women: wearing a kimono is a much simpler process for men.

This is mainly down to the fact that men’s obis are about a third of the width of a woman’s, making them much easier to tie. For young men (and women too), this return to *wafuku* is spearheaded by the *yukata*, the simple summer kimono that was originally a bathrobe. A much simpler garment than the kimono (mainly because it does not require an underkimono and the obi is much easier to tie), the yukata is gaining ever-increasing popularity at summer festivals and casual summer events such as beer gardens. For many people who wear the kimono, starting with the yukata is a natural transition towards the more complex kimono.

### New Sources of Knowledge

There are many women in their 50s and 60s who, ashamed of their lack of knowledge about the kimono, seek out *kitsuke* (kimono dressing) schools in the hope of finally mastering the “duty” kimono. Dalby argues that kimono academies had a significant role to play in the establishment of the duty kimono as the dominant form of *wafuku*:

the heavily advertised kimono schools have significantly strengthened the current social consensus on how a kimono is supposed to be worn. At the same time, by turning kimono into an object of study, these schools have contributed to its stiff, mannered style. [...] The version of kimono propagated by the kimono academies is utterly dominated by propriety. The goal is to achieve a demeanor of equanimity and composure by dressing correctly. (Dalby 2001, 135)
Each school had their own particular way of teaching, giving rise to *ryūha* (schools) with specific ways of dressing that codify every gesture. These can be so different that if you are trained in one particular style, it can be very difficult to assimilate knowledge from a different style. To give a personal example, in 2013, I spent half a year learning to wear the kimono from a teacher belonging to The Cultural Foundation for Promoting the National Dress of Japan, a nationwide network of 200 classrooms across 16 prefectures founded in 1973. During my fieldwork, I asked to be allowed into a local classroom belonging to a different academy, the Sōdō Reiho Kimono Gakuin, which possesses a much larger network than the Cultural Foundation. Everything was different, right down to the types of belts that the academy uses to keep the kimono in place. The Sōdō teacher was rather unimpressed with my use of a belt with alligator clips, a staple tool of the Cultural Foundation, which she had never seen before. I found the style so different that I felt as though I was starting from scratch again.

The codification of rules by the academies made it, if anything, even harder for women to master the kimono and share knowledge, and indeed that may have been the point, in order to keep the clients coming back for more lessons, encouraging them to take exams and acquire qualifications, based on the style of tea ceremony and flower arranging schools. Since the 1990s, *kitsuke* classes have difficulty attracting women younger than 50. As explained in the previous section of this article, the kimono is much less of an obligation than it used to be for women growing up in the postwar period. This, I argue, is not necessarily a negative development, because it means that people are more likely to choose to wear kimonos because they want to, rather than because they have to. Women in their late 30s and early 40s are less bound than their forebears by the image of what a kimono should be. They have grown up in an era where the kimono began to be seen less and less as something that must be worn to attend weddings or funerals. It is now quite acceptable to go to a wedding in a dress and a funeral in a black suit. In addition, their mothers may well have not known enough to teach them about the kimono, and there has been a shift in how the transfer of knowledge about the kimono takes place in Japanese society. Originally, knowledge was transmitted from mother to daughter, and then when Western clothes became everyday wear, kimono shops and *kitsuke* academies took over the task of teaching women how to wear the duty kimono. Nowadays, however, people have access to a plethora of sources of information that bypass the *kitsuke* academies completely. Sheila Cliffe argues that the Internet has played a crucial role in the revival of the kimono. The number of hits for “kimono blog” (in Japanese) on the Safari search engine increased from 2,820,000 in 2008 to 24,700,000 in 2012. Furthermore, she notes that formal kimono blogs are outnumbered by casual kimono (*fudangi*) kimono blogs ten to one, suggesting that the information people search for revolves mainly around non-formal kimono (Cliffe 2013, 93). In addition, kimonos, obis, underkimonos and all associated belts and items are available on Amazon, Rakuten, Yahoo and
many other sites. In order not to miss out on the sales through the Internet, savvy shop owners open their own Internet retail sites. As a result of this small but significant swing towards the kimono worn as fashion, a number of shops have broken from the business model which sells expensive duty kimonos and focused their sales strategies on the casual kimono instead.

There are other sources of knowledge in addition to the Internet. Japan is a huge producer of fashion magazines, and there is a significant number of kimono magazines among them (Milhaupt 2014, 8–9). Many feature the classic “duty” silk kimono, such as *Utsukushii Kimono* (Beautiful Kimono), but others are aimed at young women hungry for a *kawaii* (cute) kimono look. One example is *Kimono Hime* (Kimono Princess), a showcase for different kimono styles unafraid to blend Western fashion (such as hiking up the hem of the kimono around the knees and wearing boots or shoes) and frequently arranging kimono styles according to a theme, such as Alice in Wonderland. Kimonos lend themselves particularly well to this kind of “fashion storytelling” because of the number of parts involved in a kimono outfit and the possibilities for arranging them differently. A Western clothes outfit might have, at the most, four or five parts (shoes, dress/trousers/skirt, top, coat, etc.), but a kimono might have as many as 10 or more. The kimono and obi are naturally the main event, but the obi sash, obi belt, *han’eri* (underkimono collar), *netsuke* (belt decoration), *nagajuban* (underkimono), the color of which is slightly visible at the sleeves, all provide ample room for inspiration. Somewhere between *Utsukushii Kimono* and *Kimono Hime* is the magazine *Nanaoh*, which offers down-to-earth tips on choice of fabric and color, storage and proper care, while also featuring the fashion spreads that make *Kimono Hime* popular. I interviewed Yasuko Suzuki, editor-in-chief of *Nanaoh*, and she told me that she envisioned *Nanaoh* as “giving the kind of advice about the kimono that our mothers weren’t able to give us.” *Nanaoh* does not target a particular audience other than that which is interested in the kimono, and is read across the generations, unlike *Kimono Hime* or *Utsukushii Kimono*, which clearly target a particular demographic.

In addition to magazines, there are many popular authors who write on the topic of kimono and what they refer to as *kimono seikatsu* (kimono lifestyle), encouraging their (usually female) audience to wear the kimono. A major figure in this genre is kimono fashion guru Ima Kikuchi. A prolific writer, Ima-san (as she is known) has gained a wide readership through her humorous writing style filled with illustrations which she herself has penned. Her mission is to crack the difficulties and, as she would argue, misconceptions, surrounding the kimono, in order to open up the kimono as a fashion choice for more Japanese people. The first way in which she does this is by transmitting her own enthusiasm about the kimono. She has worn the kimono every day for many years, and she uses her work as a platform to argue for the kimono as casual wear, something that can be worn every day, and that since she wears the kimono every day she is well placed to give advice. A master of catchphrases and one-liners, she tells her
audience that “a kimono makes a woman 30 per cent more beautiful!” and “wearing Western clothes most days and kimono from time to time is the tastiest (lit.) fashion for grown-ups!” She is a cotton and linen enthusiast, and she offers many short-cuts and tips aimed at making kimono wear easier and cheaper, such as dispensing with rules regarding at what time of year it is appropriate to wear unlined kimonos, arguing instead that people should wear what feels comfortable, instead of obeying the rules for the sake of rules. She is also a vocal critic of the kimono industry. She authored a book entitled *Kikuchi Ima ga Tsutaetai! Katte ha Ikenai Kimono to Kimono Mawari* (*Kikuchi Ima wants to tell you! Kimonos and kimono accessories that you shouldn’t buy*) in which she tells her readers to avoid shops that make them uncomfortable and items that will be expensive/difficult to use. She gives her readers tips to detect dishonest sales tactics in which salespeople try to corral their customers into buying. A cartoon in her book reads, “1 million yen is actually a really good price for this!” (Kikuchi 2013, 67, 15). This is a typical sales strategy, in which salespeople use the kimono’s hazy pricing system to argue that the quality of a kimono is worth the cost. Since the client is often unsure about the kimono’s real virtues, they can be swayed into believing the shop owner. Ima-san does not stop at writing, however. She has her own kimono fashion line, called Skala3, which she created in collaboration with Shūya Awano, the owner of a weaving workshop in her hometown of Yonezawa. She also works in collaboration with Tansu-ya, the largest chain of second-hand kimonos in Japan, and she owns a second-hand shop in Tokyo. In addition, she is also a member of the Ministry of Trade, Economy and Industry’s Special Committee on the Revival of Japanese Dress. Having met her in person and been a witness to the way her engaging and forceful personality draws crowds at her talks, I can attest to her ever-growing fan base and her effect on them.

The spread of the Internet, magazines and publications have diversified sources of knowledge about the kimono for Japanese people and offered alternatives to the ailing duty kimono. Charismatic figures such as Ima-san have fostered trends and even moral positions towards the kimono, positioning the kimono as both fashion and lifestyle choice.

**Vintage Appeal: Second-hand Kimono Shops**

A third factor that contributed to the renewed popularity of the kimono as fashion is the spread of second-hand kimono shops in the late twentieth century. Second-hand kimono shops appeared when people, at a loss as to what to do with all the kimonos they had at home and no longer used, began to sell them.

Yasuko Suzuki, editor-in-chief of the kimono fashion magazine *Nanaoh*, published a work in English entitled *The New Kimono: From Vintage Fashion to Everyday Chic*. Partly intended to showcase various fashion styles and give practical tips in English on how to wear the kimono, the
Julie Valk

book also offers an insight into why the kimono rose again in the early 2000s:

In 2001, I started to study tea ceremony. I wanted a kimono, but I couldn’t afford a new one. Some of the other women in my class pointed me in the direction of local vintage and secondhand kimono shops. It was then that I realized a “kimono boom” had begun among women in their twenties, thirties, and forties, who were developing an interest in kimono as everyday fashion rather than ceremonial wear, and particularly in vintage kimono that could be bought cheaply and customized. (Suzuki 2011, 7)

The first reason that second-hand kimonos are popular is that they are much cheaper than tailor-made kimonos. There is a vast price gap between bespoke kimonos and second-hand kimonos. While a kimono made to order could cost upwards of 300,000 yen (2614 dollars), a second-hand kimono will usually be sold for about 500 yen (less than 5 dollars), although high quality or rare kimonos may fetch a higher price. This means that women interested in kimonos but unsure of how willing they are to spend are likely to experiment with second-hand kimonos since the financial commitment is roughly the same as with Western clothes. And price is not the only thing that second-hand shops have in common with Western clothes. Since second-hand kimonos are already “made up,” customers buy them off the shelf in the same way they would buy Western clothes. They do not go into these shops expecting to have a kimono made from scratch using a tanmono, and as a result the atmosphere of these shops tends to be more like a “regular” clothes shop and less like a kimono shop. Between December 2015 and March 2016, I worked once a week in a second-hand shop called Go-Ichi-Maru in central Toyota, to which I have referred previously in this article. The Goto family owned both a traditional shop that had been running for 120 years, and four different second-hand shops they opened in the early 2000s. I asked the owner’s mother whether there was a difference between their original shop and their new second-hand shops. She replied that

they are completely different. They have to be different for the clients. In a way, it’s easier at the second-hand shops. People feel like they can just walk in, and I don’t have to stand on ceremony so much. The items are different, the relationship with the clients is different.

Second-hand shopping for kimonos is altogether a more relaxed affair, and since second-hand kimono shops may be located in shopping centers, which was the case with Go-Ichi-Maru, customers can drop in for a look without having to commit to a purchase. Second-hand shops are, in a sense, a product of the recession. People gave away or sold their kimonos,
and this enabled second-hand shops and even chains to be set up. Tracy Diane Cassidy and Hannah Rose Bennett argue that in times of economic difficulty, shoppers in the UK turn to second-hand clothes and vintage as an affordable alternative to high street fashion (Cassidy and Bennett 2012, 243). In addition, it can be argued that buying vintage kimonos may be an act of resistance, conscious or unconscious, against the impersonal “fast fashion” of regular Western clothing stores. Kimonos are thought to be unique (although in many cases not, since several bolts will have circulated), but worn kimonos are even more so since they are likely to carry with them patterns and an “aura” associated with their time. In Old Clothes, New Looks, Alexandra Palmer has argued that vintage shoppers in the West are engaged in a nostalgic search for rarity and authenticity which, in many ways, is at odds with fast fashion (Palmer and Clark 2005).

There is an appeal besides the low price of the wares and the more relaxed atmosphere. Some shoppers are looking for a bargain, but others are looking for a specific vintage look. Inspired by the arrangements in fashion magazines such as Kimono Hime, young women specifically seek out Taisho era (1912–1926) kimonos, attracted to the bold, colorful patterns and unusual textiles such as *meisen* (Milhaupt 2014, 8). Shopping for vintage clothes has been identified as expressing a form of nostalgia for the past (Cassidy and Bennett 2012; Veenstra and Kuipers 2013), and in Japan this may very well be particularly the case, since kimonos are not only identified with the past but with a pre-Western Japanese past. However, Aleit Veenstra and Giselinde Kuipers identify a trend in twenty-first-century consumer patterns across developed nations in which buyers have shown preference for vintage goods and items that are identified with—though may not necessarily be from—the past (Veenstra and Kuipers 2013, 356). Whether it is the shrewd housewife on the hunt for a fine kimono at a knock-down price, or the young woman in her early 20s dreaming of 1920s glamour, Japanese vintage kimono shoppers are engaged in a journey of self-discovery and self-exploration: “the search is about shopping for identities, constructing images that include presenting status and identities in public, as well as revealing and concealing our private selves” (DeLong, Heinemann, and Reiley 2005, 27).

**The New Suppliers of the Casual Kimono**

So far I have explored how the kimono’s separation from day-to-day life has paradoxically enhanced its appeal for a generation who grew up without intimate understanding of the kimono, how sources of knowledge about the kimono have diversified and how second-hand kimonos offer new possibilities for the kimono as vintage fashion. But what of the kimono industry itself? To what extent has the industry been able to adapt to the trend away from the kimono as duty and towards the kimono as fashion? The answer is that, for now, only a small fraction of the industry has followed the trend. One of those who has, Yoshihide Shibakawa, third-
generation owner of the shop Azumaya, is an excellent example of a shop owner who has not just adapted, but become part of the trend towards fashion itself. Ten years ago, when he took over from his father, he changed his attitude to the kimono and to salesmanship:

I didn’t used to like kimonos really. I just wanted to make money, so I was happy if I could sell bolts that cost 300,000 yen (2614 dollars) or more. But that all changed when I decided that, as a kimono shop, we should all start wearing the kimono.

It is not in fact common for kimono shops owners to wear kimono. Perhaps the okami-san (wife or mother of the owner) would, but the men almost always wear suits. “That’s when I really understood about the kimono,” he said. “That’s when I grew to love the kimono. For me it’s the number one fashion in the world.” This revelation was the basis of his change in strategy in marketing and salesmanship. He wanted his shop to have a different image.

As discussed in the previous section, kimono shops are widely perceived as places entered only after the customer has thoroughly prepared themselves. At the very least, most Japanese people would be worried about being pushed into buying something. It is certainly not considered to be a relaxing experience. He wanted to distance himself from that kind of shop as much as possible. “My job is to sell anshin (reassurance),” he told me. He turned his shop into a space where people could just drop in if they felt like it, even if they had nothing they wanted to buy. He stands out from other shops both through his philosophy of the kimono as fashion, but also by his willingness to do things that other shops cannot, or will not, do. One example includes taking apart zōri shoes and putting them back together. He taught himself and bought the tools so that he could do it in his shop without resorting to a specialist. His father cuts bolts of cloth according to the customer’s measurements. All this reduces costs and allows them to bring down their prices, increasing their positive image among their clients as honest and hardworking. In addition, he is a savvy user of new technologies. He maintains a presence on the Internet with a website, a popular retail website, a YouTube channel and weekly Internet TV broadcast. Through Twitter and Facebook he has built a network of like-minded shop owners, retailers, fashion critics, craftspeople and customers, attracting himself a small but fervent group of casual kimono aficionados. In doing so, he has earned the trust of Ima-san, discussed above, and she in turn publicizes his shop in her work. Like her, he is a member of the Special Committee on the Revival of Japanese Dress, and with the support of his network he regularly organizes large-scale kimono events, such as the Kimono Salone event, which took place in September and October 2015.

However, he estimates that only about 1% of shop owners had started marketing the kimono as fashion the way that he has. His take on the kimono fashion is still anathema to many kimono providers who see him and his network as altering the very substance of kimono culture itself.
Manami Okazaki, in her book *Kimono Now*, sums up the current rift in the kimono industry as follows:

In the contemporary kimono industry there are, by and large, two parallel factions. The first are the traditional makers who cater to a clientele that wear kimonos mostly for formal occasions: for example, the opulent *furisode* worn by 20-year-old girls on their Coming-of-Age Day, the *uchikake* or *hiki-furisode* that are worn at weddings or the *mofuku* that are worn at funerals. [...] Existing alongside these orthodox types are the modern kimono aficionados. [...] Their clientele are not interested in national or ethnic dress. They consider kimonos a kind of fashion, and the shops that cater to these people see themselves as boutiques. (Okazaki 2015, 9–12)

The shift made by Yoshihide Shibakawa and other like-minded kimono shop owners is still very recent, and more may yet follow him. In order to do so, however, suppliers will have to adapt to the needs of their new clientele: good branding, lower prices and an emphasis on fashion. They will have to change their marketing and salesmanship styles, integrate the Internet and social networks into their strategies and keep abreast of the trends and wishes of their customers—in other words, be trend-setters as well as suppliers. How many will be able—and willing—to make this shift remains to be seen.

In this article, I have explored how the kimono’s role has shifted from one of “duty,” in which kimonos had to be provided for bridal trousseaus and coming of age ceremonies, to a part of fashion which Japanese people wear because they choose to, rather than because they have to. I argued how the economic crash of the 1990s and the changing social practices surrounding marriage combined to undermine the formal kimono. Further, I argued how the industry’s disproportionate focus on the formal kimono led to the industry suffering substantial losses. The image of the kimono as an almost exclusively formal garment losing its hold on the Japanese mind allowed people interested in wearing it to bring the sensibilities they would apply to Western clothing fashion and start wearing the kimono as part of their Western wardrobe, negotiating the materiality of the kimono and the canon of rules as they see fit—respecting or contravening the established way of wearing the kimono. There is little doubt that the industry is struggling: the market size for the industry in 2015 was 280.5 billion yen, a mere 10% of what it was in the mid-1970s. However, I argue that a shift away from “duty” and towards fashion will ensure the continued existence of the kimono, albeit perhaps on a smaller scale. This changing role is also changing the nature of the industry, as the case of Yoshihide Shibakawa’s shop Azumaya shows. While in terms of numbers, the kimono industry seems to be floundering, this crisis has a generative side in that it has enabled the rise of the kimono as fashion by stimulating the industry to change and adapt to a growing demand for fashionable kimonos. I conclude with a passage from Okazaki’s book *Kimono Now*:
While the kimono industry is struggling, times of adversity can create brilliance. For some, this is the most exciting time ever for kimonos. There is a frenetic energy in the industry, and the determination of the people in the scene is exhilarating. The current generation has a huge responsibility on their shoulders to ensure that the world of kimonos lasts for another era. Contemporary kimono makers are among the most cutting-edge, creative visionaries in Japan today. (Okazaki 2015, 12)

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Notes

1. A celebration in which girls aged three and seven, and boys aged three and five are celebrated, dressed in traditional clothes and taken to local shrines.
4. Meisen is a form of mechanized ikat weaving.
5. From the Yano Research Institute.
6. All translations from Japanese provided by the author. Japanese names are introduced following English conventions (first name + last name) and thereafter as last name + san as they are known to me in Japanese.
7. All photographs taken by the author.
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