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## **Picturing the Transformation of a Nation's Textile Traditions: Meiji Era Woodblock Prints**

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Japan kept to herself for many years, shunning foreigners and trading only with the Chinese and Dutch for raw materials and items not available on the Japanese islands. In 1853, American Commodore Matthew Perry sailed into Tokyo harbor and forced the issue. The American presence in Tokyo Harbor had the unintended consequences of exposing how weak the Shogunate had become and provided momentum to a movement to restore the Emperor. The Americans signed a treaty for trading concessions in 1854 and an American Consul was installed. In 1858, under duress, treaties were signed with Britain, Russia, Germany and France. This brought many foreigners to Japan, including the wives and daughters of the merchants and exposure to all things Western – especially technology and dress.

In the meantime, Anglo-French forces in the Second Opium War resoundingly defeated China in 1860. This show of supreme power by the West over their Chinese neighbor shocked Japan (Runkle 1976). As the leaders of Japan began to observe Westerners closely, they began to understand that Japan was being left behind other nations militarily and economically. In reaction to this, the rush to Westernize and thus modernize was initiated.

The overthrow of the Shogun in 1867 was the beginning of political modernization. The emperor was restored to power. During the Tokugawa Era the emperor had played only a symbolic and ceremonial role, leaving all governing to the Shogun and his samurai. Emperor Mutsuhito was fifteen years old at the time of the restoration. His regents were young samurai who were well aware of the importance of competing with the West on their own terms; they understood that they would need to catch up scientifically and industrially or they would not be able to survive as a nation. So, they encouraged the young emperor to learn the ways of the West, even as they made political and economic decisions which paved the way to open the country.

The Emperor himself, selected the name by which his reign should be known, he chose *Meiji* because of its meaning – enlightened rule. The government used the rallying cry “Bummei Kaika - Civilization and Enlightenment”. The term civilization meant dismantling the old feudal system and relaxing the rigid class structure. The government committed itself to recruiting men of talent rather than relying on the old hereditary structure. The term enlightenment meant Westernization. European and American ways were considered advanced, while traditional Japanese ways were considered backward (Liddell 1989).

Young Japanese men were sent to the West to learn all they could, and foreign technicians were brought to Japan to assist in a crash program of modernization (Runkle 1976). All this contact with the West and Westerners brought their cultural differences

into sharp focus. While change was happening rapidly in all areas of society, the adoption of western clothing styles by the Japanese was used as a symbol of the acceptance of Western cultural ideas. Whether these style changes also indicate a change in beliefs and/or a change in self-identity is a topic for study.

This paper proposes to examine changes in the Japanese textile industry due to the adoption of Western style clothing during the Meiji era in Japan. The goal of this paper is to show that the changes in dress both symbolized and effected significant change in economic, social, political and cultural attitudes. First hand accounts from both Westerners and native Japanese of clothing changes and visual documentation of those changes through photographs, and woodblock prints will be used to illustrate these changes.

One of the richest sources of visual material covering this era is the Lincoln E. Kirstein collection of about 200 woodblock prints currently owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City (Meech-Pekarkik 1986). The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston also owns a collection of prints from this era, the Sharf Collection of Meiji prints which primarily depicts military events of the time (de Sabato Swinton 1991).

Woodblock prints are a traditional Japanese art in which a woodblock, or series of wood blocks are carved with an image, and then are inked and the image transferred to handmade Japanese paper. These were easy to mass-produce and usually featured documentary or topical subjects in this time period. During the nineteenth century they met the demand of the growing middle class Japanese population for an inexpensive art form. The Japanese bought prints of the foreigners and their homes and ships. The prints from this era were generally done by obscure artists and art students, but often faithfully depict scenes in Japan or reproduce scenes from foreign language newspapers (Meech-Pekarkik 1986). Thus, they serve as a visual record of the changes taking place in society.

The government of Japan during Emperor Mutsuhito's reign made a conscious effort to modernize the country. Dress reform was one small part of a larger overall scheme to achieve equality with the powers of Europe and North America. Runkle commented:

Contrary to some impressions ... the Japanese did not modernize purely out of sudden discovery of and admiration for Western civilization. Japan sought after Western technology and methods largely out of fear – fear for its very survival as a nation and society, fear that it would otherwise be chewed to bits like China by the then-voracious imperial appetites of the Western powers (Runkle 1976).

The government ministers decided that they needed to learn everything they could about the West in order to understand the foreigners, protect Japan from further demands and win back the independence and dignity that had been given away with the trade treaties. They set out to create a strong, modern Japan (Bolitho 1977). Reischauer cites the tradition of Japanese borrowing from China and a pattern of awareness that things could usefully be learned from abroad as reasons why the Japanese were so easily able to adopt Western ways and technologies. He comments: The Japanese “quickly seized on the idea that the best way to make their country secure from the West was to modernize it along Western lines, and they were willing to do anything necessary to achieve this goal” (Reischauer 1974). Embracing the new culture brought not only interesting new ideas and styles but also the power of the industrial revolution and the strength of the capitalist

structure of the modern nation-state. This made the desire to adopt the new culture even more enticing (Daikichi 1985). Those in power also understood an important economic principle – economic modernization was dependent on the expansion and diversification of traditional supply and demand (Nakagawa and Rosovsky 1963). What better way to expand and diversify than to create a demand for Western consumer goods?

Dress reform was used by the government as a way to propose, initiate, display and enforce social change (McCracken 1988). Clothing can be used to establish communication and to bridge a psychological gap between people (Dichter 1985). Communication via clothing was used to inform the foreigners that Japan was going to become their equal in a very short time, and to bring the native population along in the modernization in a non-threatening manner. The first regulation of the Meiji era to concern clothing was dated November 1872. The Proclamation of the Chancellery ordered the “substitution of Western dress for the ceremonial robe and crown hitherto worn by noblemen at court.” In an imperial rescript of 1871 the Emperor proclaimed:

The national polity is indomitable, but manners and customs should be adaptable. We greatly regret that the uniform of our court has been established following the Chinese custom, and it has become exceedingly effeminate in style and character. We should no longer appear before the people in these effeminate styles, and we have therefore decided to reform dress regulations entirely (Nakagawa and Rosovsky 1963).

There was some protest, but according to Yanagida, the desire to imitate the West was irresistible (Yanagida 1957). The government strongly urged major and minor officials to adopt Western dress, and it happened gradually with suits appearing with wooden geta, and bowler hats being worn with kimono. “A number of rather curious combinations of old and new were tried and discarded” before Western dress became the standard (Yanagida 1957).

In the early Meiji years, combinations of traditional and Western were common. Dalby reports about a white linen frock coat in the Bunka Gakkuen Museum of Fashion in Tokyo: “from the front it appears to be a faithful copy of a dapper Western style from 1870. Yet, embroidered at the center back seam is a family crest of sparrows and bamboo, just as one would expect on a formal kimono” (Dalby 2001). The owner of the coat felt the need to display his family heritage and thus his status even as he asserted his enlightenment by wearing the frock coat. Especially in the early years, tailored, wool clothing was very expensive and only the very wealthy could afford an entire outfit. But, it was still a powerful political message if only a few pieces were worn. Hats, umbrellas, flannel shawls were easy to obtain and add to the traditional costume. Leather shoes or a pocket watch could be added if one had the cash (Dalby 2001). Ashmead reports an 1896 traveler’s description of a man in Western dress: they “usually have a blue coat, a pink vest, lavender trousers, a red necktie, a green hat and if they can find a shirt of another color they put it on” (Ashmead 1987). Daikichi argues that the Japanese partial appropriation of the Western culture brought about an extended period of surface imitation and ambiguity, but allowed for slow assimilation as opposed to outright resistance as seen in other cultures such as China and India (Daikichi 1985).

As early as the 1850s some units of the Army and Navy began to adopt Western style uniforms (Nakagawa and Rosovsky 1963). In 1866, wool uniforms were adopted for the

entire army. Soldiers in training were issued “Western-style tubular sleeves and camp breeches” and allowed to wear them even in their leisure hours (Shibusawa 1958). In 1870, Naval Academy cadets wore uniforms modeled after British military styles, and Army cadets wore uniforms in the French style as seen in photos from Mrs. Hugh Fraser’s book (Fraser 1899).

Production of these uniforms was an industrial challenge. At first, the fabric needed to be imported from Europe and tailors had to be induced to come to Japan to make the uniforms and to train Japanese in the art of tailoring fitted clothing with inset “tubular sleeves” and crotch seams. Between 1859 and 1868, imports of woolen fabrics for the army and navy amounted to between 20 and 40 percent of total imports (Nakagawa and Rosovsky 1963)

In the late 1850s and 1860s there were a few foreign tailors catering to the small foreign settlements. Some of the establishments took Japanese apprentices, and they in turn became the first native entrepreneurs in this trade. In 1886 the Association of Merchants and Manufacturers of Western Suits was founded in Tokyo with 123 members (Nakagawa and Rosovsky 1963). After the Western jacket and trousers were found to be efficient for soldiers, farmers began to adopt them, not because of the Western style, but because of the practicality of them (Yanagida 1957). Men released from service in the military to return to the rural areas, often continued to wear Western sweat shirts and other articles from their military service (Shibusawa 1958). Government officials were early adopters because by wearing Western dress, the officials of the government were clearly communicating their desire for social interaction with the West on an equal footing. Mailmen and policemen adopted Western style uniforms in 1871 and the workers on the National Railway adopted uniforms in 1872 (Nakagawa and Rosovsky 1963). After the imperial rescript male court fashion was based on drawings of Prussian, Austrian, English and Italian uniforms (Meech-Pekarkik 1986).

In 1877 the symbolism of the old versus the new was clearly displayed in the outcome of the Satsuma Rebellion. Rebel leader Saigo Takamori, from the southern province of Satsuma, led his traditionally attired samurai warriors in battle against the Emperor’s forces in an attempt to force a return to the shogunate. The government forces, dressed in wool jacket and trousers and wearing leather shoes easily defeated the rebels in their silks and sandals (Dalby 2001).

By the late 1880s middle and upper class men had adopted trousers for regular public wear. The newspaper *Yomiuri shimbun* wrote in 1888: “the convenience of crisply worn Western clothing goes without saying. Now that Japan is a military nation, we think it particularly commendable that the wearing of Western clothes had increased” (Dalby 2001). By this decade too, the odd mixtures of Western and Japanese had nearly disappeared. The cost of Western style clothing had decreased with the increased ability to produce it within Japan. The understanding of what to wear with what had increased. The need to show enlightenment by even one Western accessory had disappeared, and even rural men might wear a suit for a very formal occasion. However, men continued to wear traditional clothing in the home, so for men, leisurewear became synonymous with kimono. The spread of Western clothing gradually increased – always from the top down – and total consumption of woolen fabrics reached 3 million yards in 1898 (Nakagawa

and Rosovsky 1963). At the beginning of the twentieth century, Western style dress was clearly established as a symbol of social dignity and progressiveness, and still proved to be a good indication that the wearer was publicly employed (Nakagawa and Rosovsky 1963).

In the old style of dress, especially during the Tokugawa period, it was easy to tell the status of an individual at a glance simply by the style, cut, color and texture of his clothing and his hairstyle. When the sumptuary laws were abolished in the Meiji era, the inability to immediately tell the status of a stranger was revolutionary and frightening indeed. As Western dress was adopted by government officials, such as postmen, railway workers, policemen and military men, it became easy to tell the employment or function of a person at a glance, but not necessarily his social rank (Shibusawa 1958). The wearing of a uniform became a badge of identification, in a manner very similar to the way that the old sumptuary laws aided in social class identification. The Japanese language is very specific in the honorific words to be used for certain individuals. The loss of the immediate identifiers of the old style clothing may have caused some linguistically embarrassing moments. During this same period, according to Shibusawa, merchants began to clothe themselves in uniforms similar to government officials. In this way they could “establish confidence in themselves among their prospective customers” (Shibusawa 1958). The Japanese found the uniform to aid in the development of a new type of class-consciousness, and the new ability of individuals to better themselves. Uniforms were even adopted by private businesses and the Japanese fascination with uniforms continues to the post-modern era. The uniform served to increase individual’s sense of belonging to a group and may have played a part in restraining individual freedom of action. In the Meiji era some women in factories and nurses wore uniforms, but it was much less common to find women in them.

The changes in taste for clothing styles also had a great effect on the industrial and economic structure of the domestic economy (Nakagawa and Rosovsky 1963). Wool textiles were important in following this economic change along with military and industrial products. Before the Meiji era, woollens were treated as a luxury commodity, much like furs in the west. The Japanese wool industry developed parallel with the gradual Westernization of clothing, wool was practically unknown in Japan prior to the restoration.

The demand for woollen fabrics for uniforms was the impetus for the government to support a strong, rapid industrialization of the textile industry. Both the availability of cheap imported raw cotton and the demand by Westerners for Japanese silk also spurred the growth of the entire textile industry. Just as in England, the beginning of the industrial revolution in Japan was due to a huge increase in demand for new fibers and fabrics (Dalby 2001). Nakagawa and Rosovsky note that the development of the wool industry in Japan closely paralleled that of the Westernization of clothing (Nakagawa and Rosovsky 1963). Technological innovation in the textile industry was just the starting point for innovation throughout the economy.

The first woollen mill in Japan was established in a Tokyo suburb in 1878 as part of a general program to introduce new industries. The Senju woollen mill was the first company to introduce an entirely new branch of an industry to the country and it was

extremely successful, continuing to be an important center of textile industry for many years. The government invested in the new industry in order to reduce the dependence on foreign wool and to encourage the entry of private industry into the field. The government's purposes at the time were quite clear. It wanted to improve Japan's foreign exchange position by reducing the import of wool cloth, and to stimulate further development of the industry by private enterprise (Nakagawa and Rosovsky 1963).

The technical problems of producing wool textiles were formidable. Japan possessed no reservoir of experience for this kind of enterprise, especially because wool dyeing and finishing processes were much more complicated than those for cotton (Nakagawa and Rosovsky 1963). Inoue Shozo spent 1871-1878 in Germany becoming familiar with wool spinning, finishing and other techniques. Inoue subsequently received an appointment as a government engineer. He went to Germany again to purchase for the Senju mill: 6 carding and 6 spinning machines, 42 power looms, and napping and fulling mills. At the same time, he also hired two mechanical engineers and five workers. Annual production went up from 22,000 yards of woolen fabric in 1879, to 1,640,000 yards in 1904 (Nakagawa and Rosovsky 1963) (figure 1).

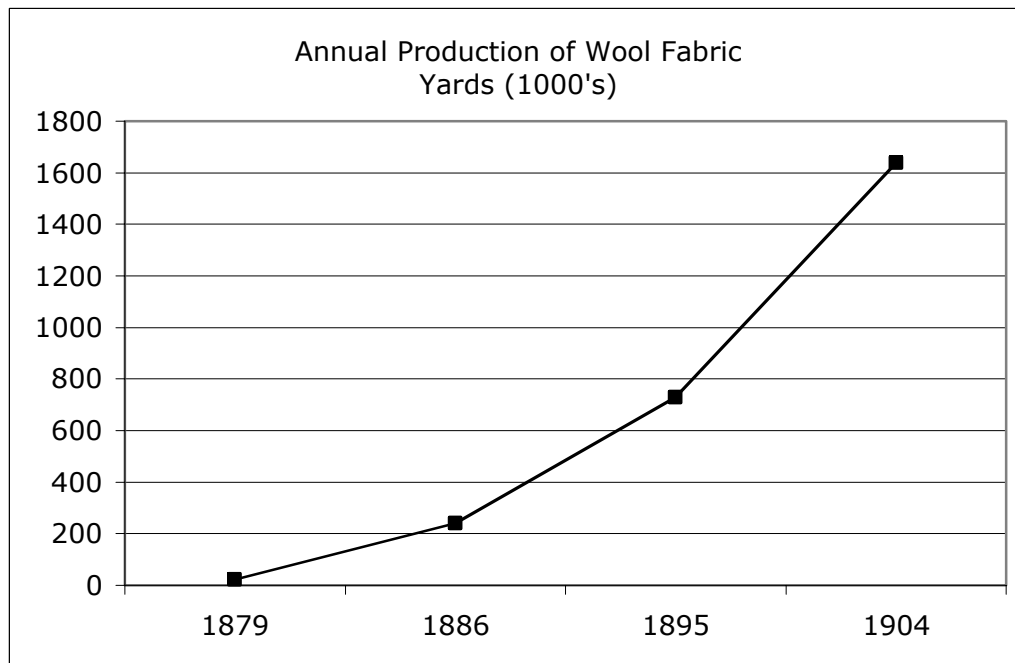


Figure 1

By the turn of the century, worsted fabrics increased in demand again. This increase was not due to an increase in the use of wool for western style garments but for use in traditional garments such as kimono. Winter accessories for kimono such as overcoats and *obi* had been made of woolens since the 1860s. But it was this fashion to use lightweight woolens for kimono that sparked a real increase in woolen imports and in demand for the local production. Worsted muslins, called muslin de laine, were printed using a special technique developed by a Japanese artisan in 1881. These Yuzen muslins became very fashionable items to own and wear. Forty percent of the total wool imports in 1896 were muslins (Nakagawa and Rosovsky 1963). Mechanization of the printing

process increased demand more, and created the need for domestic worsted mills. Women and children wore the muslins, men seemed to prefer imported serges from Germany. These fabrics eventually led to the establishment of worsted mills for men's suiting later in the twentieth century.

Traditionally Japanese clothing was made at home, by hand. Kimono seams were sewn by hand with large stitches, so that it could be taken apart easily for cleaning. The sewing machine fascinated the Japanese diplomats when they visited Philadelphia in 1860 (Meech-Pekarkik 1986). The group's interpreter brought the first machine back to Japan in 1860. It was a number of years later, though before it came into popular use. Singer sewing machines jumped into the new Japanese market by the mid-1880s, especially when women began to adopt Western dress. In early 1887, 685 singer machines were sold in Japan, while at the same time only 50 machines were sold in China (Meech-Pekarkik 1986).

Western style tailors continued to wear traditional kimono, but made and sold Western suits. The Naval Academy set up its own tailor shop in 1878 to make uniforms for the students. Western style clothing stores began to appear, some with foreign salesmen, at first they exclusively sold menswear (Shibusawa 1958).

Some upper class women moved to the western styles for formal and public occasions shortly after the empress issued an edict in 1887 requesting that women begin wearing the foreign clothing for formal and state occasions, but encouraging them to retain Japanese fabrics. The Shirokiya Clothing store in Tokyo added an English seamstress and Mitsui announced that they had three Western tailors, one of whom was a French couturier in 1888 (Meech-Pekarkik 1986).

In conclusion, The Meiji era was time of great change in Japan. The powers behind the Meiji restoration, decided that the best way to resist the onslaught by the West was to meet it on equal terms, by frantically catching up in terms of technology and militarization. The emulation of Western dress and manners by the government was a subtle message of change, a way to soften the message of the necessity of modernizing by hiding the political and economic agenda inside a cultural message delivered through the use of consumer goods (McCracken 1988). It was an especially effective message and the nation moved very rapidly towards modernization. Men were able to use their choice of Western dress to express their ideas, desires and beliefs in the future of Japan in world society (Wilson 1987). In a little under thirty years, Japan moved from a feudal, agrarian society, to a major military and industrial power. Dress served the government well as an "opportunity to fashion a new cultural concept through the selective use, novel combination and premeditated innovation" of styles and cultural meanings (McCracken 1988).

Western clothing was used for definition of social and political roles, communication of economic status and as a political symbol during this era (Roach and Eicher 1979). The Japanese government used dress and other consumer goods to convince the populace to accept cultural change. The economic power of industrialization was harnessed to create a military nation. And more importantly the economic power of consumer demand was used to create new industries and new technologies.



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