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# From Secular Garment to Sacred Object: Kosode Refashioned into Buddhist Altar Cloths and Banners

By Nobuhiko Maruyama  
National Museum of Japanese History

## Introduction

Altar cloths are rectangular cloths on which Buddhist offerings are placed. Generally, they are made with gorgeous textiles of gold *nishiki*, a multi-colored weft-patterned fabric. In the Momoyama and Edo periods from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, however, they were also made from refashioned *kosode*, an early type of *kimono*.

### 1. Banners and altar cloths remade from kosode

When a person died, his or her *kosode* were often donated to the family temple. The *kosode* were then remade into various religious objects such as altar cloths and banners for Buddhist ceremonies for the deceased. Most of the donated *kosode* were originally created for wealthy women and hence were made with superior materials.

Generally, *kosode* were used until they wore out. That is why few *kosode* remain today. *Kosode* that date to before the late-sixteenth century are especially rare. In contrast, *kosode* refashioned into altar cloths and banners are relatively well preserved in temples. They make up for a shortage of historical examples of *kosode*. Occasionally, an inscription on the altar cloth or banner gives important clues about the *kosode*'s date. This banner [fig.1] has an inscription indicating that it was made from a *katasuso kosode* in 1530. *Katasuso* is a *kosode* design with motifs only on the shoulders and skirt of the *kimono*. This is the oldest *tsujigahana* textile piece with an inscription that offers a clear date.

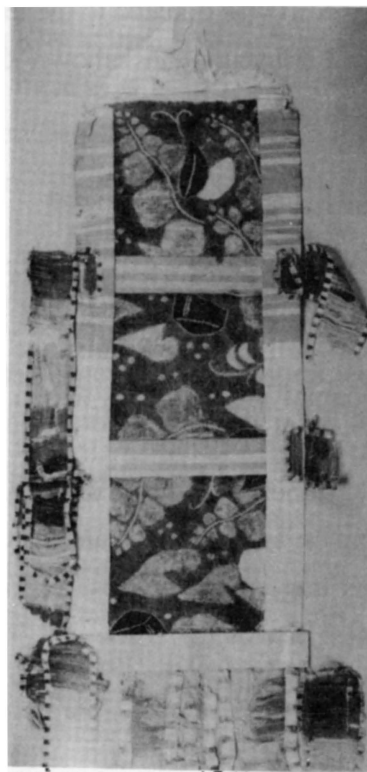


fig.1

*Tsujigahana* textiles flourished from the sixteenth to early seventeenth centuries. They combine a number of techniques such as the main technique of tie-dyeing by stitch-resist

method, drawing and shading in ink, applying red pigment by brush, and impressing *surihaku* gold leaf onto the textile. They also represent one of the earliest steps in the transition from woven decorative patterns to dyed ones.

Before the fourteenth century, plain *kosode* were worn as undergarments by the upper class and worn as outer garments by common people. In the Muromachi period (1392-1573) however, the upper class began to wear *kosode* as outerwear, as well. Tomiko Hino (1440-96), the wife of the eighth samurai general of the Muromachi shogunate, wore *kosode* as an outer garment when she went to a party in 1479 attended by Emperor Gotsuchimikado. This exceptional event provides evidence that *kosode* had taken root as outerwear before the fifteenth century. When *kosode* began to be used as outerwear, the number of decorative techniques increased. *Tsujigahana* is one decorative style that came out of this development.

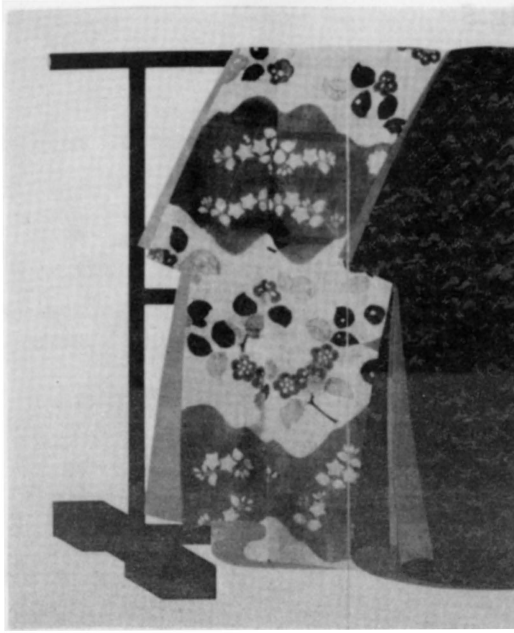
Another type of *kosode* textile which gradually replaced a style of decorative weaving was a textile made with an embroidery and gold leaf technique known as *nuihaku*. As the importance of *kosode* grew in society, the number donated to temples also increased. Thus *nuihaku kosode* robes have also been preserved in the form of altar cloths and banners, often with inscriptions. An altar cloth at Kodaiji-temple in Kyoto was originally a *nuihaku kosode*. It was donated to the temple in 1601. Shigeki Kawakami, a curator at the Kyoto National Museum, has shown that it is possible to reconstruct almost a whole *kosode* from this altar cloth.

## 2. The Nomura Collection

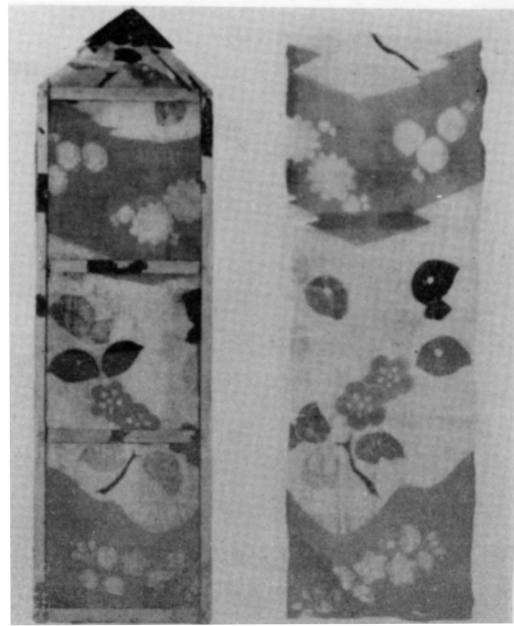
When discussing *kosode*, altar cloths, and banners, one must not overlook the *kosode* folding screens of the Nomura Collection (Chiba Prefecture). The Nomura Collection is one of the most well-known and also the largest collection of *kosode*.

Shojiro Nomura (1879-1943) was a pioneer in the collecting of *kosode* and *kosode* fragments. When he began, few people were interested in collecting Japanese fabrics. At the end of the nineteenth century, an anti-Buddhist movement led to the destruction of Buddhist temples and images, and forced temples to dispose of their altar cloths and banners. This tragedy in Japanese history became a splendid opportunity for Nomura to collect the finest fabrics.

To preserve and display the *kosode* fragments, Nomura designed a *kosode* folding screen, which was eventually patented. When he could not reconstruct a whole robe, he pasted the *kosode* fragments onto a two-panel folding screen to give the illusion of a complete garment hanging from a *kimono* stand. Although the *kosode* appear to have been painted, they actually have been made from fabrics that have been attached to the screens.



**fig.2**



**fig.3**

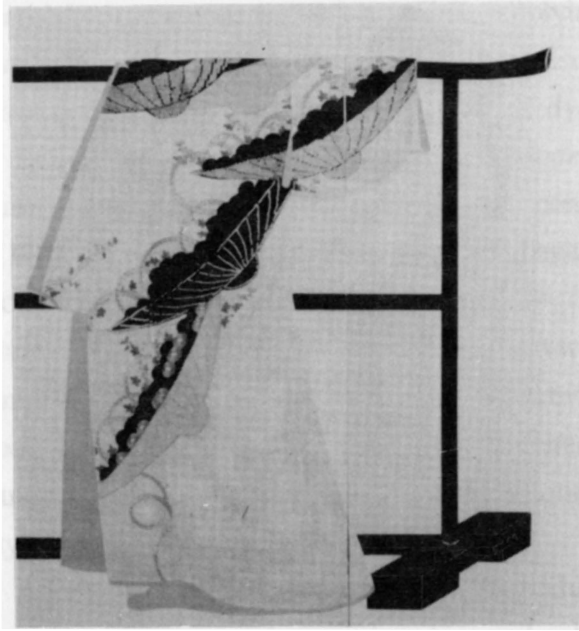
**fig.4**

One screen [fig.2] uses fragments from a *tsujigahana kosode* that had once formed a banner. The fabric is divided into red and white sections with patterns of camellia and Chinese bellflower created by a stitch-resist technique. There are dark crimson bands which, because they were once covered by the banner frame, retain sometime close to the original color. In the Kyoto National Museum, there is a banner with the exactly same pattern as this *tsujigahana* [fig.3]. The distance between the crimson bands is also the same as that in this example from the Nomura collection. In this connection, a third example of this same fabric can be found in the Toyama Memorial Museum (Saitama Prefecture). These *tsujigahana* fragments were originally all from the same *kosode* [fig.4].

Next, is an example of a Kanbun era (1661-73) *kosode* now remounted on a *kosode* folding screen [fig.5]. This *kosode*, patterned with sedge hat motifs and flowers, had been turned into an altar cloth. A photograph of this altar cloth can be found in the 1985 Asia Society exhibition catalog "*KOSODE* 16th-19th Century Textiles from the Nomura Collection". With the folding screen, Nomura truly recreates a sense of the original *kimono*. The motif of upside-down umbrellas and flowers is not a mistake. The Nomura Collection has another fragment of the same fabric that clearly shows where the shoulder line was and therefore shows which direction was the top of the robe.

A photograph of another altar cloth which Nomura took apart in order to make a *kosode* screen appears in a report by Nomura titled the "The Research of *Yuzen* Dyeing". This cloth is a rare example of an Edo-period *ro*, a type of silk gauze, dyed by *yuzen*, a sort of dyeing technique by rice-paste resist [fig.6].

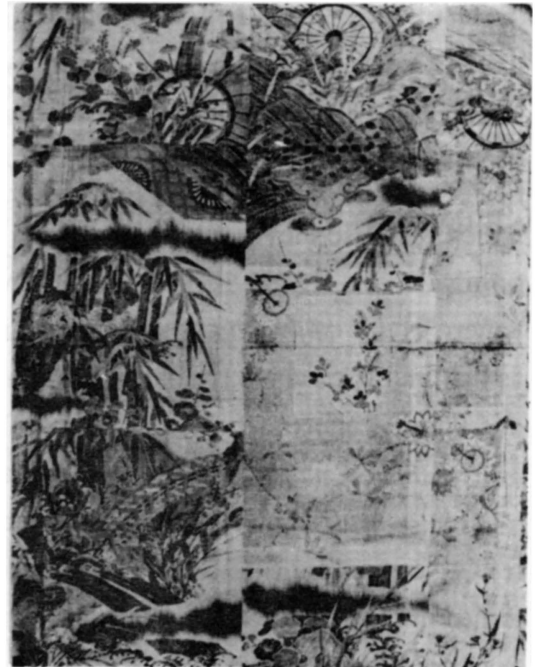




**fig.5**



**fig.7**



**fig.6**

### **3. Inscriptions attached to *kosode* folding screens**

All the examples have no inscriptions. There are, however, some examples of inscribed *kosode*. One screen from the Nomura Collection has an inscription in ink attached to the back of it that is written on a fragment of what used to be the red lining of the robe [fig.8].

The inscription says that this *kosode* was donated to the temple in 1740. The *kosode* features a typical Korin motif associated with craft designs influenced by the painting style of Ogata Korin of the *Rimpa* school.

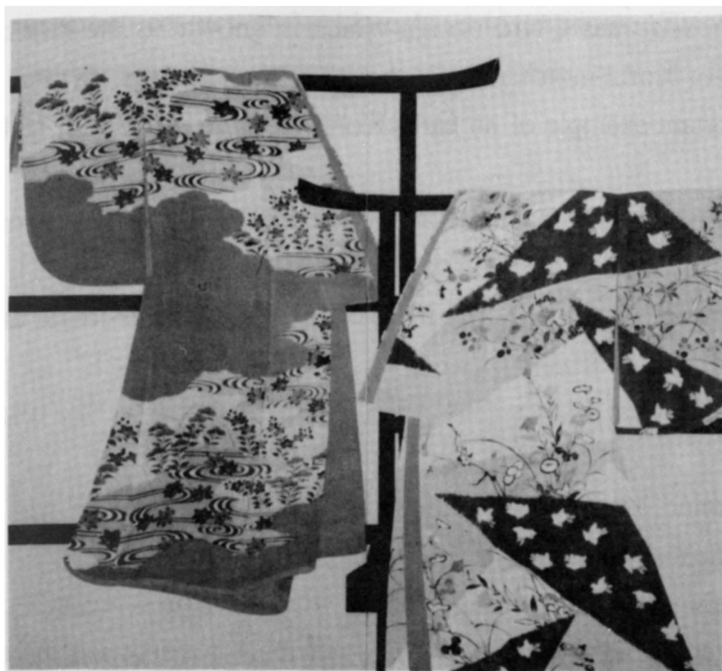


fig.8 (right)

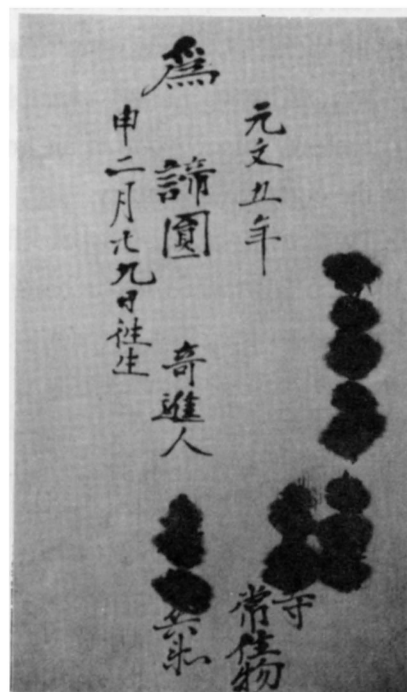


fig.9

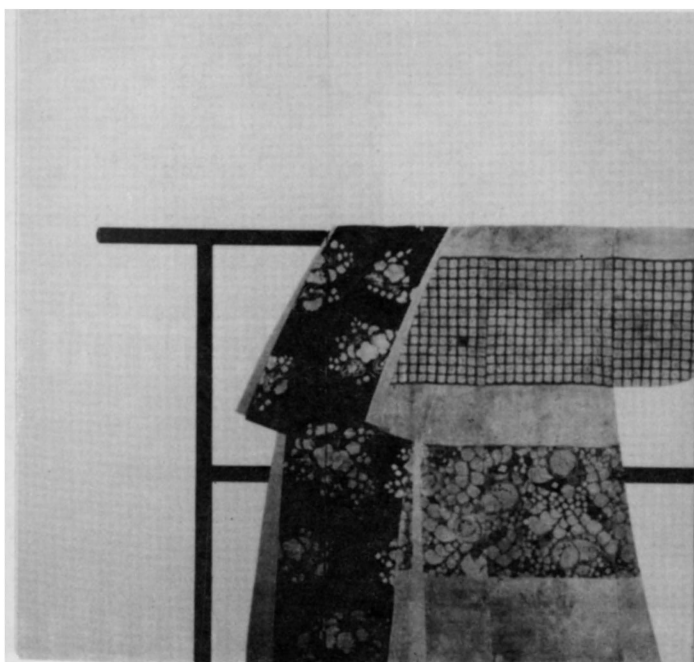


fig.10 (right)

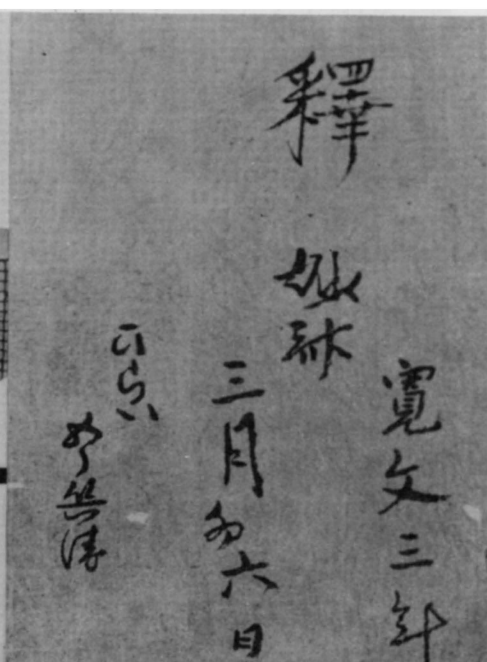


fig.11

Korin motifs, which became popular after the seventeenth century, are characterized by a simplicity of expression. The *kosode* has a bird design which is known as the Korin plover. Although many examples of Korin motifs remain, those with inscriptions are rare. Therefore, this *kosode* is an important example of an early Korin motif from the first half of the eighteenth century.

Two *tsujigahana kosode* fragments are featured on another screen [fig.10]. An inscription attached to the back of this screen dates the year of donation to 1663 [fig.11]. This is most likely not from the lining of a robe, but a piece of the same *kosode* fabric as the right *kosode* on the screen.

There are thirty-five other inscriptions besides these two, but these are the only two which are attached to the screens.

It is at times difficult to determine exactly which linings belonged to which *kosode*. Nomura noted the corresponding *kosode* motifs for fifteen of the lining inscriptions.

Unfortunately, not all fifteen linings can be matched to *kosode* fragments on screens. So far, it has been possible to link ten of the linings to *kosode* fragments. Here are three important works from this group of ten inscribed linings:

*Koshimaki* screen with auspicious motifs [fig.12]

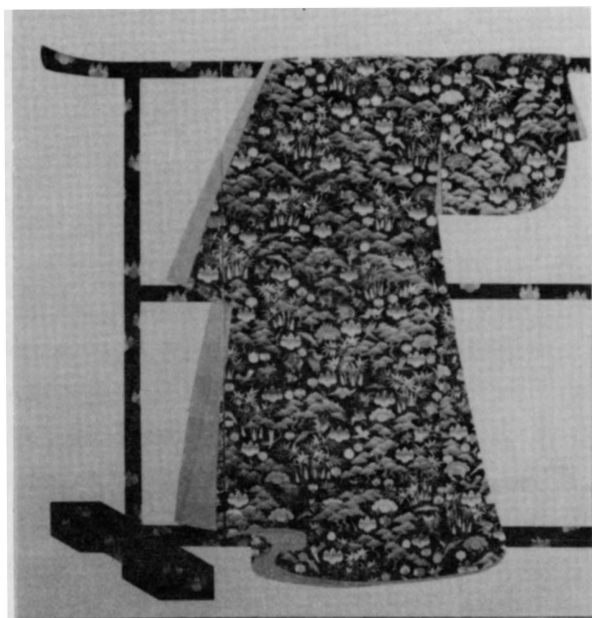


fig.12

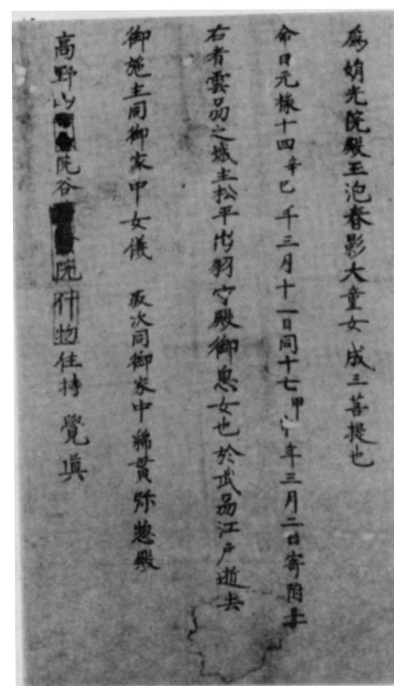


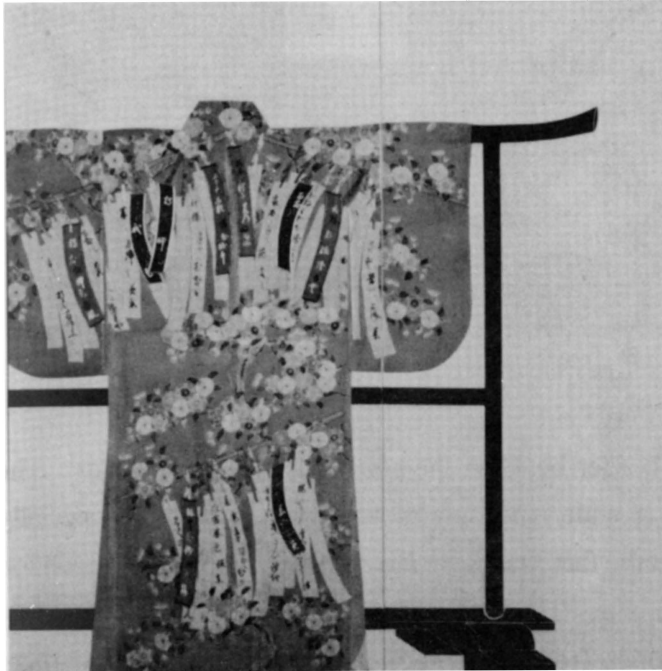
fig.13

A *Koshimaki* garment was worn over *kosode* in the summer. The upper half was slipped off the shoulders and tied around the waist like a sash. The whole surface of this *koshimaki* is covered with delicate, embroidered patterns of auspicious motifs. It is not clear when such a style of *koshimaki* originated. *Koshimaki* came into fashion after the

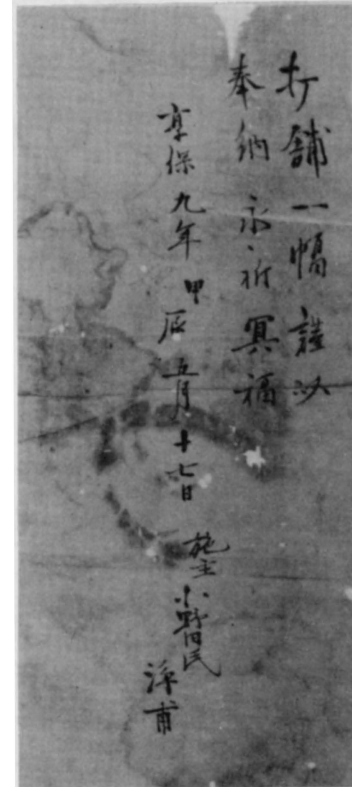


middle of the eighteenth century, but most of those that have survived belong to the nineteenth century and seldom have inscriptions. This *koshimaki* was donated in 1701, which means it is not only a rare example from the early eighteenth century, but one of the oldest extant *koshimaki* [fig.13].

*Kosode* screen with flowering cherry tree and poem slips [fig.14]



**fig.14**



**fig.15**

This *kosode* was made with the *yuzen* dyeing technique. Like *koshimaki*, extant examples of *yuzen* dyeing rarely have inscriptions. The name "yuzen" appears on some inscriptions from the second half of the seventeenth century, but most examples of *yuzen* dyeing belong to the eighteenth century. Therefore, this *yuzen* dyed *kosode* fragment donated in 1724 is one of the earliest examples of *yuzen* dyeing [fig.15].

*Kosode* screen with cycad palms and earthen bridge [fig.16]

Finally, this *kosode* embroidered with cycad motifs (a kind of Japanese palm tree) deserves special note. Although its design and embroidery technique resemble that of a nineteenth-century *kosode*, the robe was donated in 1760 [fig.17]. Thus, this *kosode* is yet another early example from the first half of the eighteenth century.

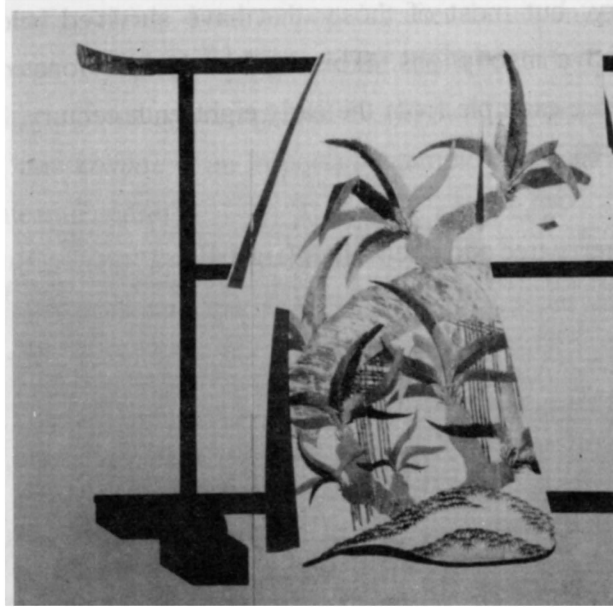


fig.16

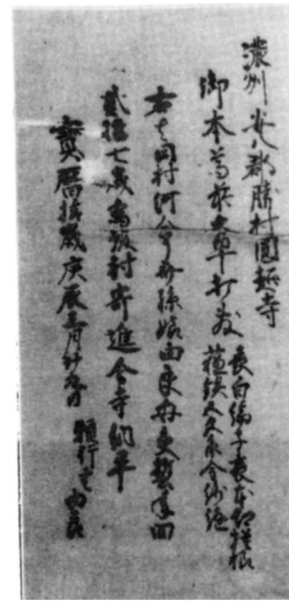


fig.17

## Conclusion

Altar cloths and banners lie on the border between the secular and sacred worlds. The designs of donated *kosode* employed a wide range of motifs from daily life, especially from the world of the upper class. Yet the fact that these *kosode* were chosen for donation confirms their elevation above secular use. Thus, the altar cloths and banners not only mark the historical rise of *kosode* fabrics from undergarments to highly treasured outer garments of the upper class between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, but their leap towered sacred use after the sixteenth century.

Although donated *kosode* were refashioned into different form, they stood a better chance of preservation as altar cloths and temple banners than if left in the secular world. Until recently, there was little interest in the history of *kosode* textiles, and many scholars ignored Nomura's work. Yet, Nomura's collection includes superb examples of textiles. The hundred *kosode* folding screens are important because they not only preserve the fine, sacred textiles of altar cloths and banners, but effectively recreate images of the original *kosode* form. The collection is also vital as a standard for dating other surviving *kosode*.

Of course, the date that a *kosode* was made did not necessarily correspond to the date of donation. Donations could be made long after a person's death, and the donated *kosode* did not always belong to the deceased. Even so, the information provided by inscriptions on donated pieces is valuable.

While keeping in mind the historical importance of altar cloths and banners, the National Museum of Japanese History has strived to collect fabrics with inscriptions. Most of these acquisitions belong to the nineteenth century, but there are some rare examples, such as the



altar cloth refashioned from a *kosode* of Chinese weave designed for *Noh* performance, which belong to the early-eighteenth century [fig.18-19].

In the summer of 1997, there will be an exhibition of inscribed fabrics at the National Museum of Japanese History in cooperation with the Tokyo National Museum and the Kyoto National Museum. This exhibition will provide an opportunity to further study how Buddhist altar cloths and banners made from *kosode* can advance our knowledge of *kosode* fabrics.



**fig.18**



**fig.19**