

*Japan Beyond the Kimono: Innovation and Tradition in the Kyoto Textile Industry.* By Jenny Hall. Bloomsbury, 2020. xxiv, 243 pages. \$115.00, cloth; \$36.95, paper; \$33.25, E-book.

*Reviewed by*  
KAORI NAKANO  
Showa Women's University

It has been two years since the COVID-19 pandemic began at the end of March 2020, bringing international travel to a standstill. Until then, the Japanese fashion world had regularly traveled overseas to view new collections and exhibitions. Designers from other countries also visited Japan to promote their work, and reports on their latest offerings occupied the mainstream of Japanese fashion news. Suddenly, all of this came to a screeching halt.

As if to fill this gap, the focus in Japan shifted to Japanese fashion brands and traditional Japanese culture—which, admittedly, were always present, but often went unnoticed and unremarked, obscured by the prestige of Western fashion. Today, however, Japanese fashion brands and luxury goods associated with traditional Japanese culture are increasingly featured in the fashion news, and many Japanese are beginning to “discover” and pay attention to the beauty and charm of their native tradition. The kimono is one of the products of Japanese culture that is attracting renewed attention at home. This reawakening of Japan to its own cultural legacy can perhaps be seen as a kind of de-colonization. Appearing fortuitously at this moment when the Japanese are taking a new interest in their fashion and its tradition, Jenny Hall’s *Japan Beyond the Kimono* is an epochal and comprehensive exploration of the past, present, and future of the kimono and its world.

Sustainability has become an important touchstone in recent years, but kimono were sustainable long before the term became a buzzword. Along with the knowledge for their proper wear and care, kimono are handed down through the generations from mother to daughter. When the fabric eventually begins to show signs of wear, the kimono will be refashioned into a cushion cover or other household object. As it finally reaches the end of its useful life, it will be recycled as a cleaning rag.

The kimono is not just sustainable, it also endorses body diversity. Consisting of several rectangles of fabric, the kimono gently wraps bodies of all shapes, without forcing them into some oppressive “ideal” form. At a recent body diversity fashion show in Japan, a celebrity with prosthetic hands and legs wore a kimono, the body-positive garment creating an elegance that would not have been possible with a Western suit. Supporting sustainability, body diversity, and local industry, the kimono is in the limelight as a garment for our times.

S  
N  
L

266

And yet some, invoking the kimono's long tradition and historical weight, still insist on dogmatic rules for wearing kimono. These ultra-conservative guardians—the “kimono police”—are always on the alert for any violations of the “proper” way to wear kimono and are eager to enforce orthodoxy. Lacking confidence about the proper way to wear kimono, most Japanese today are increasingly reluctant to don them on a daily basis. The kimono is now mostly limited to ceremonial occasions and special events, for which people call on a professional kimono master and hairdresser to dress them properly. Such formal kimono are often too tight and rigid to allow any extended activity and can even be hard to breathe in—another reason the kimono has come to be shunned as everyday wear.

If the situation of the prospective kimono wearer is so daunting, the outlook for the kimono producer is even bleaker. A lack of successors to the elderly kimono craftspeople of the previous generation is putting many kimono workshops in danger of closure, and the precious lineage of traditional technical know-how is at risk of being severed. Most Japanese today are ignorant about both the kimono and the industry that produces it. While there are many books teaching the proper way to wear kimono, there are few books offering comprehensive information about the cultural significance of kimono or its industry, and probably very few Japanese even know how kimonos are actually made and distributed.

*Japan Beyond the Kimono* investigates many of these themes, including the production area of traditional kimono, the ecosystem of the kimono industry, the process of creating the kimono, and the innovation taking place to ensure the survival of traditional techniques. Living squarely in the heart of the kimono industry in Nishijin, Kyoto, Hall conducted lengthy, detailed interviews with more than 20 companies connected to the kimono industry, including Pagong, Kyoto Denim, and Sou Sou. She describes the current reality of the kimono industry of Kyoto with painstaking accuracy while explaining the technical terms with scholarly precision to readers unfamiliar with the field. Calling her approach “sensory ethnography,” she succeeds in placing the Kyoto textile industry in the transglobal context of transitional craftscapes.

Hall prefaces the work with an overview of the basics of academic fashion studies, using that as her foundation for a sociological and psychological analysis of the Japanese affinity for the “slow fashion” represented by the kimono, and the garment's relation to Japanese identity. In addition to being an excellent contribution to fashion studies, Hall's work offers a unique perspective on the discussion of Japanese culture and “Japaneseness.” She directs her keenly calibrated gaze to events such as cosplay, local festivals, and “kimono experiences,” opportunities to wear kimono as a kind of “play,” and she highlights how they are useful for promoting kimonos. With numerous photographs of the events taken by the author and inter-

views with the participants, this book has a journalistic aspect. The author also analyzes evolving connections of kimono to modern materials (such as denim), new techniques (such as digital printing), and social media as means for bringing kimono culture into the future. She expands her scope to include accessories such as *jikatabi*, *noren* (shop entrance curtains), and furniture covers made from kimono fabric, and she covers in depth not only the designs but the supply lines, sales, and marketing of these innovations, making the book important from a business perspective as well.

*Japan Beyond the Kimono* provides a comprehensive, 360-degree view of the kimono. The author adopts a flexible research methodology tailored to each area of investigation, which is the best approach by far for subjects requiring an interdisciplinary approach. As a result, she succeeds in fully describing the kimono industry while also satisfying the intellectual curiosity of readers with various specific areas of interest. But what makes this book most appealing is the author's deep love for the kimono and Japanese culture evident throughout.

Perhaps the most notable achievement of this book for me was the sharpness and accuracy of the author's observations on Japanese people and culture. She highlights the emphasis on the "heart" by Japanese craftspeople, as well as the fact that in Japan things are considered to be not mere objects but extensions of human beings, leading to the conclusion that things not only possess the heart of the craftsman who makes them, but also the soul of the person who uses them. This worldview can be seen underlying many aspects of Japanese life and culture. To offer a contemporary example, the idea articulated by the celebrity organizing consultant Marie Kondo that an object with a personal association can produce a "spark of joy" can be understood as an extension of this idea.

I also found in Hall's book a reassuring indication that Japan, as it confronts the current state of economic recession and environmental destruction, is embarking on a reevaluation of its beautiful past traditions. She finds that Japanese young people, who have grown up in a very Americanized culture and are more familiar with pizza and jazz than their own traditions, are seeking their "Japaneseness" by turning to exotic (to them) phenomena such as kimono and Japanese dance and music. She suggests "walking in Kyoto wearing a kimono" as a sightseeing experience to satisfy that longing.

One of the author's most memorable exercises is her analysis of the meaning, motivation, and pleasure of the experience of wearing a kimono in modern times. She discusses the psychology of women who challenge traditional rules by, for example, tying the obi in front or wearing Western accessories with kimono, calling such transgressions "kimono jacking" and interpreting them as challenges to the female stereotype of "good wife, wise mother" and a sabotage and reversal of oppressive traditional values. Within

S  
N  
L

268

our own cultural bubble, we Japanese tend to be unaware of, ignore, or even mentally censor such behavior, thus making it impossible for us to put the subtly psychological processes taking place into words. The observations of a foreign scholar concerning the Japanese and Japanese culture can, however, provoke an enlightening objectivity and help us to rediscover ourselves and our culture—including the attractiveness and the value of kimono—and trigger us to actually start thinking about who we Japanese are and the future of Japanese culture, beyond the kimono. This experience of considering the world through the kimono is revitalizing and inspiring (though the harsh reality facing the kimono industry remains far from sanguine).

I sincerely hope this masterful work will be translated into Japanese and read by many Japanese readers as a contribution not only to the discussion of the survival of the kimono industry but to the ongoing deliberation on the subject of Japanese identity, past, present, and future.