

Kyoto

A Treasure House of Traditional Japanese Costumes

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Abstract:

From 794 to 1869, Kyoto was the capital of Japan, the residence of the emperor, and the center of Japanese government and culture. The most elite members of Kyoto society were the aristocrats, led by the emperor but by the fourteenth century they also included top military leaders. Their way of life was supported by commercial activities of the commoners and by the religious rituals of temples and shrines, which were thought to protect the capital and its court.

Early paintings show that, amidst this cultural landscape, the aristocracy wore costumes derived from the formal official robes of ancient China, while the commoners wore less formal robes called *kimono* (literally, “things to wear”), the predecessors of the modern day national costume. Then, in Kyoto’s temples, Buddhist priests adorned themselves in exotic patchwork-like robes called *kesa* (*kāsāya* in Sanskrit) modeled after Indian Buddhist robes that were pieced together from rags.

Contemporary Kyoto is becoming increasingly westernized, but it still retains the atmosphere of the ancient capital. This paper examines the costumes used by the aristocracy, clergy, and commoners over the long history of Kyoto, through an overview of some of the rare, surviving garments and paintings preserved in Museums.

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Geographical position of Japan

A city’s cultural landscape is made from the multiple layers reflecting different periods. So the traditional Japanese costumes still seen on the streets of Kyoto stem from the overlapping of different cultures as well, some brought from distant countries centuries ago and then adjusted to Japanese taste and others outgrowths of continuing native styles.

Japan is an island country facing the Pacific to the east and the Asian continent to the west. Its major trade partners were Korea and China, the most advanced country in East Asia. The ancient relics excavated in Japan show the strong influence of these two countries. The first text about the trade between Japan and China appears in the *Weishi* (History of the Wei dynasty) edited in third century. In the seventh century, Japan began to send envoys to the Sui dynasty (581-618) and started a tributary relationship with China whereby official “presents” were sent both ways. This relationship was maintained through most of the Tang dynasty (618-907), but ceased in 894 because of confusion within China. Trade between the countries, however, carried on in the hands of private merchants. So Japan continued to learn of new social systems, technologies, and cultures as they developed in China.

Kyoto is located almost in the center in the main land. Its layout follows the ancient Chinese ideal of capital location. North, East, and West are surrounded by mountains, only the South is open and faces towards a body of water. The streets are laid out like a grid. The imperial palace (*goshō*) stood a little north of center, though today it has been relocated slightly Southeast from its original site. Since the Japanese emperor (*tennō*) moved to Tokyo in 1869, now no one lives in the palace and its grounds are open to the public. Around the palace, the aristocrats built their residences, while the crowded houses of the city commoners lay to the south. Along the mountainsides, one finds many Buddhist temples and *Shintō* (the indigenous religion) shrines.

Three types of traditional costume and social classes



Fig. 1:
Outline image of the scene “Beginning of the Mission” from Illustrated Scroll of the Life of Priest Hōnen,
original stored in the Chion-in temple, Kyoto.

In this capital each of the three main social classes wore different types of clothing. The Illustrated scroll of the Life of Priest Hōnen painted around 1300 provides a snapshot of each style of clothing (fig. 1). Hōnen spread the ideas of Pure Land Buddhism (*Jōdō shū*) to the public and in the scene on the scroll showing the “Beginning of the Mission”, Hōnen is seen preaching to a crowd gathered together around his lodge. Closest to him are the Buddhist priests and monks. Then come the aristocrats, including the Shinto clergy, who were counted among the aristocrats and dressed similarly. The third group is the city commoners. The costumes seen in the painting are still worn in contemporary Japan.



Fig. 2:
Sokutai formal court costume worn by Prince Yasuhito of Chichibu (1902-1953),
Kyoto National Museum.

First the aristocrats: for certain ceremonies, the imperial family members still wear garments of the same weave and cut as were worn a thousand years ago. The costumes of the prince (fig. 2) and princess (fig. 3) of Chichibu, uncle and aunt of today's Japanese Emperor Akihito, can be seen in the coronation ceremony of their brother, Emperor Hirohito, which took place in 1925. Along with the westernization of Japanese society after the nineteenth century, the courtiers started to wear formal western dress for certain occasions. So today, the royal family wears the traditional court robes mainly on the rare occasions when they participate in ceremonies concerned with Shinto rituals. Shinto priests, however, continue to regularly wear garments similar to court costumes, which have wide, open sleeves and round collars. Modern Japanese see the old court costumes worn by Shinto priests most frequently when ritual ceremonies are reported in the media.



Fig. 3:
Itsutsuginu-karaginu-mo court costume worn by Princess Setsuko of Chichibu (1909-1995),
Kyoto National Museum.

The court costume for men consists of a round-necked over-robe and trousers. Reputedly the model was the Chinese court costume from the Sui and Tang dynasties. We can see an example in the Chinese painting “Emperor Taizong Receiving the Tibetan Envoy” attributed to Yan Liben (?-673, fig. 4) .



Fig. 4:
Outline image of the scene from “Emperor Taizong Receiving the Tibetan Envoy”,
attributed to Yan Liben, original stored in National Palace Museum Beijing.

Although the oldest Japanese court costume associated with a specific person still extant dates to the sixteenth century, we know what they looked like in earlier years from paintings. The oldest painting of men’s court costume is the Takamatsuzuka mural from the seventh to eighth century (fig. 5). These decorate the walls of a tomb for some high-class aristocrat.



Fig. 5:
Court officials in the Takamatsuzuka mural painting. Asuka village, Nara prefecture.

Women's court costumes feature layers of V-necked kimono. In the costume for the princess of Chichibu looks as if there are only layers of kimono, but actually she wears trousers underneath (fig. 3). Another image from the same mural painting shows aristocratic women (fig. 6). These costumes are also said to be modeled on ancient Chinese costumes, such as were worn by the lady-in-waiting to Emperor Taizong on the Palanquin by Yan Liben (fig.4). Although this Chinese model looks totally different from Japanese court costumes seen today, the latter still retain the short jacket and train from the Chinese model. The Japanese added layers of wide-sleeved kimono under the short jacket and train (originally a skirt). Interestingly, the short jacket and train were and are used exclusively for formal occasions: this points to the importance placed on their Chinese origin.



Fig. 6:
Waiting maid from the Takamatsuzuka mural painting. Asuka village, Nara prefecture.

Second, the Buddhist clergy wear a distinctive outermost garment that has its origins in ancient India: the *kasaya* in Sanskrit, *kesa* in Japanese. They pull these large patchwork cloths across their shoulders. In a Buddhist ceremony where many nuns are wearing *kesa*, wrapping the expansive fabrics from the left side and over the right shoulder (fig. 7).



Fig. 7:
A scene from the Buddhist ceremony in Hokkeji Imperial Convent, Nara.

The *kesa* traveled from India through China and Korea and arrived in Japan with Buddhism, around the middle of the sixth century. It is easy to imagine the Indian *saree* from its rectangular shape. Many old *kasaya* handed down in Japanese temples were brought from China as certification of *dharma* transmission from master to disciple. On the continent such garments did not survive, so the Japanese collection of old Buddhist robes has important meaning for the study of the East Asian textile history.



Fig. 8:
The scene of "Bad Breath" from *Yamai no Sōshi* (illustrated Handscroll of Diseases and Deformities).
Kyoto National Museum.

Finally, the city's commoners, merchants and artisans, wore clothing very similar to the modern *kimono*. Our national costume has its origin in city commoner's clothing, but the same shape garment was also worn as the bottom layer of the court costume. We can see an early style *kimono* in the "Yamai no Sōshi" (illustrated handscroll of Diseases and Deformities) painted in the twelfth century (fig. 8). A court woman who has bad breath is wearing V-shaped neck garment with narrow sleeve openings under a robe with wide-open sleeves. The common woman talking to her husband, who has tooth trouble, wears an outer robe of the same shape as the court woman's under robe image (fig. 9).



Fig. 9:
The scene of "Tooth Trouble" from Yamai no Sōshi (illustrated Handscroll of Diseases and Deformities).
Kyoto National Museum.

Kyoto as the treasure house of Japanese traditional costume

Today, Chinese, Indian, and native Japanese style clothing come together in the landscape of Kyoto. The court costumes still worn by the Shinto priests, the *kesa* donned by the Buddhist clergy, and the *kimono* sported by lay people on festive occasions bring Kyoto's history and culture into the living present. Although many of the aristocratic households moved to Tokyo with the Imperial family in the latter part of the nineteenth century, some, like the Reizei family north of the old Kyoto Imperial palace, continue to preserve the ancient treasures, ceremonies, and lifestyle. Buddhist temples have long served as repositories for sacred textiles, though now some of the more fragile pieces are on long-term loan to museums for better preservation. In addition, the wealthy commoners with households reaching back hundreds of years have their own heirlooms carefully put away in fireproof storehouses. Despite the growing preference for western clothing, enough people still wear the native garments, and that weaving and dyeing workshops around Kyoto continue to fill a demand for beautiful traditional textiles. Kyoto remains a treasure house of Japanese traditional costume.

Reference

Ishiyama, Akira. 1987. "Clothing." In *Kodansha Encyclopedea of Japan*, edited by Gen Itasaka, 329-333. Tokyo: Kodansha.