

[About](#)[Browse](#)[Timelines](#)[Store](#)[Search Databases](#)[Advanced search](#)

[Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion](#)

East Asia

eBook

John E. Vollmer (ed)

Berg Fashion Library

BRIDAL DRESS IN JAPAN

Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni

DOI: 10.2752/BEWDF/EDch6059

Pages: 368–372

Abstract

Modern Japanese wear Western-style clothing (*yōfuku*). Japanese attire (*wafuku*) that is clearly distinguished from Western attire is worn mainly on ceremonial occasions, especially for life-cycle events such as weddings, funerals, and the coming-of-age ceremony (*seijin shiki*) celebrated at the age of twenty. Of all these occasions, the wedding ceremony is marked not only with the most elaborate traditional costumes but also with an unparalleled combination of Japanese and Western dress.

Modern Japanese wear Western-style clothing (*yōfuku*). Japanese attire (*wafuku*) that is clearly distinguished from Western attire is worn mainly on ceremonial occasions, especially for life-cycle events such as weddings, funerals, and the coming-of-age ceremony (*seijin shiki*) celebrated at the age of twenty. Of all these occasions, the wedding ceremony is marked not only with the most elaborate traditional costumes but also with an unparalleled combination of Japanese and Western dress.

The majority of Japanese people hold their weddings at commercial institutions, mainly wedding parlors and hotels. With the burst of the economic bubble in the 1990s and the economic recession that followed, a new style of less extravagant wedding ceremonies celebrated in smaller venues like restaurants has also become an option. Another significant change since the 1990s has been the growing popularity of Christian-style or chapel wedding ceremonies. This has led to a rush to build chapels in the gardens of wedding halls and hotels and at other attractive locations, such as seashore resort areas. Both changes are related to the economic slowdown as much as to the growing involvement of the young generation in decisions about their wedding ceremonies. Nevertheless, notwithstanding such new trends, many of the features developed by the wedding industry since the 1970s are still largely prevalent, including the great emphasis on bridal costumes and costume change and the interesting combination of Japanese and Western styles and outfits.

Commercial Weddings in Postwar Japan

Commercial weddings in Japan are characterized by an extremely fixed and well-organized pattern, which has developed with the growth of the wedding industry since the 1970s. The initiators of the contemporary commercial wedding style and pattern are the mutual benefit associations known as *gojokai*, which still maintain a major interest in the wedding industry. The *gojokai* are associations in which members can accumulate money over a period of time to use for weddings or other ceremonial occasions (*kankon sōsai*), mainly funerals. Although wedding parlors operate in accordance with a similar scheme, these associations have undergone a shift in ideology with the growth of the wedding industry. Thus, while they were originally set up in the harsh times of post-World War II Japan to provide service for the common good, the emphasis in the early twenty-first century is more explicitly market oriented. The development of the *gojokai* associations is closely linked to the shift in the location of weddings from the privacy of the home and close community to public spaces. If weddings in Japan in the early twenty-first century are characterized by their uniformity, formality, and elaborateness, those in the prewar period were noted for their diversity, informality, and simplicity, especially among commoners and in rural areas. Such wedding ceremonies, often held only after the birth of a child or the retirement of the groom's parents from active life, were extremely simple, involving at most the exchange of sake cups between bride and groom, and they were performed with the help of the local community.

The *gojokai* associations began as agents organizing weddings in such places as Shinto shrines and restaurants until in the late 1960s they discovered the advantage of constructing their own "comprehensive wedding parlors" (*sōgō kekkon shikijō*), which would include everything required for the production of a "total wedding," from engagement rings through bridal furniture to honeymoon packages. A requisite element of this system is a bridal costume rental department and an adjacent beauty shop in charge of dressing brides and wedding guests. This kimono dressing service is necessary, since the majority of Japanese no longer have this knowledge. Moreover, the beauticians' expertise in kimono dressing is considered vital for producing the right bridal

We use cookies on this website, you can [read about them here](#). To use the website as intended please... [ACCEPT COOKIES](#)

The Fixed Wedding Pattern: A Combination of Japanese and Western styles

Japanese weddings formally open with a religious marriage service. Until the early 1990s this was a Shinto ceremony, which has since been increasingly replaced by a Christian chapel service. According to the Sanwa Bank annual survey of wedding customs and expenditures, whereas less than 10 percent of urban Japanese held chapel weddings until the early 1990s, in 1996, 46.8 percent of Japanese urban couples chose to have chapel weddings, while only 47.6 percent married in Shinto ceremonies. The same trend has continued: In 1998, 53.1 percent had chapel weddings while only 32.3 percent held Shinto ceremonies, and in 2006, 65 percent had Christian-style ceremonies and only 16 percent had Shinto weddings, as compared to over 90 percent in 1991. There has also been an increase in nonreligious ceremonies, reaching 16 percent in 2006. The growing popularity of the chapel wedding is not in any way related to any religious change in Japan, where a rather steady 1 percent of the population has been Christian since the turn of the twentieth century, but it is an epitome of recent fashion trends. The popularity of the Christian-style wedding is closely related to the increased demand for the white Western wedding dress. Choosing the latter, which is much less expensive than the Japanese outfit necessary for the Shinto ceremony, was also considered an appropriate concession, especially during the relatively hard economic days of the 1990s.

Although Japanese wedding practices are changing in the early twenty-first century, the bridal tradition that had evolved since the Meiji period was a hybrid involving Japanese and Western dress. Prior to the religious ceremony, the bride, groom, and relatives perform laborious preparatory functions in the proper attire. This is elaborate, often heavy, Japanese attire for the Shinto ceremony and classical Western attire consisting of a white wedding gown and a tuxedo in the case of a chapel wedding. The next inevitable stop before the service is the photo studio, located for convenience inside the wedding venue. Taking professional photographs of the bride in her different outfits, of the bride and groom together, and of their families is considered as essential a part of the wedding as the marriage ceremony or the reception that follows it. In fact, even couples who choose not to have any wedding service may still make sure that they are photographed in traditional Japanese wedding attire. The photo session takes some time, in order to ensure that the pictures to be displayed for years to come will be perfect. After this, the whole retinue is invited to proceed to the religious ceremony. The central rite of the Shinto ceremony is the exchange of nuptial cups of sake between the bride and groom. This ritual is known as *san-san-ku-do*. In addition to a few prayers and offerings, the Shinto ceremony also includes two Western practices: the exchange of rings and the recitation of wedding vows prepared in advance by the wedding producers.



A modern, white, woven silk outer kimono (shiro muku) from about 1990, which would be worn for a small modern Japanese wedding taking place in a Shinto shrine. Although the shiro muku is often marketed as a traditional Japanese wedding garment, the role of "pure white" in the Japanese tradition before the wedding industry's boom in the 1960s is debatable. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. www.vam.ac.uk

The reception (*hirōen*), which follows the ceremony, is considered the highlight of the wedding day. It usually lasts about two hours, follows a very strict order, and consists of dramatic entrances, speeches by the main guests, and a few "minidramas" or performances designed by the wedding industry, including the cake-cutting ceremony and the candle service. Among the dramatic scenes, the entrances of bride and groom deserve special attention, for the bride leaves the room at least two and sometimes three times to change her outfit. A photograph is often taken before she returns to the reception. Each of these entrances—for which the groom joins the bride—is highlighted by special effects.

The procession of the bride and groom, sometimes followed by the symbolic *nakōdo* (go-between) couple, down the long aisle into the reception hall can take a variety of forms. In the most popular one, the two couples slowly follow the wedding director, usually to the music of Mendelssohn's "Wedding March." Other options may add to the drama. For example, mainly from the 1970s through the late 1980s, when it was popular for brides to change from the *uchikake*, the elaborate kimono worn for the wedding ceremony, to another kind of lighter "swinging-sleeve" formal kimono (*furiisode*), the bride and groom walked together under a traditional parasol, or the bride dutifully followed three steps behind the groom. The parasol implies protection of the bride from evil spirits. The effect of this so-called *ai-ai-gasa* (mutual love) is not unlike the image of an Edo-period courtesan walking along a street in the pleasure quarter. While such Japanese-style entrances are used when the couple is dressed in traditional Japanese attire, Western-style entrances are employed when wearing Western clothing. The flashiest Western-style entrance has the couple lowered into the hall in a device called a gondola (a sliding device in a shape of an Italian gondola or of a carriage). The dramatic effect of this entry is usually intensified by accompanying audiovisual effects and is considered particularly appropriate before the candle service. All these entrances are carefully documented by a video photographer, hired for the occasion, and by wedding guests, many of whom bring cameras.

After the opening speeches, the bride and groom perform several mainly Western-style minidramas, devised to create climaxes of memorable moments, which are recorded in valuable photographs. In the first of these acts, the cake-cutting ceremony, the bridal couple, who may still be dressed in traditional Japanese outfits, inserts a knife into an elaborately decorated cake made of wax, under the close guidance of the director. The well-staged event is accompanied by romantic music, a spotlight beaming on the couple, and a white cloud (created by dry ice) enveloping them. The next set part of the program is the toast (*kanpai*). As on many such occasions, this gives guests the cue to relax and begin eating and drinking, usually when the bride leaves the room for the first of her costume changes (*ironaoshi*). The toast is followed by a series of short congratulatory speeches given by company superiors, former teachers, relatives, and friends. The flow of these speeches is not hampered by the absence of the bride, who keeps leaving the room for costume changes, each of which takes about twenty-five to thirty minutes. The groom usually has only one costume change, from the Japanese-style *hakama* (pleated skirt) to a Western tuxedo, which takes only about fifteen minutes.

The candle service is another indispensable miniperformance. The bride, now usually dressed in a colored party dress, enters with the tuxedo-clad groom, each carrying a long unlit candle that they light from candles on their respective parents' tables. Led once again by the director, they circle the room together and light the candles on the guests' tables. Each candle lighting is greeted by cheers and applause, encouraged by the master of ceremonies. Then, the bride and groom proceed to their own table, where they light the Memorial Candle.

At this point, the two hours allotted to every reception are almost over. The remaining fifteen or so minutes are filled with light speeches or songs and dances usually performed by friends. The reception ends with a short "flower presentation ceremony," focusing on the couple's gift of flowers to their parents as an expression of gratitude for having raised them to this point in their lives. This event not only signals the end of the reception but also provides an excellent opportunity for the participants to shed a tear or two in an emotional outbreak, which is considered an appropriate ending. The reception has now ended, and another wedding party is usually anxiously waiting to enter the reception hall. Thus, additional informal farewells and snapshots with the bride take place in the lobby. Then the bride and groom, and many of the female guests, go down to the ground-floor changing rooms to remove their formal attire before leaving the wedding venue.

Traditional Japanese Bridal Attire

The contemporary Japanese commercial wedding is replete with seemingly ancient traditions. However, an investigation into the sources of these elements indicates that they are not really that old.

We use cookies on this website, you can [read about them here](#). To use the website as intended please... [ACCEPT COOKIES](#)

government to make Japan "civilized" and Western. Leading Japanese scholars view the incorporation of a religious ceremony into the Japanese wedding in terms of such Western influence.

Both bride and groom wear what is considered traditional Japanese attire for the Shinto ceremony; this dress was designed to fit the atmosphere of the ceremony. While the bridegroom's clothing typically consists of a formal but relatively simple hakama (pleated skirt), the bride, whose attire is the most expensive, wears uchikake, which is an elaborate and heavy upper coat worn over a white kimono. It is, in fact, usually the white uchikake, special wig with head covering, and white makeup that is said to create the "bridal appearance" (*hanayome sugata*). As traditional Japanese dress, the kimono has become a symbol of femininity in postwar Japan, and it is not an overstatement to suggest that donning a bridal kimono or the bridal appearance is considered, and promoted as, one of the high points of a Japanese woman's life.

When questioned as to their motivation for wearing uchikake, many brides stress both its intrinsically Japanese (*nihon-teki*) and traditional (*dentō-teki*) aspects as reasons for deciding to include it instead of wearing a Western dress alone. It is important to note, however, that the uchikake did not become part of the traditional bridal attire worn by most brides until the late 1960s, when the wedding industry began its boom period. Before that, only a very few brides, who could afford to follow what had been known as part of the ceremonial court protocol, wore it. Moreover, the contemporary image of white weddings is promoted by the wedding industry as traditionally Japanese in promotional captions, such as "Wear your hair in the traditional Japanese wedding style, put on a pure white kimono (*shiro muku*), take the oath of marriage." However, some researchers of Japanese custom instead view all this as a later development based on the white wedding gown worn in the West.



The tsunokakushi, a Japanese bridal hat. The hat is considered traditional but is more recent than the watabōshi, another form of headwear that covers more of the face. Both indicate the bride's resolve to become an obedient wife—the veiling of the head represents the masking of traits such as jealousy and selfishness. Seiya Kawamoto/Getty Images.

The bridal appearance is not complete without a special *takashimada* coiffure—a style known to have been worn by daughters of the samurai class—which used to be done by a professional hairdresser using the client's own hair but which has now been replaced by a wig. Over the Takashimada hairdo goes one of two head coverings to complete the traditional, pure bridal image: the *tsunokakushi* ("horn concealer"), a thin strip of white silk cloth that envelops the wig and some of the forehead, or the more elaborate *watabōshi*, which veils the whole wig and also some of the face. The tsunokakushi, which is generally interpreted as covering the "horns of jealousy," or the bad traits of the woman's character that must be hidden to signify her future obedience as a wife, is a more recent and simplified version of the *watabōshi*. The latter used to be worn by noblewomen outside their homes and by women of the Ikko Buddhist sect when they visited the temple. Hiding the woman's face was considered also effective to avoid the evil eye (*jashi*). Modern brides consider both head coverings traditional and decide which one to wear based on aesthetics and appeal.

Although a bride in uchikake and a wig with a head covering is considered in the early twenty-first century as the only proper and traditional bridal appearance, we can learn from a variety of sources that in the early postwar period, Japanese brides wore a black, short-sleeved formal kimono (*tomesode*) similar to the one worn by early twenty-first century female wedding guests, although its pattern was slightly more highlighted and elaborately colored. In the late 1940s and 1950s, with the growing popularity of Shinto ceremonies and restaurant receptions, the black *tomesode* was replaced by a long-sleeved black furisode. The change from short to long, swinging sleeves is related to the wedding being moved from the private to the public domain. When weddings were held at home, the short-sleeved kimono allowed the bride to serve the guests during the wedding reception. The move to a swinging-sleeve kimono, which is considered proper for ceremonies and improper for work, also symbolizes the change in the bride's role on her wedding day, from someone showing her ability to assume the role of a daughter-in-law in her new household to a passive, doll-like actor in the commercial wedding production.

Since the groom's appearance at home weddings never received much attention, it has been almost totally ignored in the literature. With the rise of the commercial wedding, however, he has gradually become a costar in the production, albeit in a supporting role. Thus, he, too, now changes outfits during the course of the wedding. According to Kunio Yanagida, a leading scholar of Japanese customs, the pleated skirt (*hakama*) and the black cloak (*haori*) with the white house crests were originally designed by the chancellery in 1877 as the ceremonial dress for low-ranking nobles and ordinary officials and later became common formal dress for all men. Grooms did not begin to wear Japanese-style clothing until as late as the early 1970s, when wedding parlors began to promote formal Japanese wear to complete the supposedly traditional image. Before that, through the Taishō (1912–1926) and a large part of Shōwa (1926–1989) periods, grooms usually wore formal Western morning dress (*mōningu*). Before 1868, depending on the class, males wore formal attire: Nobles and governing officials wore ceremonial court dress; samurai wore pleated skirts (*hakama*) and pleated over-vests (*kataginu*); merchants wore kimonos and cloaks (*haori*).

"Changing Color" (*Ironaoshi*): The Flexibility of Tradition

The practice of changing outfits (or changing color, as *ironaoshi* literally suggests) during the modern Japanese wedding, which has become one of its main attributes, is a very good example of the flexibility with which Japanese tradition is treated. As is often the case, this invention of tradition has not appeared from thin air but has instead been based on a store of ancient materials and practices.

It has been suggested that changing clothing on the wedding day began during the Edo period, when the bride changed from a more formal kimono to a kimono from her trousseau between the formal ceremony and the banquet. Some Japanese scholars argue that this was an abbreviation of an even older practice, in which the bride would wear white for the first and second days of her wedding and then change into a colored garment for the third.



During the Edo period (1603–1868), Japanese brides of the wealthier classes would change after the wedding ceremony, from a more formal kimono into a lighter type of kimono from their trousseau, such as this costly “swinging sleeve” style of kimono called a furisode from about 1800. It is made of figured satin silk and has been tie-dyed using an expensive dye produced from safflowers. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. www.vam.ac.uk

While some have reported the custom of changing outfits in rural weddings, the time and number of changes apparently varied. The only constant among all these observations is that a bride at a home wedding would change into one of her trousseau kimonos to show members of the community some of the clothing she was bringing to her new home and to display the wealth of her parents' household. It seems that the main reason this practice was not universally observed was that few rural brides had enough kimonos of sufficient quality to carry on this practice.

As for urban weddings in postwar Japan, the practice of changing costumes hardly existed at all before the heyday of the wedding industry in the 1970s and 1980s. In fact, as in other cases of the adoption of old customs, so it was in the case of the ironaoshi—the wedding entrepreneurs made clever use of tradition. They did so by reviving an ostensibly traditional practice—albeit one that had never really caught on in the past, leaving only its *form* and filling it with different materials. The flexibility of this custom can be seen in the way new fashions replaced some of the old/new traditions. For example, whereas until the late 1980s it was popular for brides to change from the uchikake, the elaborate kimono they had worn for the wedding ceremony, to a lighter, swinging-sleeve formal furisode, since the early 1990s, brides have forsaken this change in favor of the more “modern” white wedding dress followed by a colored party dress. This change of custom was followed in the mid-1990s with the introduction of another outfit change, from the white overgarment appropriate for the Shinto ceremony to a colorful one upon entering the reception. This relatively quick change is handled by two dressers on the spot, at the entrance to the reception hall. The most popular color for the overgarment is red, but other colors, such as green, black, and silver, which are regarded as gaudy (*hade*) and luxurious (*gōka*), have also become popular and may be seen as another way to practice conspicuous consumption, or, in other words, a way of displaying the bride's family's affluence to the wedding guests.

Color Symbolism

Among the colors that create the total bridal appearance, two seem to be of particular significance: white and red. The white uchikake, which is now considered de rigueur for the Shinto ceremony, is often interpreted as representing purity, as in the case of the Western white dress. However, aside from this Western influence, in Japan, white is the color in which babies and the dead are dressed, symbolic of the tabula rasa that starts a new period in life. In the case of weddings, the meaning attached to this symbolism is that the bride is dead to her household and now can be “dyed” (*somaru*) into her husband's house.

White is also the color of the bride's makeup for the traditional attire. The lengthy makeup process includes painting of face, neck, arms, and hands. The bride's makeup (at least for upper-class brides) was white in the past, although the old-style white powder has been replaced by modern cosmetics. Although the color of the face is much whiter and the makeup considerably heavier than it would be in the West, veteran dressers argue that it is not as white as it used to be. This is usually related to the preferences of the new generation, which is criticized for not appreciating the authentic Japanese aesthetic of white skin.

Along with white, which, especially on the neck and nape, is intended to convey a feeling of naivete and freshness, red also plays a significant role in the bridal makeup. Red is used near the bride's eyes and ears to give the impression of bashfulness. The bride's mouth, which is considered the *ponito* (focal point) of her face, is painted a deep red color, but only over part of the lips, the rest of which are covered in white. This creates a smaller mouth in a shape of a mountain (*yama*). “A touch of scarlet” (*ko itten*) is the phrase used to denote a woman in a group of men, and such is also the red *yama* on the white mask. Red is pretty, an attribute females are supposed to embody. Red also signifies happy occasions. Thus, it has become a popular color for the second uchikake. A touch of red has also been left in the bride's underrobe, not only as a symbol of beauty but also, perhaps, as a reminder of the former tradition of red undergarments for women, which were considered erotic and also thought to ward off menstrual pain and keep the female reproductive system running smoothly.

Japanese Bridal Dress in the 2000s

The popularity of chapel wedding ceremonies has been on the rise since the 1990s. Some couples even choose to go abroad to have a chapel wedding offered by Japanese wedding providers in attractive places such as Hawai'i, Guam, or Australia. This change implies as well a greater attraction to the white wedding dress that is deemed suitable for such a ceremony. Nevertheless, while the popularity of so-called traditional Japanese attire has declined somewhat, it has by no means disappeared. Many brides who marry in a Christian-style ceremony still choose to change into uchikake and wig after the ceremony, and an “instant” process of makeup and dressing has been especially designed to help them do so. Some other couples prefer to come to the wedding venue before or after the actual ceremony just in order to be dressed in the proper traditional attire and professionally photographed. Having such a photograph is considered by the married couple and by their families an essential manifestation of the value they accord to tradition and to their Japanese identity.

References and Further Reading

- Edwards Walter. *Modern Japan through Its Weddings: Gender, Person, and Society in Ritual Portrayal*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989.
- Ema Tsutomu. *Kekkon no Rekishi* [History of Marriage]. Tokyo: Yuzan-Kaku, 1971.
- Goldstein-Gidoni Ofra. *Packaged Japaneseness: Weddings, Business and Brides*. London and Honolulu: Curzon Press and Hawai'i University Press, 1997.
- Goldstein-Gidoni Ofra. “*Fashioning Cultural Identity: Body and Dress in Japan*.” In *A Companion to the Anthropology of Japan*, edited by Jennifer Robertson, 153–166. Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 2005.
- Hendry Joy. *Marriage in Changing Japan*. Rutland, VT and Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1981.
- Hobsbawm Eric, and Terence Ranger, eds. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Katagi Atsushi. “*The Wedding Reception: Old Rituals in New Disguises*.” In *The Electric Geisha: Exploring Japan's Popular Culture*, edited by Atsushi Ueda, translated by Miriam Eguchi, 185–194. Tokyo: Kodansha International. 1994.

We use cookies on this website, you can [read about them here](#). To use the website as intended please... [ACCEPT COOKIES](#)