

# CHAPTER 10 Fashioning Cultural Identity: Body and Dress

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## INTRODUCTION

Modern Japanese wear Western clothing (*yōfuku*). Japanese attire (*wafuku*) that is clearly distinguished from Western attire is worn mainly on ceremonial occasions especially in life-cycle events, such as weddings, funerals, and the coming-of-age ceremony (*seijin shiki*) celebrated at the age of 20. On all these occasions it is predominantly women who put on the kimono while men appear in what is considered formal Western attire. I suggest that we should regard this gendered distinction in dress as part of a much more general and complex process of the construction of cultural identity in modern Japan. The distinctions between the “Western” and the “Japanese,” the “modern” and the “traditional,” lie at the heart of this process.

The striking symbolic distinction between the sexes can be well observed in the difference in dress on significant formal occasions, especially in life-cycle events. While men wear rational, “active” Western suits, women are encouraged to put on the kimono. This is more than a question of fashion or taste: the kimono that is wrapped around the female body has become a national symbol of traditionality, and so perfectly completes the image of Japaneseness, which is opposed to Westernness. Wrapped in this symbol of traditional Japaneseness, the Japanese woman herself has gained a symbolic role, as her kimono-clad image has become one of the “eternal” images of Japanese uniqueness.

As the kimono has become so separated from everyday life in contemporary Japan, kimono dressing itself has become the esoteric knowledge of a few. These are women who have achieved their expertise through special kimono schools offering courses to modern women who lack familiarity with the kimono and kimono-dressing. The involvement of such expert hands in producing the right kimono appearance has created a complicated process aimed at achieving a well-packaged “symbolic” form of the female body.

In modern Japan, the kimono has gained the role of an active player in the process of molding the female body not only into a cylindrical form, but in fact also into a specific cultural pattern. Since the Meiji era (1868–1912), with the state’s declared official aim of building a rational modern nation, the role of women in the new Japan was clearly and officially defined as benefiting the nation by being wives and mothers. The preoccupation of the new nation with women’s proper role has remade them as representations. However, this has not been in the sexual sense that is usually implied in feminist writing, but in the sense of models of tradition and the maintenance of the precious household (*ie*). The proper role of women, which has been defined since the Meiji period by the slogan “good wife, wise mother” (*ryōsai kenbo*), is clearly opposed to the role of men, who are regarded as models for action and rational enlightenment.

This is in no way to argue that women in contemporary Japan are restricted only to traditional roles. Their involvement in wage labor is high and steadily increasing (Brinton 1993; Molony 1995), and their intimacy with the West has been growing (Kelsky 2001). The important point is that the construction of modern Japanese identity has involved inventing distinct cultural roles for men and women. This chapter will look at this dynamic process of the construction of gendered cultural identities in modern Japan through a historic perspective, by looking closely at such processes mainly in the Meiji period, and through an elaborated ethnographic example from contemporary Japan: the role of dress in the construction of gendered distinctions in the coming-of-age ceremony.<sup>1</sup>

### GENDERED DRESS REGULATIONS AND MODERN INVENTIONS IN THE MEIJI PERIOD

When modern Japanese refer to Japanese attire (*wafuku*), they refer to *kimono*. Literally, the word kimono simply denotes something to wear; however, while in premodern Japan it included various styles of everyday as well as festive clothing (Yanagida 1957:11), in modern Japan only one mode has remained. The modern kimono stems from the decorative festive clothing worn by the elite on special occasions (Dalby 1993:139). The shift to a single-mode kimono was coupled with the almost total neglect, as well as delegitimization, of the many traditional work kimonos, especially those of rural men and women (Segawa 1948:89). My argument is that it is certainly not accidental that the invention of the modern kimono took place in the Meiji period. It is related to the intense effort of the Meiji government to build a modern, “rational” nation, modeled on a Western ideal. In dress, this effort was seen in the massive promotion by the new centralist government of Western attire, mainly for men, as well as in the overt involvement of the government in cultivating a single, native, so-called “traditional” kimono, as distinct from the modern, Western, one.

A massive “invention of traditions” has been related to processes of nation-building in Europe (Hobsbawm 1983) as well as in Japan (Vlastos 1998). As in other areas of the world, the field of national costume offers a creative arena for invention and

deliberate change. While governmental intervention in people's dress and appearance was not new in Japan, in premodern Japan it related mainly to class distinctions. In the Meiji period, when Western rationalization was the declared goal of the government and when the cultural distinction between the Western (*yō*) and the Japanese (*wa*) was created, new regulations related primarily to Western–Japanese/male–female distinctions.

The regulations regarding formal dress were abundant and naturally related mainly to men, who were regarded as the formal public representatives of both family and state. One example of the novelties of the time was the November 1872 proclamation of the chancellery that the Western morning suit (*mōningu*) would substitute for the formal Japanese attire worn by noblemen at court. This has remained the formal wear for men since. Grooms used to wear it side by side with their kimono-clad brides throughout the Taishō (1912–25) and a large part of the Shōwa (1926–89) periods (Goldstein-Gidoni 1997:138) and wedding guests still wear these suits, considered old-fashioned in the West, on these occasions.

While Japanese men of the Meiji period gradually changed to Western clothing, the most notable innovation for men was cropped hair. But not all men were quick to part with their samurai-style topknots and sidelocks. The government's resolve was firm, with fines for men who did not follow the new fashion and certificates of merit given to village mayors who successfully promoted the haircut in their jurisdictions. A verse that appeared in a magazine of 1871 perfectly conveys the symbolic aspect of this new Western style:

If you tap a shaven and topknotted head you will hear the sound of retrogression; if you tap an unshaven head you will hear the sound of the Restoration; but if you tap a close-cropped head of hair you will hear the sound of culture and enlightenment. (quoted in Yanagida 1957:28)

During that same period, some Tokyo women found it stylish to cut their hair short like men. However, public as well as governmental opposition soon appeared. The following comment from one of the leading magazines of March 1872 is especially illuminating: “Recently in the city we have seen women with close-cropped hair. Such is not the Japanese custom and furthermore nothing of the sort is seen among the women of the West. The sight of this ugly fashion is unbearable” (quoted in Yanagida 1957:29). The Tokyo government's reaction was swift. In April of the same year it proclaimed a strict ban on short haircuts for women.

This illuminating example of governmental intervention in fashioning the male and female bodies can be seen as sending distinct symbolic messages to Japanese women and men. The message for women was to become repositories of the past and of traditional values. This kind of role has been identified in other rapidly changing societies as bestowed on women by men, who tend to translate their fear of change into attempts to prevent changes in women's roles. Whereas Japanese women gained the role of models of tradition and representations of unique Japanese beauty and form, at the same time, the symbolic message sent to men was that of conferring on them the role of carriers of rational enlightenment.

### THE KIMONO TAKES ON THE SYMBOLIC ROLE OF (MAINLY FEMALE) NATIVE DRESS

The invention of the kimono as a feminine and national dress in modern Japan has been coupled with a larger discourse on the allegedly “natural” relationship between the kimono and the Japanese people. Writers like Kiyoyuki Higuchi (1974) find a complete fit between the kimono and Japan’s climate, as well as its people’s mentality and body type. More generally, the kimono takes on a role in the intensive discourse on Japanese uniqueness, the vast literature usually referred to under the rubric of *nihonjinron* (discourse on being Japanese) (see Dale 1986).

In this literature, the uniqueness of the Japanese heart and spirit is typically distinguished from the West. Norio Yamanaka, a distinguished figure in the world of the kimono, writes in a quasi-academic publication, “At the mention of kimono, our minds immediately tend to make a distinction between Japanese and Western styles of clothing” (Yamanaka 1986:9). This is not a distinction in clothing alone. Yamanaka says that, in order to understand the role of the kimono in Japanese culture, it is important to understand the West as having a *suru bunka*, a culture that does things, whereas Japan has a *naru bunka*, a culture in which things become (Yamanaka 1986:7). Yamanaka explains Western culture as calculated and having utilitarian goals, whereas Japanese culture prizes love, admires beauty, respects courtesy, and fosters harmony with nature. This harmony, regarded by the Japanese as a unique characteristic of their culture, is directly related to their love of the kimono. These attributes are deeply incorporated in the popular image of the kimono. For example, the distinction between a culture which does and one in which things become was expressed in an interview between the female owner of a large kimono school and a kimono expert. When asked whether wearing the kimono feels constraining and uncomfortable, she replied that it gives a feeling that a “non-Japanese cannot understand.”

There is a great difference [between Western and Japanese attire]. When I wear Western dress like today, I [come to] have a feeling of activity and moving [*katsudō teki ni narimasu*]; kimono, on the other hand gives one a feeling of calmness [*yuttari to*] and an urge to quit work. Life now is very busy in Japan, but when one wears kimono it gives her the opposite feeling.

Like Yamanaka and others, the kimono expert sees the difference in clothing as a basic cultural distinction between the Japanese and the Western. The West not only plays a role as a distinguishing category, but also as the Significant Other. As explained by another kimono expert: “After the war many things entered [Japan] from America. . . . Because of this, it became necessary to save something Japanese, and thus kimono has gradually become a national costume [*minzoku isshō*].”

Kimono has indeed become one of the main symbols of Japan and Japaneseness both inside and outside Japan. Nevertheless, it is important to note that this so-called national costume has been reproduced mainly for women. Thus, while the kimono gained a significant role in the internal cultural discourse about Japanese uniqueness, there were some early voices, especially those of women, who rejected this direction. This critical voices of women choosing to dress in the kimono instead of adopting a

Western style of dressing was typically related to the same characteristics as those praised by the contemporary kimono expert quoted above. The beauty of the kimono is found in immobility and calm gestures, as in those of the tea ceremony; Western attire encourages movement. This Japanese beauty has confining attributes, as a woman writer commented in the journal *Bunka seikatsu* (Cultural Life) in 1924 (Saga 1924). In the article, she calls on Japanese women to adopt a Western way of dressing in order to “liberate [their] body movements from the traditionally restrictive and non-movement-prone kimono.” She argues that, especially considering the period of rebuilding the nation after the devastating earthquake in the Tokyo area in 1923, when the country demanded a joint effort from women, women should adopt Western-style dressing in order to free their minds from “childishly receiving the standard of beauty from others.” In these “others,” she included not only most esthetic critics but also Japanese men in general, as well Western visitors to Japan. This writer encourages women to adopt Western-style attire, which is related to a “freedom of choice,” in order to “raise their own consciousness.”

Japanese women, especially in postwar Japan, certainly adopted a Western way of dressing in their everyday life. Nevertheless, in the symbolic domain, the kimono is still linked both to the Japanese spirit in general and, more specifically, to the ideal of eternal Japanese female beauty. This is certainly evident in the language of kimono entrepreneurs. Slogans such as “The beauty of kimono is the heart of Japanese people” (*kimono no utsukushisa wa nihonjin no kokoro desu*) are very common in popular kimono magazines. Kimono entrepreneurs also always emphasize the natural “longing” (*akogare*) any Japanese girl or woman has (or should have) to don a kimono. These kinds of advertisements are especially numerous in the months before January 15, the coming-of-age day.

### THE COMING-OF-AGE CEREMONY

Since World War II the coming-of-age day has been a national holiday. Celebrated on January 15, schools, municipalities, and other social institutions hold public ceremonies called *seijin shiki* (the coming-of-age ceremony) symbolizing the attainment of legal majority of men and women who will reach the age of 20 in the course of that year. However, it seems that in recent years participation in the ceremony itself has certainly not been the main focus of the day; it is the attire, and especially the expensive kimono, worn by the female participants. Most of the girls questioned regarded the event mainly in terms of a social gathering and as an opportunity to be seen (or displayed). The nature of the event was clearly described by the mother of a celebrating girl:

The day itself is mainly a kind of a reunion, meeting friends one hasn't seen for a long time. It does not have so much the meaning of becoming an adult. For the girls it is an opportunity to show off. Since it is not compulsory, it seems that those who cannot afford *furisode* [a kimono with swinging sleeves – the proper kimono for the occasion] do not come.

Indeed, an elaborate kimono has come to play a crucial role in the coming-of-age ceremony. In light of the decreasing number of women wearing the kimono for other

ceremonial occasions such as weddings and funerals (mainly due to the economic recession), its recent increasing popularity for the coming-of-age ceremony is especially illuminating.

Boys and girls both dress up for the occasion. However, whereas great effort and money are invested in producing the perfect woman in kimono, men are formally required to don a Western suit, which they will use later for job interviews and when going to work. This distinction between Western attire for boys and Japanese attire for girls has become a significant attribute of the occasion to the extent that girls who cannot afford the costume that will make them the proper model of Japanese femininity prefer to avoid the ceremony altogether.

Japanese etiquette and rules of formality require the proper dress, with great attention to detail. For example, while men must don a white tie when attending a wedding, a black tie with the same black suit is appropriate for a funeral. Other rules apply to the dress of women on similar occasions. Such strict rules of formality imply that, on occasions such as weddings and funerals, most attendants of the same gender dress very similarly.

Gender distinctions can be observed through ceremonial dress well before the coming-of-age ceremony, in earlier life-cycle events, for example, in the *miyamairi* ceremony, in which newborn babies are presented for the first time to the local deity, and in the 7-5-3 (*shichi-go-san*), a day of celebration on 15 November when children aged 3, 5, and 7 are dressed in fine clothes and taken to visit shrines. All these occasions not only require special attire, but also mark clear distinctions between the dress of boys and girls in color and symbolic utterances such as a black kimono with house crests for baby boys and an uncrested kimono for girls in their first presentation to the local deity (see Omachi et al. 1962:240).

The coming-of-age ceremony is considered in modern Japan as one of the life-cycle rituals (*kankon sōsai*) that the Japanese are keen to perform properly. However, despite the importance attributed to formality, contemporary Japanese consider themselves ignorant in such matters. This presumed ignorance is perpetuated by so-called experts, including mutual assistance organizations for ceremonial occasions (*kankon sōsai gojokai*). The latter were established after World War II to assist poor Japanese with such compulsory ceremonies and have since then become savings organizations for such occasions. Other important sources of information and guidance on proper etiquette in formal occasions are instructive books and manuals; e.g., the bestseller, “Introduction to Ceremonial Occasions” (*Shin kankon sōsai nyūmon*; Shiotsuki 1991).

Experts leave little room for personal preferences in terms of dress and total appearance in the case of the coming-of-age ceremony. While suggesting an expensive kimono for girls, to be used later for other ceremonial occasions, Shiotsuki (1991:36) recommends suits for boys. “There is no doubt,” she writes, “that the dark blue suit will be useful as everyday attire later on.” While boys are excused from severe formality, such permissiveness is out of the question in the case of girls. Shiotsuki (1991:36) exempts the boys from following the formal rules of etiquette according to which they should wear a morning suit (*mōningu*), which is worn on other formal occasions such as weddings. With girls, the experts are very particular concerning dress and general appearance, which includes hair setting, hair decorations, and the proper way to wear a shawl.

This expert advice is instructive with regard to distinctions between young women and young men. Advising boys to purchase a suit that can be used later for the job interviews that are an inseparable part of the life of the Japanese salaryman, the expert reproduces their male role as models for instrumental action. On the other hand, although most Japanese girls will also be university or college graduates and will go to job interviews in Western attire, this dress is not regarded as their formal attire. On the formal occasion that represents their entry into adult society they should symbolically adopt a “traditional Japanese” appearance.

### PRODUCING THE PERFECT JAPANESE FEMALE FORM

So complicated is the total appearance required from girls for the coming-of-age ceremony that they need experts to aid them in achieving the desirable image. These experts include kimono shops, department stores, wedding parlors, beauty salons, photo studios, and other producers of various traditional Japanese accessories considered appropriate when donning the kimono. Their role in producing the proper female model is twofold: they provide the proper items and necessary services, and also their expertise, which is considered essential for those Japanese eager to perform properly. Japanese women regard their own ignorance of the “secrets” of kimono dressing as an embarrassing flaw in proper etiquette and femininity. Mothers who send their daughters to kimono school as part of their bridal preparation are attempting to correct this flaw. But for the mothers who did not attend such schools, the alternative is to rely on experts (*kitsuke no hito*) to dress their daughters and themselves on the rare ceremonial occasions that require a kimono.

Mothers play a significant role in preparing their daughters for the coming-of-age ceremony. In fact, most girls, when asked for their motivation for donning a constraining kimono and participating in the ceremony, answered, “Because my mother wanted me to,” or “I couldn’t resist my mother’s will.” Japanese mothers are generally involved in the lives of their sons and daughters even when they reach matrimonial age. Mothers of the postwar generation also regard their daughters’ opportunity to don the kimono, which they themselves lacked in the harsh economic times of their youth, as too important to forsake. Mothers are responsible for making all the arrangements for the ceremony, and they are advised to make their appointments early in the year, since beauty shops in charge of dressing the girls soon become over-booked. At the Cinderella beauty shop located in a commercial wedding parlor in a large city in western Japan where I conducted my fieldwork working as a part-time dresser, mothers booked their daughters for dressing as long as a year in advance of the ceremony.

Booking an appointment at the beauty shop is not the first step in the preparation process. First, the mother has to convince her daughter to wear a kimono for the occasion. The alternative of putting on Western dress has become inconceivable. While more and more girls consent, or even find this “once in a lifetime” opportunity for donning a kimono appealing, there are those who refuse to participate. Financial considerations seem to be one reason for this. While parents regard the high cost of up to ¥1,000,000 (about \$10,000) for purchasing a kimono as a kind of a social must, some “modern” girls prefer to spend the money differently. Other girls of this

“new breed of humans” (*shinjinrui*) – a derogatory term used by social critics and by older people to describe a young generation which has become removed from traditional Japanese values – take an even more critical stance. These are mainly wealthy and well-educated university students, who find this custom old-fashioned and repulsive because it is an ostentation of the lower middle classes. This negative attitude nevertheless does not usually prevent the girls from participating. Evoking the ideology of *nihonjinron*, an owner of a kimono school gave a simplistic explanation for this generation gap:

For the parents it is their desire. From the day a girl is born they have the desire to dress her in *furisode* when she becomes 20 in the *seijin shiki*, take her picture, and send it to relatives as custom requires. In some cases, the mother herself also wore a *furisode* she received from her mother in her *seijin shiki*. This is still left. Deep in their heart, the Japanese still have kimono as a latent image, as their greatest longing [*akogare*]. This is a proof of that [longing], I think, though it is usually not said. This is why they want to dress their daughter. They work hard for this. There are, though, some cases in which the girl says that it would be enough to rent a kimono and that she would prefer a small car instead.

The kimono expert continued her well-informed observations emphasizing not only the parents’ so-called natural longing for a sense of Japanese-ness, but also the aspects of conspicuous display:

Everything together [the total cost of kimono and other preparations and photographs] reaches the average of ¥1,000,000. In this sum it is possible to buy a small car. The girl wants this [the car] but for the parents it is like a proof [*akashi*]. If they have the possibility of dressing their daughter in a ¥1,000,000 kimono it is proof that they have worked hard all their lives and can afford it. It is the result of their life work. If they don’t dress her it is as if they couldn’t reach this stage. They are watched by the people around. It is a display for the neighborhood. While other girls in the neighborhood wear *furisode* in their *seijinshiki* and only their daughter doesn’t, they are ashamed. This kind of feeling has been left. But the girls do not always understand their parents’ feelings and they say they would prefer a car.

Having the economic means to dress one’s daughter in an expensive kimono for her coming-of-age ceremony is considered important for the public image of the modern Japanese household. This nuclear family household has emerged in Japan mainly since the 1960s, with the emergence of the new middle class and the archetype of the Japanese salaryman (Vogel 1963). Its well being is maintained by the mutual efforts of the salaryman as breadwinner and his wife as homemaker. Japanese society in general and Japanese women in particular attach high value to the role of the “professional housewife” (Vogel 1978). She is the one responsible for managing the household, including its budget, and taking care of and educating the children.

While the feminine model is opposed to the rational male model, mothers are very rational with regard to household finances. The mothers of coming-of-age girls who cannot afford the expense of a ¥1,000,000 kimono do not hesitate to look for cheaper ways to dress their daughters in the desired costume. The obvious alternative is to rent instead of purchasing it. More prudent mothers find that the cheapest way is

not to rent through ordinary kimono shops but rather through one of the mutual assistance organizations for ceremonial occasions which offer kimonos at very reasonable prices to their members. These organizations are well aware of the recent tendency of the Japanese to economize due to the recession. Thus, as compared to the “bubble days” of the late 1980s and early 1990s, they increasingly are promoting kimono rental for the coming-of-age day.

The morning of the coming-of-age day is a very busy one for 20-year-old girls and their mothers. It is also hectic for those involved in producing the proper appearance and for those in charge of manufacturing their replicas or representations. At the beauty shop, the employees are summoned to work at 4.30 a.m. to be ready for the first girls, scheduled for 5 a.m. Photo studio workers arrive at 6 a.m. Extra part-time staff are necessary for the task of preparing 120 girls in a few hours. The beauty shop employs as many as 30 part-time beauticians and kimono dressers for the day, many more than the average number of women employed on busy wedding days. Each of the workers knows her responsibility for the day (as rehearsed) and has her assigned room. The two rooms usually used for dressing female wedding guests are arranged differently for the day. A larger room is used for dressing and a smaller one for getting undressed and for putting on the special underwear necessary for the kimono (*hadajuban*). In the larger room, eight to ten pairs of dressers occupy the two mirrored sides. The beauty shop assigns as many women as possible to setting hair and doing make-up, which are the most time-consuming chores. The beauticians occupy the beauty salon and additional available space. Another group of four women struggles against time in the room usually used for dressing the groom and male guests at weddings in order to make up the queuing girls. There is no fixed sequence: the girl may begin in either of the rooms, and the procedure is decided more on the basis of convenience and the length of the queue than on any other consideration. Each of the girls holds a piece of paper, detailing the different sections of preparation and accessories needed, with which she moves between the different rooms. In each room an employee adds the necessary fee. When fully ready in her kimono with her hair set and her face made up, the girl goes back to the beauty shop, where she pays the accumulated fees for the total form. This amount, averaging about ¥20,000, depends mainly on the various kimono and hair accessories the dressers managed to promote as “indispensable” for a perfect appearance.

### **KIMONO DRESSING AS SHAPING THE JAPANESE MODEL OF BEAUTY AND FEMININITY**

Kimono dressing can best be described as a series of correcting, binding, and packaging. Hendry (1993:73–74) writes, “Japanese kimonos, perhaps more than any other garments, are literally ‘wrapped’ around the body, sometimes in several layers, like the gifts, and they are secured in place by sashes, with a wide obi to complete the human parcel.” The girls being produced by the experts for the coming-of-age ceremony can indeed be seen as “parcels” or as packaged products of the vast industry involved in the reproduction of their feminine Japanese image. Western attire is usually adapted to the female body; not so the kimono, where the woman’s

body is made to fit an ideal cylindrical shape. The modern art of kimono dressing has developed this aim to an extreme.

Dressing a woman in a kimono requires “correction” (*hosei*), which refers to padding the body with gauze and towels to make it fit the ideal feminine form. If she is thin, the woman will be padded out with an extra towel; if fat, her breasts will be flattened. If, alas, she has any fault such as a low shoulder this must also be perfectly “corrected.” After the body has been padded, special undergarments are carefully wrapped around it, tied with cloth cords, and then fixed with an elastic belt. The kimono is wrapped over them and then folded and bound in the same way. After each layer has been bound, a final binding completes the wrapping: the binding of the *obi*. The latter should not only be done firmly to keep the whole “parcel” tightly fixed, but also beautifully, in a way that the pattern on the *obi* will be most obvious. The exquisite kimono bindings are prepared in advance to save time in the demanding schedule of the day and to be as perfect as possible. Attention is also given to rules of etiquette as well as art in modern kimono dressing. These require a single kind of tie for married women’s kimonos, while allowing a proliferation of shapes (carrying names such as “butterflies and “flowers”) for the kimono of the unmarried woman.

The kimono invites the plausible feminist reaction to clothing as restricting the female body, and therefore a device for the subordination of women. It suggests parallels with such fashions as the those of the Victorian era, which included several layers of clothing and constraining elements such as the corset. The kimono has indeed been described as restricting the Japanese woman’s movement and as making her defenseless as well as rigidly disciplined. The kimono does constrain the female body. The vocabulary used by the dressers – including holding out (*gambaru*) and endurance (*gaman*) – illustrates this. Notions of patience and endurance have been regarded as part of femininity training in Japan. The ability to stay put and tidy when wearing a kimono has always been considered as part of this kind of socialization for girls (Lebra 1984:42–45). The dressers at the beauty shop ignore young women’s complaints about constraining ties, while they may take into account the same complaints made by older women. As if fulfilling their own role in training Japanese girls for proper female roles, the dressers, as experts of feminine knowledge, frequently remind the girls (at times quite severely) that they should know how to hold out and endure suffering.

A “constraining-oppression” analysis should be used with caution in the Japanese case, as in other similar cases, in order not to oversimplify the explanation for the oppression of women. The Japanese case must take into account the fact that notions of endurance and patience are characteristic of Japanese society in general. Taking into account that notions such as *gaman* and *gambaru* were defined as keywords in Japanese culture (Moeran 1984) we must admit that, while being an appealing explanation, the constraining argument is not satisfactory. The alternative interpretation offered here is embedded in the symbolic aspects of kimono and kimono dressing. The way kimono dressers themselves explain how body correction creates the right Japanese ambiance confirms this point: “the correction [*hosei*] is used so that the woman’s appearance will give the impression that she is gentle and open-hearted.” In other words, the female body is not just constrained; more significantly, it is molded into a ready-made pattern, which is the model Japanese woman.

### “GOOD WIFE, WISE MOTHER”: THE CULTIVATION OF FORM

A kimono school owner summarized the experience of donning a kimono in the following words:

When you wear kimono it reaches your feelings, it enlarges your mind and makes you calm; even if you want to run you cannot. You have to move in a natural way. So, if the feelings become calm so are your thoughts. Even if something bad is done to you, you do not react immediately, you think first before you act. A Japanese woman like this guarded the Japanese household [*ie*]. I would like the young women to be a little like this.

For the kimono expert, the kimono is much more than a constraint on the body; it has a mental influence and its ultimate role is to cultivate the perfect Japanese woman. This owner of one of the largest kimono schools, with branches all over Japan teaching about 30,000 students, indicated her expectations for the women who were taking courses for their bridal preparation. She hoped, she said, that the education they acquired at her school would help them to be “good wives and wise mothers” (*ryōsai kenbo*).

A characterization of the Japanese woman as “good wife, wise mother” emerged in Japan at the end of the 19th century. The term has since been promoted vigorously by male politicians who define women as domestic managers of households and nurturers of children. The concept has pervaded Japanese society and has come to constitute the official discourse of women in Japan (Uno 1993). Paradoxically, although this concept was initially taken from the Western model of the ideal Christian woman of the 19th century, it is now viewed as traditionally Japanese. The kimono school owner, who regards herself as an educator of women, said that being a good (Japanese) wife and wise mother “is a traditional Japanese pattern. . . . This is the splendid woman that guarded the Japanese household [*ie*] over the years”.

The art of kimono dressing was not considered part of bridal training in prewar Japan since wearing a kimono was an integral part of everyday life. However, in modern Japan, as the kimono has become increasingly separated from everyday life and associated almost exclusively with special occasions, it has gradually found its place beside the refined arts of the tea ceremony and flower arrangement. A young unmarried woman, who like many other modern women took evening kimono classes after work, found it hard to explain why she was investing money and time in this pursuit. Finally she said, “You know, the kimono is a Japanese thing, like the tea ceremony and flower arrangement, that any Japanese girl should know [even though it] is something that one does not use every day.” The explanation of an experienced kimono teacher supports the connection between knowing the secrets of kimono dressing and proper Japanese femininity. As she said, “A woman who does not practice such things [as the tea ceremony, flower arrangement, and kimono] is considered no good.” Most Japanese women do not take courses in traditional Japanese arts in order to achieve any mastery of them. They take the courses in order to internalize proper manners and comportment through the arts. The study of manners is part of the curriculum of kimono schools, and the kimono, like similar

feminine pursuits, is considered to be a perfect way to cultivate modesty, elegance, tidiness, and courtesy.

The emphasis on cultivation of form and on appearance related to Japanese women partly explains the significance given to the coming-of-age photograph. It often seems that, as in the case of weddings, the production of the formal representation of the model girl in a kimono overshadows the event itself (see Goldstein-Gidoni 1997:73–77). For several months before January 15, the Japanese media, including local and national newspapers and women’s magazines, carry advertisements for the coming-of-age ceremony. The ads, always with a picture of a kimono-clad young woman, usually emphasize the “natural” longing (*akogare*) girls have to don a kimono. Sentences such as “Every female longs for a beautiful and charming kimono appearance” (*utsukushiku, adeyakana kimono sugata wa josei no akogare*) or “Any female would yearn for a graceful manner in dress” (*shittori toshita kikonashi wa, josei nara dare mo ga akogaremasu yo ne*) are frequently used in many published materials. It is important to note that the advertisements do not refer to the civic event or the ideal of becoming an adult as much as to the “ceremonial (bright) appearance [*hare sugata*]” that the girl must leave an image of for the future (“Aren’t you going to leave a memory of your ceremonial appearance?”).

The professional studio photograph of a daughter’s coming-of-age ceremony takes on some specific purposes. Young women are likely to choose January 15 to pose for portraits that will be shown to potential marriage partners in a matchmaking (*miai*) procedure. It is also customary to send photographs to relatives who have sent congratulatory gifts (*o-iwai*) for the occasion of the daughter’s coming of age. The Japanese attach great importance to what they call *seken*, meaning a reference group (Inoue 1977). Responsibility for maintaining the right image for others, or of the *sekentei* (the honorable appearance as viewed by the surrounding world), falls mainly upon the housewife. A mother of a 20-year-old girl, highly aware of her responsibility for maintaining her household *sekentei*, told me of the efforts it took her to convince her daughter to put on a kimono that she had bought for her. The girl consented only on condition that she would be taken by car directly to the beauty shop and from there directly to the photo studio. Going to the civic ceremony or even walking in the streets was totally out of the question. However, for her mother this solution was satisfactory since it saved her from the embarrassment she would have faced if photographs of the kimono-clad daughter had not been sent to thank all the congratulating relatives.

There seems to be an almost “natural” link between Japanese women and *form*. This can be observed through their occupation in esthetic pursuits such as flower-arranging and kimono, tasks that a kimono expert defined as “things that fit into form” (*kata ni hamatta mono*), which are in fact “meaningless things” (*nani-mo-nai koto*). Moreover, it seems that the exaggerated occupation in the cultivation of form can end in the woman herself becoming a form and a model. Freezing the perfect female image in a frame as in the coming-of-age portraits is related to the way in which Japanese women has been made into models of Japaneseness. Robins-Mowry (1983:xviii) has elegantly described it:

The world gently placed this living, breathing woman into the glass box used throughout Japan to encase all treasured kimono-clad and artistically hand-wrought dolls. She was

entrapped in the legends of her own perfection – a likeness that harmonized with those perpetuated symbols of Japan: cherry blossom and Mount Fuji.

## CONCLUSION

The kimono-clad Japanese woman has become a symbol in modern Japan. Like cherry blossom and Mount Fuji, it is one of the best-known symbols of Japan as a nation. I have shown that the process by which the kimono and the women who put it on have become symbols of tradition in modern Japan has been deliberate. There was first direct state involvement in the crucial Meiji period and then the role of kimono experts and entrepreneurs in producing this model of traditional Japanese femininity, which is clearly distinct from the model of Western rationality imposed on Japanese men.

This analysis has not focused on the actual position of women in contemporary Japan, but rather has investigated their culturally constructed position. Producing Japanese women as models of traditional Japaneseness should be understood against the background of more general processes of the construction of Japanese modern cultural identity. Processes of self-definition tend to intensify the sense of self by dramatizing the difference from and opposition to the Other; in the Japanese case, the distinction between the “Japanese” and the “Western” has been pervasive and diffused through all spheres of Japanese life. Using historic and ethnographic perspectives I have offered here a glance at the gendered symbolic aspects of these significant cultural distinctions.

## NOTE

- 1 Fieldwork was conducted from 1989 to 1991 in a wedding parlor’s beauty shop. I also participated in kimono classes and conducted interviews with kimono experts and practitioners. Additional data were collected in a two-month visit in 1997.

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