

# Kimono and Colony

## From Testimonies and Literatures

By Rie Mori

### International Women's War Crime Tribunal and *Kimono*

During the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal in December 2000, Park Yong-sim, who came to Japan with the prosecutors, was unable to eat or talk, since she saw *yukata* provided in the hotel. As *yukata* reminded her of the Japanese *kimono*, which she had been forced to wear in the comfort station, Park lost her words, and was haunted by flashbacks. As a result, she was not able to enter the witness box, and the video was used as evidence<sup>1</sup>. In current Japanese society, *yukata* or *kimono* may be considered, in general, as something nostalgic and charming, and which play a part in contemporary women's fashion. I used to think that way. However, reading the article about Park's flashback, I was deeply reminded that the *kimono* may trigger a serious reaction in some individuals, and that the Japanese

*kimono* is deeply connected to Japan's colonial control and its war responsibilities. Therefore, I began to think that I ought to research what the Japanese *kimono* was like for the people who were invaded and damaged by the Japanese state and the military.

### Nationalism and *Kimono*

The Congressperson's League of Promoting Japanese Dressing (*wasou shinkou giin renmei*) is promoting "the furtherance of Japanese clothing", for example, by wearing the Japanese *kimono* to "welcome the Emperor's Majesty" at the opening reception for the annual Diet.

The 2006 Amendment to the Basic Education Law included the sentence, "Respect tradition and culture, and love our own nation and homeland". In the Government Curriculum Guidelines, which were announced in March 2008, the new requirement of "having a basic knowledge of Japanese clothing" was included into junior high schools' technical arts and home economics. Today, the Japanese clothing industry is actively collaborating with the home economics educational agencies, in order to find the means of introducing Japanese clothing into junior

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1 Rumiko Nishino. "Shougen ni dou mukiauka (How to face the testimony)", in *Shougen: Mirai he no kioku ajia 'ianfu' shougen-shu Minami/Kita/Zainichi Korea Hen-jou (Testimony: Memories for the Future-The Collected Testimonies of "Comfort Women" in Asia-Vol.1(1), South, North, and Zainichi Korea)*. Women's Active Museum on War & Peace Ed. Akashi Shoten, 2006. Hereinafter all the testimonies used in this article are quoted from this book.

high school education<sup>2</sup>.

When asked why one chooses to wear a *kimono*, many *kimono* fans answer: “Because I am Japanese”, or “I can identify with Japan when I wear a *kimono*.”

Where and how did this attitude or discourse begin, which aims to connect ‘Japan’ and the *kimono* so deeply? I think that it was the trend of ‘Japonism’ in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Western world which created the discourse of connecting ‘Japan’ and the *kimono*, and that the discourse began to be used strategically by Japan during the national mobilization.

Keeping this in mind, the following discussion will examine how the *kimono* has appeared in the testimonies of women of Korean origin, who were forced to be “comfort women” for the Japanese military. Then, it will examine the ways in which the *kimono* is represented in the literature in Korea at the time of Japanese control.

### *Kimono* in the testimonies of people forced to become Japanese military’s ‘comfort women’

The aforementioned Park Yong-sim testified that at the *Kinsui-rou*, Nanjing, to which she was first taken, she was told by the landlord to change into Japanese clothing. When she resisted, she was forcibly deprived of her own clothing and her name was changed into *Utamaru*. Park Du-ri, who was taken to the comfort station in Changhua County of Taiwan, testified: “The landlord (of the comfort station) offered me *nemaki* (*kimono* to wear in sleeping time) and *obi* (belt). Each of us had to acquire three or four *kimono* with differ-

ent prints in order to wear. The manager would buy cosmetics and other clothes for us if we paid him.” Similarly, in many testimonies, women recounted their experiences of being forced to change from *Chima-Jeogori* to *kimono*, adopt a Japanese name, and have their hair cut short, because “Japanese women have short hair”.

In another case, Song Shin-do was ordered to wear *kimono* at *Sekai-kan* in Wuchang District. She testified: “When I said I didn’t know how to wear the *kimono*, and didn’t need it, they said that I could wear a one-piece dress. I thought it meant that I would be given a one-piece dress, but was told that I had to buy it myself.” This reveals how a one-piece dress was chosen when Japanese-style *kimono* was not available or rejected by the women. Moon Pil-gi, who was in the comfort station in Manchuria, testified: “I was given a purple-colored one-piece dress, and was told to change my clothing. All ‘comfort women’ were wearing the same one-piece dress and had their hair short”. Kang Duk-kyung, who was in the comfort station in Japan, testified: “I have never worn a *kimono*. I wore a blouse and skirt.”

Moreover, in the battlefield where *kimono* could not be prepared, makeshift clothes were being used. Kim Hak-soon testified that in the comfort station in China she was wearing “something like cotton underwear already worn by soldiers” or “clothes that Chinese people had left in their homes”. Hwang Geum-joo also mentioned that when she arrived at the comfort station in Jilin, she was given “*monpe* (women’s workpants), *haori* (overcoat), military socks, a hat, black running shoes, and a quilted overcoat and

pants. After that, there was a time when I was provided with military sports wear, but soon there was no clothing supply, and I began picking up soldiers' used clothes and wearing them."

In this way, 'comfort women' for the Japanese military wore *kimono*, or if not *kimono*, wore western clothes, and in cases where neither of them were available, they wore soldiers' used clothes. In all of these cases, the women who were forced to become 'comfort women' were made to adopt Japanese-style names and Japanese-style customs, and were denied their long hair and specific culture, such as *Chima-Jeogori*.

### **Kimono appeared in Korean literature under the colonial rule**

#### **(1) An image of Japanese and clothing**

In the Korean literature during the colonial period, a contrast between 'white clothing' and 'black clothing' was used as a symbolic expression. While 'white clothing' represented traditional Korea or Koreans, 'black clothing' mainly meant Western clothing which represented modernized male or Japanese or Western male. In some cases, when the literature portrayed Japanese peasants, 'black kimono' and 'blue long johns' were used as a symbol: "the land where the peasants had gone was now cultivated by unfamiliar farmers who wore black clothing. They worked with their face covered by a towel, wore blue

long johns and held up the hem of their *kimono*<sup>3</sup>.

On the other hand, Japanese females were often represented as wearing *kimono* in the literature. Interviews conducted with individuals who lived through the colonial period illustrated how these people remembered Japanese men as wearing 'black clothing' and Japanese women as wearing *kimono*<sup>4</sup>.

#### **(2) Kimono represented urban culture**

Until around the early 1940s, rather than being perceived as a symbol of Japanese nationalism, the *kimono* as portrayed in the literature evoked the international atmospheres of Korea and Manchuria as cosmopolitan cities. In "Home" by Hyeong Jing-geon (1926), a man who had to leave home due to the colonial rule and was wandering Manchurian and Japan wore a *kimono* (Translated by Yang Min-gi, *chosen bungaku sen* vol. 1, *sanyu sha shuppan*, 1990). In "Ruthless" by Lee Gwang-su, a progressive Korean woman who was influenced by democracy and went to a music school in Japan was described as wearing a *kimono*. In "Artists from the Korean Peninsula" and other pieces by Kim Seong-min(1936), the author describes Korean women working at a café who had short hair and wore *kimono*. In "*Sinmon* (a form of heart)" by Cheoi Myong-ik(1940), there is "a white dancer who wore *kimono*" at a cabaret in Harbin<sup>5</sup>.

#### **(3) Kimono in the 1940s: Representing**

2 See *Gekkan some to ori (Monthly Dyeing and Weaving)*, August 2010.

3 "Owareru hitobito (the persecuted)" Chang Hyok-ju, 1932, *kindai chosen bungaku nihongo sakuhin shu*

(1901-1938), Part.3, *ryokuin shobo*, 2004.

4 Hiroki Okada, 'White Clothing and *Chima-Jeogori* in Kiyofumi Suzuki and Makoto Yamamoto eds, "Anthropology of Clothing", jinbun shoin, 1999.

### the unity of Japan and Korea

However, in the late colonial period towards 1945, a change of representation of *kimono* could be observed. In the movie “*kimi to boku* (you and me)” produced by the Press Section of the Korean Army, there is a scene in which Paek’hi, the sister of a Korean volunteer soldier, and Mitsue, the sister of a Japanese soldier, exchanged their clothing. In the scene, Mitsue helped Paek’hie to put on the *kimono* and said “it suits with you very well, Paek’hi-san. I wonder if you can come to my home as my brother’s bride.” Mitsue went on, “I wish more women here in Korea wore *kimono*.” In reply, Paek’hi said “Umm...but it is difficult to wear and people would feel shy about it.” Then Mitsue said “I wear Korean clothing without hesitation as it is very nice. We cannot do anything if you feel shy.” In their conversation, while the unity of Japan and Korea and the close relationship between Japanese and Koreans were promoted, we cannot see an equal relation in their exchange of *kimono* and Korean dress: Mitsue was outgoing and Paek’hi was passive; *kimono* were difficult to wear and Korean dress was easy<sup>6</sup>.

In this period, scenes of Korean women in national dress and Japanese women in *kimono* sewing good-luck handkerchiefs (*sennin bari*) and bidding farewell to the soldiers feature heavily in the literature, movies and drawings. In order to promote the image that colonial Korea

and its ruler Japan worked together in carrying out the war, Korean dress and *kimono* were effectively used to convey unity. Therefore, when the *kimono* evolved from an innocent cultural item into a nationalistic symbol of ‘Japanese women’ or ‘the spirit of Japan’, it was imposed upon the people in colonial and occupation areas.

### Conclusion

After Japan’s defeat, more people wore and sewed western clothing under the Allied forces occupation. On the other hand, the *kimono* was worn less frequently. A feminization of the *kimono* became more apparent. To the Allied occupation army, *kimono* were used, for example, as souvenirs, and became a stereotyped symbol of Japanese culture.

*Kimono* as a symbol of nationalism and oppressive Japan was an image which was introduced into colonial Korea prior to post-war Japan, at a time when the image was inseparably linked with nationalism in the minds of Koreans.

The style of Japanese *kimono* has hanged alongside Japan’s political and economic transformation. I would like to carefully observe the future of the *kimono*.

**Rie MORI** is an Associate Professor of Kyoto Prefecture University

*Translated by Naoko IKEDA and Risa TOKUNAGA*

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5 Kindai chosen bungaku nihon go sakuhin shu, ryokuin shobo, 2001-2004.

6 Kindai chosen bungaku nihon go sakuhin shu (The Series of Modern Korean Literature Written in Japanese) 1939-1945, Part 6, ryokuin shobo, 2001.