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High Teas, High Collars and High Rise Buildings in a 'High-Context' Culture: The Semiotics of Japan's Project of Modernity

Abstract

This article addresses a paradigm shift in Japanese society during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – focusing on the encounters with Western culinary, sartorial and architectural practice experienced by a 'high-context' culture (Hall, 1976). The main discussion documents the differentiated reception of these changes – valorised by reformers for whom engaging with the outside world was key to their project of modernity, but treated with suspicion by members of the proletariat who feared for the purity of traditional Japanese values. The manner in which the resulting tensions were mediated through the print media and imagery of domestic visual culture is interrogated using a prism of semiotic analysis and the findings located within a contemporary context to suggest that Roland Barthes' analytical approach to the country as an 'empire of signs' (Barthes, 1982) retains its original traction.

Keywords: Meiji Japan; semiotics; fashion; food; architecture.

Son of Yamato: Historical and Theoretical Contexts

In 1603 Japan closed its doors to the outside world as the *shogun* (military general) united warring factions and instigated a policy of *sakoku* (national isolation) so rigorously enforced that shipwrecked sailors who washed up on country's shores were thrown back into the sea. There followed a period of two and a half centuries of socio-political 'purdah' until the arrival of the American fleet in Japanese waters in 1853 signalled the technological superiority of the West and initiated a crisis that led to the restoration of Emperor Meiji to the Chrysanthemum throne. A policy of *bunmei kaika* (civilisation & enlightenment) was introduced, designed to persuade the developed nations of the world of Japan's fitness to join their ranks. The reformers established modern administrative institutions, encouraged new social practices and consumed myriad aspects of Western material culture, but many Japanese citizens feared exposure to so-called *bunmeibyō* (diseases of civilisation) – considered so virulent that some would pass beneath telegraph wires with fan held aloft to prevent even the shadow of a Western invention falling upon them. These tensions are cleverly articulated in a wood-block print, *Hakurai, Wamono: tawamure dogu choho no zu* (Humorous picture of the merits of goods), c.1873 by Utagawa Kuniyoshi¹, which employs anthropomorphic imagery to comment on the appearance of foreign material culture in Japan (reproduced in

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Meech-Pekarik, 1986, plate 17). In certain cases the ‘combatants’ in the various contests depicted appear evenly matched – the idealism of the wood-block print vies with the realism of photography and native soap is no worse than its foreign equivalent – but only in the arena of diet is domestic rice clearly superior to the alternative. Otherwise the West is in the ascendancy as a rickshaw destroys the *kago* (palanquin), a post-box snatches the letter carrier’s cleft stick and a fabric umbrella proves more effective than the paper parasol². Surprisingly the discipline of dress is only broached tangentially in the form of the visual pun in the bottom right-hand corner. In place of two people, the artist has drawn a kite (*tonbi*) and a mythical creature (*kappa*). The Japanese word for the bird of prey was used for the Inverness coat, while the latter term also served to describe a domestic raincoat.

In *The Decay of Lying* (1889) Oscar Wilde declaimed, “The whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people. If you desire to see a Japanese effect stay at home and steep yourself in the works of certain Japanese artists.” While accurately skewering the Victorian desire for the exotic that underpinned a ‘cult of Japan’ that was sweep through Great Britain, Wilde also highlights the value of the native visual record as a source of documentary information. Accordingly, this article mobilizes primary research material derived from *ukiyo-e* (pictures of the floating world), together with evidence culled from a number of cultural histories addressing Japan’s encounters with Western food, Western dress and Western architecture. As a quintessential ‘high-context’ culture (Hall, 1976), the Japanese were well attuned to implicit messages communicated across the three disciplines. The texts and images that record the reception of these aspects of material culture are examined using a theoretical framework of semiotic analysis, with the material presented in a format suggested by a Japanese aphorism:

The son of Osaka spent his fortune on food
The son of Kyoto spent his fortune on clothes
The son of Edo spent his time looking at things

(translated in Seidensticker, 1985)

The conclusion considers the manner in which the changes identified have impacted on Japan’s socio-cultural development – tracing the three aspects through the twentieth century and documenting examples of contemporary practice that suggest Roland Barthes’ characterisation of the country as an ‘empire of signs’ continues to enjoy traction as an analytical tour-de-force.

The Son of Osaka: Diet, Manners & Health

Early commentators were quick to notice differences in culinary culture between Japan and their native lands. Writing in the eighteen-twenties – prior to the large-scale ingress of foreigners – one observed that “milk in any form, is unknown, or at least, strictly prohibited” (cited in von Siebold, 1973, p. 121). By the 1870s an influential disseminator of Western ideas, Fukuzawa Yukichi, was championing the dairy product as “one medicine for 10,000 ills” (reported in Narusawa, 1997, p. 335) having consumed it while recuperating from typhoid. Despite a rather tenuous grip on the science of nutrition, Fukuzawa produced a treatise on the benefits of meat-eating, and assiduously promoted a higher protein intake amongst

the students of Keio Gijuku – the educational institution he founded in 1872 and would later become Keio University. The radical nature of this departure from dietary norms is indicated by the fact that purification rituals had to be conducted as eating meat offended against Buddhist principles, although monkey flesh formed part of a *sumo* wrestlers diet and other forms of game were eaten for medicinal properties³. Fukuzawa had been a translator on the First Japanese Embassy to Europe in 1862 and another fact-gathering mission was undertaken between 1871-1873, headed by Iwakura Tomomi. The ambassador's daughter, Sakurako, recalled her father coaxing her to eat beef – paradoxically using the offer of new *kimono* as a reward. In a similar manner the title of Kanagaki Robu's 1872 satirical novel, *Agura Nabe* (Sitting cross-legged around the stew-pot) plays on the fact that certain social practices were more ingrained than others.

Depictions of the appetites of the foreign nationals who had established trading relationships with Japan prior to the Meiji Restoration had already appeared in visual culture. *Dinner at a Foreign Merchant's House* by Gountei Sadahide (1861) shows an Englishman offered wine by his servants (reproduced in Sato & Watanabe, 1991, p. 6). *Vinho tinto* had been extant in Japan since being introduced by Portuguese missionaries in the sixteenth century, and the beverage features in a print from the c.1800 series *Kyokun oya no megane* (Educational Glasses for Parents) by Kitagawa Utamaro. The image of a girl holding a glass of wine in one hand and a crab in the other is reproduced in a seminal work on the Western scientific gaze (Screech, 1996, p. 188), where the title is given as 'a canny one' – a misattribution seemingly caused by the author's penchant for word-play. The Japanese word for the crustacean is the homonym *kani*, whereas the term that does translate as 'a canny one' (*rikomono*) is actually the title of an image from the same collection in which the subject reads a book.

In the final years of the nineteenth century there was a steady increase in the number of restaurants and cafés catering to the demand for foreign cuisine, particularly in the capital. Seiyokuen, originally a hotel in Tsukiji (the area where foreigners were settled following the Meiji Restoration) relocated in 1881, advertising itself as a French restaurant located in Ueno 'Parque' in the north of the city. The first coffee house opened nearby in 1888, followed by the first beer-hall a year later – the latter described in the *Chuo Shinbun* newspaper as "a separate world in which all the classes are truly equal" (reported in Gluck, 1985, p. 173). Several cookery schools sprang up and a separate section featuring *yoshoku* (Western-style cuisine) appeared in a home encyclopaedia published by Fuzanbo in 1906. The same company later issued a book by Haga Yaichi, who decried "light Japanese cuisine being overwhelmed by heavy Western food" (Gluck, 1985, p. 177). Towards the end of the Meiji period (1868-1912) voices of dissent emanated from the countryside, railing at "old home-made gifts replaced by strange Western-style sweets" (Gluck, 1985, p. 251) – a reference to the 'Chaplin caramel' (a confection of chocolate, coconut, cashew nuts and marshmallow) that was all the rage back in Tokyo.

Tensions between traditional and modernizing Japan were not merely a function of geographically but were also articulated in a social context. The consumption of new forms and the practice of new behaviours were valorised by members of the aristocratic class, "itself a sort of western colony" according to sociologist Miyoshi Masao (reported in Lebra, 1993, p. 187). The main venue for this social fraction's performances of modernity was the Rokumeikan (Pavilion of the Baying Stag) – an Italianate pavilion designed by English architect Josiah Conder in Tokyo's administrative centre and completed in 1883 – where the socio-political elite enjoyed masked parties and fancy-dress balls. So frequent was the appearance of politicians

at these events that government ministers of the time became known as members of ‘the dancing cabinet’. Somewhat ungallantly, French writer Pierre Loti (a pseudonym) describes the Japanese ladies’ dancing as wooden; conversely a correspondent for the *Tokyo Nichi Nichi Shinbun* newspaper compliments them on negotiating social interactions with foreigners more successfully than their male counterparts (reported in Esenbel, 1996). An 1887 print entitled *Ladies Charity Bazaar at the Deer Cry Pavilion* by Toyohara Chikanobu suggests that such events were as much fashion shows for friends as good works for the benefit of others. This contradiction was well articulated by Basil Hall Chamberlain, Professor of Japanese at (then) Tokyo Imperial University, who observed that being civilized in Japan meant only having to give way to one’s wife when dressed in Western clothes. Politician Ozaki Yukio published an etiquette guide in 1893, advising on how to distinguish between the Western gentleman and the foreign cad (no pipe or topaz ring!) and the wisdom of protecting the virtue of Japanese womanhood from both types. More sophisticated analysis became available a few years later when publications by commentator Miyamoto Keisen cautioned that a lack of social knowledge would damage Japan because the West used manners as tools in both war and competition (*ibid*, p. 112). Texts combining foreign etiquette and Japanese *reigi* (manners) appeared, and the standing bow was introduced as a new form of greeting. An anonymous drawing entitled *Morning Greeting* (reproduced in Lehmann, 1978, pp. 64-65) parodies this compromise – depicting Japanese children dressed up in formal adult Western styles bowing to each other while their parents still kneel to each other in traditional fashion. This critique of new social obligations also makes an oblique reference to a loss of martial virtue in its relegation of a *shinai* (bamboo practice sword) to the umbrella-stand that has become a required piece of furniture in the modern home.

The authorities also felt it necessary to ensure that public spaces in Tokyo reflected Victorian sensibilities. A Municipal Improvement Act was passed in 1888 after prompting by writer Mori Ogai, who took a special interest in Western ideas regarding hygiene. Accordingly, the deceased, the mentally or physically sick and foreigners were all assigned to specific locations in the city. Slums were cleared, phallic statues removed, and rickshaw-pullers required to stop prior to entering the city to put their shirts on. Consideration was given to banning the display of available prostitutes in cages along the lanes of the red-light district of Yoshiwara before a technological solution arrived in the form of *shashin mitatecho* (photographic portrait albums). Victorian attitudes regarding hygiene were adopted and the nursing profession introduced Western uniforms in 1892. A Dr. Newton founded a lock hospital in the capital’s nearest port Yokohama – more to prevent the loss of British sailors to venereal disease than for the benefit of the general population. Another British doctor found significant decrease in disfigurement from syphilis among locals in research conducted over a generation. In *The Night-less City* Dr. J.E. de Becker records the adoption of Western dress by employees of certain brothels in 1886, describing the institutions as serving “viands...on plates of a Western pattern” (cited in Lehmann, 1978, p. 75). His cautionary aside – that clients were expected to eat with chopsticks – makes allegorical interpretation of this passage all the more intriguing.

Paradoxically, a more sanitary (and, some would argue, sanitised) Tokyo acted as an incubator of *ryukobyō* (addiction to trends). In a few years either side of the turn of the century, half a million people suffering from differentiated strains of *tokainetsu* (city-fever) – enterprise fever, get-rich-quick fever, success fever – abandoned rural life and migrated to the capital, only to find themselves become unemployable ‘bacilli’, ravaged by unhealthy thoughts

and financial ailments. Urbanite salaried workers demonstrated greater resistance, although many would be diagnosed as *yofuku saimin* (paupers in Western dress) because, while able to afford the latest fashions, they could not purchase the houses they lived in.

The Son of Kyoto: Fashion and Presentation of the Self

In pre-modern Japan an indigenous silk industry had provided the fabric for its rulers since the Heian period (794-1185), and sumptuary laws restricting its consumption reinforced an entrenched four-tier class system of farmer, merchant, artisan and warrior. The *Tempo Kaikaku* reforms of 1841-1843 limited the wearing of fine silks and brocades to the nobility⁴ and dark coloured cottons and linens were the only materials available to those not of *samurai* status. Codification enshrined power relationships embodied in dress while simultaneously inviting their subversion. A wealthy tradesman might wear a plain *kimono*, but one made with a lining that featured prints of popular actors of the time or was surreptitiously embroidered with gold thread, thereby converting economic into symbolic capital.

Following the Meiji Restoration the social structure was simplified into a small aristocratic class and the citizenry, with the former taking the lead in promoting Western-style dress as the 'uniform of civilisation'. Initially synthesis of the two sartorial cultures was the preferred approach; a white linen frock coat from c.1870 features the Katakura family crest of sparrows and bamboo embroidered across the shoulders (reproduced in Sato & Watanabe, 1991, p. 125), as it would have been on a formal *kimono*. Later, a mimetic policy was instituted for the bureaucracy as Western dress was made obligatory by order of the *Dajokan* (Council of State) in 1872. Members of the socio-political elite hastened to dress themselves in swallow-tailed morning coats, striped trousers and starched shirts, but the high costs involved limited widespread uptake of complete outfits. Writing in the *North American Review* in 1900 former Foreign Minister Okuma revealed that those who did not have the means, "satisfied their pride by using European underwear beneath their Japanese clothes" (cited in Checkland, 1989, p. 40). More often a form of bricolage was achieved using visible accessories of silk scarves, pocket-watches and hats to decorate traditional styles – a print of the interior of a Tokyo brothel (reproduced in Lehmann, 1978, pp. 80-81) depicts a group of Japanese clients, all wearing *kimono* topped with bowlers or homburgs. In 1876 a correspondent for *The Times* reports on this tendency, noting that, "the most pronounced form of foreign mania which has attacked the intelligent classes finds expression in head-gear" (*ibid*, p. 35).

Whereas a Western-style suit was unaffordable for most city-dwellers, a modern haircut was easily attainable. The first barber's shop, offering a cut called *zangiri* (random crop), opened in 1869 and within twenty years the traditional topknot had almost disappeared from the capital. Haircut clubs for women also appeared, promoting Western styles such as *hisashi* (eaves), *mimi kakushi* (ear covering) or *soku hatsu* (chignon/pompadour). The appeal of wearing the hair on top of the head in the manner of the renowned 'Gibson Girl' was that it revealed the nape of the neck –endowed with a particular eroticism in Japanese culture and an area of the body that the *kimono* sublimely reveals. As with male dress, synthesis of the two sartorial cultures was one solution to the new manners; the allusions to classical literature woven into the domestic fabric used for a Western-style dress c.1881, indicative of the cultural capital possessed by the Marquise Nabeshima Nagako, wife of a Meiji diplomat. However at the upper echelons of the social spectrum the ability to dress appropriate to the

occasion has led to theorisations of a ‘double-life’ in which Japanese wore Western-style clothes in public but reverted to traditional dress in private. This is an over-simplistic view – whether wearing *kimono* or crinoline dress choices made by the elite “were both constructions, representing the dualistic nature of their professional lives” (Esenbel, 1996, p. 115). The constant changing of costume was a chore for some – socialite Tsuda Ume characterised the life at the Rokumeikan as “a crowd, a crush of gay dresses, dancing, low necks and all that sort of thing” (reported in Chapman, 1987, p. 266). Again it was Basil Hall Chamberlain who felt obliged to critique his hosts in their attempts to follow fashion, observing that “no caricature could do justice to the bad figures, the ill-fitting garments, and the screeching colours, that ran riot between 1886 and 1889” (Chamberlain, 1905, p. 126). But caricatures there were – cartoonist Georges Bigot portrayed the Japanese as monkeys costumed in Western styles but, looking past the overt racism, some of his images cleverly articulate how dress functions to discipline the body and the fact that posture is socially constructed – depicting *geisha* struggling into corsets prior to attending the weekly ball at the Rokumeikan and squatting outside the hall to enjoy a quick pipe during a break in the dancing (reproduced in Meech-Pekarik, 1986, plate ?).

Outside this socio-political elite female dress practices did not change in the precipitate and prescriptive manner that had been the case their male counterparts. Rather than from domestic to international the pattern was from class-based as they were released from their traditionally assigned positions in the home and engaged in the traditionally male bastions of work and education. The *kimono* was not widespread being an upper-class urban fashion *haori* jacket became acceptable wear for students, and working women started wearing the man’s *hakama* (bifurcated skirt). This can be clearly seen in the 1875 Kunitera print of the conditions in a Tomioka silk mill (reproduced in Smith, 1964, p. 222), in which the female employees working in the factory are all dressed in this style. The suggestion that women “become the repository of traditional values...among groups exposed to rapid change” (Sievers, 1983, p. 15) would seem to be supported by the fact that only the final of nine depictions of Meiji women featured in a series of prints entitled *Fuzoku Sanjuniso* (Thirty-two Aspects of Customs and Manners) produced by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi in 1888 features a Japanese woman dressed in crinolines. This image (reproduced in Narazaki, 1966, p. 247) possesses a connotative level beyond that of pure Westernisation – the irises that the woman strolls amongst symbolise purity in Japanese culture. The *kimono* remained a marker of Japanese woman-hood well into the twentieth century, although the garment tended worn more tightly wrapped around the body than previously in order to counter the erotic associations that the looser style had with *iki* (floating world sensuality).

Within a few years Western dress became known by the term *hai-kara* (high collar) – initially a reference to the starched neckband of the man’s dress-shirt, but later used as a disparaging epithet for anything considered modish. Unease at the pace of change had been articulated in the mass media back in 1872 when the *Shinbun Zasshi* (News Magazine) despaired at the sight of “a Japanese man with a Prussian cap on his head, French shoes on his feet, the jacket of an English sailor and American military dress trousers... The ordinary Japanese citizen drapes himself in clothing stripped from the world” (reported in Dalby, 1993, p. 68). This unlikely scenario can be read as a commentary on the Meiji government’s practice of modelling institutions of state on preferred Western versions – the new Japanese education system had been based on Prussia’s, the Navy on Britain’s, the postal service on the United State’s and the Army on France’s. The military was crucial in promoting the advantages of foreign styles

and defeat of a cohort of traditionally dressed warriors in revolt against the government in 1877 by the standing army of conscripts clad in Western-style uniforms had huge symbolic import. A sketch captioned 'Fashionable Costumes of Modern Japanese Officers' that appeared in the *Illustrated London News* portrayed the subjects, sporting bow ties and trousers tucked into knee-length cavalry boots, being stared at by an incredulous old-school *samurai*. Narusawa Akira argues that the Japanese experience of modernity is encapsulated in two wood-block prints depicting military drill either side of the Meiji Restoration. The earlier work by Torashige shows parade-ground gates opening onto a bustling Edo (old Tokyo) street with no clear boundaries, spatially or sartorially, between citizens and soldiery. In the other, by Kunisada (1871), the two groups are segregated by railings and easily distinguishable by virtue of their respective appearances – signalling the disappearance of certain social freedoms as the new government began to regulate bodies, behaviours and the built environment.

The Son of Edo: Spectacle and the Built Environment

The denizens of Edo hardly lacked for things to look at. In addition to the regular sight of retinues comprised of up to 500 men accompanying their *daimyo* (provincial governor) into the capital⁵, groups of peddlers, acrobats and mountebanks thronged the streets of the metropolis. The melange of humanity would later have to compete with automotive traffic – prints of the Nihonbashi area in the city centre by Kunitora (1870) and Yoshitora (undated, held in the Ministry of Education Archive Tokyo) record a variety of wheeled vehicles. The first railway line was built between Shinbashi in central Tokyo and the port city of Yokohama in 1872. A print entitled *The First Railway Train at Takanawa* by Shosai Ikkei (reproduced in Fox, 1969, p. 392) from that year and a similar undated work by Yoshitora (reproduced in Seidensticker, 1985, pp. 48-49) both depict on-lookers gawping at the locomotives from their viewpoints on bridges – evidence that technological advances were very much part of the spectacle of the early Meiji period. An inaugural run took place with the Emperor travelling in carriages fitted with *tatami* (reed-mats) in place of Western-style seats. A possibly apocryphal account records that having embarked by stepping out of his shoes as Japanese custom dictates, none of his courtiers thought to pick them up, the cause of some consternation when the party arrived at its destination.

Another auspicious occasion captured in domestic visual culture was the promulgation of the constitution in 1889. An anonymous print (reproduced in Gluck, 1985, pp. 132-133) of Japanese officials in military uniform or formal wear with wives dressed in crinolines gathered in front of the Emperor and Empress records how the process was legitimised by the presence of foreign dignitaries and diplomats. Other events that followed the Meiji Restoration in attempts to provide "historical and cultural ratification of contemporary order" (Williams, 1977, p. 117) included a mock battle staged between Japanese and British forces. Visits by eminent foreigners provided opportunities for such spectacular performances. Clara Whitney records the appearance of a group of Yanagibashi *geisha* wearing Stars & Stripes-patterned *kimono* during General Ulysses Grant's trip to the Shintomiya *kabuki* theatre in 1879. While in Tokyo Grant reviewed the Imperial troops, as did Victoria's grandson, Prince Arthur of Connaught, in 1906. An anonymous print of this event (held in the British Museum) shows the Imperial flag and the Union Jack suspended from an airship in the background. There seems to have been particular interest in levitation in Japan – an English stuntman known as

Spencer the Balloon Man attracted large crowds at Ueno in 1890. The entertainment provided by performers in travelling shows gradually gave way to more scientific displays in the form of automata, magic-lantern displays and dioramas. Japanese citizens were already familiar with *karakuri* (peep-boxes) – a section of an unsigned scroll c.1730 (in the British Museum) entitled *Amusements in Edo* shows one such item drawing crowds in the grounds of Asakusa Kannon temple in downtown Tokyo. Asakusa was selected as the site for construction of the *Ryounkaku* (cloud-scraping tower), built with advice of English engineer William Barton in 1890. This 12-storey edifice housed numerous shops and a lounge served by the first country's elevators, although for safety reasons the topmost stages – an exhibition space and two observation platforms equipped with arc-lights and telescopes – had to be accessed using a flight of stairs.

Spectacle not only occurred within creative contexts, it also arrived in the form of destructive events. With residences constructed of wood and cooking done on open braziers, so-called 'flowers of Edo' frequently burned swathes of the capital to the ground. A *hinomi* (fire-viewing platform) was an architectural feature of many buildings, and lookout towers could be up to nine metres in height. In spite of the efforts of the fire brigade who, unlike the other public services, had retained their traditional uniform, the great Tsukiji fire of 1872 provided an opportunity for rebuilding the centre of the city – a project undertaken by English architect Thomas Waters. A print by Hiroshige III of the new Ginza Bricktown records the appearance of telegraph poles, horse-drawn carriages and gas-lamps – all items name-checked in the *Civilization Ball Song*, an educational rhyme repeated by children while bouncing a ball. Also listed among the benefits of Western technology was the lightning conductor – the use of which no doubt prevented a number of the fires that had engendered a philosophical attitude regarding the inevitability of destruction and renewal in the Japanese mind and aided acceptance of the changes being wrought to the urban environment.

One other innovation introduced in Ginza was the use of glass in shop fronts, and businessmen were further encouraged to move in through favourable rental terms offered by the government. A pharmacist started manufacturing Western-style cosmetics with the ambition of "taking the muddiness from the skin of the nation" in a return to the traditional aesthetic ideal of a chalk-white pallor that connoted freedom from manual labour in the fields. The name of the brand, Shiseido, was derived from classical Chinese literature is an example of 'Japanization' – the wrapping of the grit of foreign ideas in nacreous layers of native taste. Hattori Kintaro founded the Seiko company nearby and, as the pocket-watch became the quintessential *hai kara* accoutrement, satirical prints portrayed the modern dandy sporting an outsize timepiece⁶. As the main thoroughfare developed *Ginbura* (strolling around Ginza) became a popular leisure practice amongst young people, thereby creating Tokyo's equivalent of the Parisian *flâneur* and *flâneuse*.

The businessmen who had moved into Ginza were considered *narikin* (nouveau riche); old money had been in residence since the seventeenth century in the form of two rival family-owned, dry-goods merchants. Shirokiya was first to offer Western-style clothes and featured window displays from 1886; Echigoya (owned by the Mitsui family) was first to instigate a fixed pricing policy and installed glass display-cases⁷. In 1905 the outlet re-opened under the name Mitsukoshi, promoting itself as the country's first American-style *depato* (department store). An advisory group on trends included graphic designer Sugiura Hisui, who created the poster advertising completion of the company's new fabric annexe in 1914. The image – of a woman/angel dressed in contemporary European clothing, born aloft by a pair of Vien-

na Secession-patterned wings while holding a Statue of Liberty-style torch (originally French) and a cornucopia (appropriated from ancient Rome) – features an eclecticism that demonstrates a pre-existing, post-modernist aspect to traditional Japanese aesthetics. From this point onwards the Japanese department store became the foremost cultural intermediary in disseminating foreign material culture as commercial interests began to supersede the political expediency that had marked the country's initial encounter with the West.

Conclusion: The Sons (and Daughters) of Samurai

In his renowned work *Empire of Signs* – a series of miniature case-studies on topics ranging from the painterly signification of Japanese cuisine to the empty spectacle of the centre of Tokyo – Roland Barthes argued that the pleasure Western audiences gained from decoding signs could not occur in “this system which I shall call: Japan” (Barthes, 1982, p. 3) because the country's signifiers – surfaces, masks, maps, wrapping, calligraphy – were complete in themselves and further meaning was either unreachable or non-existent. This article has considered the manner in which Japanese appropriations of elements of Western material culture during a socio-cultural paradigm shift in the Meiji period were conducted with particular attention paid to the connotative aspects of the sign systems of Western culinary, sartorial and architectural culture. One phenomenon that escaped Barthes' analytical eye was the display of simulacra of available dishes that feature in the windows of many restaurants – a practice aimed at educating citizens about foreign fare that dates back approximately one hundred years. Opening up to the outside world in the latter part of the nineteenth century, Japan had embarked on a project of modernity that would enable it to catch up with the West not just socio-culturally but also physically. Associations were set up to promote the consumption of meat, using the stature of the foreigner as a spur – with the result that *tonkatsu* (pork cutlet) is now a standard dish. Within a generation the diet enjoyed by the general population had changed considerably, although increased consumption of meat did not improve the status of *eta* (lowest caste community frequently employed in slaughterhouses and tanneries) who were discriminated against as a result of Buddhist thought that linked the handling animal products with ritual impurity.

The convenience of Western foods was enshrined in a mnemonic *okasan yasume haha ki-toku* (wife, take it easy, your mother is ailing) using the first *katakana* (alphabet used for loan-words) syllable from a range of new dishes – O from *omuretsu* (omelette), Ka from *kare raisu* (curry-rice) and so on – that have become standards. Not unreasonably for a culture based around the harvesting and consumption of rice, the Japanese use different terminology for this staple; *kome* for the uncooked grain, *gohan* when served with Japanese food, although the English word is used when it appears in foreign fare, as in the *kare raisu* referred to above. Curiously, the Hollywood cowboy films shot on location in Italy in the nineteen-sixties are known as ‘macaroni westerns’. Other idiosyncratic appellations include *kasutera* (a kind of sponge cake referred to using the native word for its country of origin, Spain), *shiyu kurimu* (custard cream in a choux pastry) and *sofuto kurimu* (ice cream). As the popularity of dairy products increased milk bars became hangouts for the intelligentsia, while more hedonistic fare was available at numerous cafes which sprang up during the Taisho period (1912-1925) – the forerunner of the notorious Ginza girlie bar. The contemporary urban landscapes of Tokyo now features a wealth of restaurants (including as many Michelin-starred establish-

ments as Paris) that offer either foreign or indigenous cuisine in order to accommodate the long-standing Japanese practice of socialising outside the home.

Changes in sartorial practice were also accompanied by the entry of loan words into the lexicon: *manto* and *zubon* (both from the French) for sleeveless cloak and trousers respectively, *seta* for sweater, *oba* for overcoat and *sebiro* for business suit – written using the *kanji* (Chinese characters) meaning broad stature but originally a contraction of Savile Row, the centre of Britain's tailoring trade. In 1908 newspaper articles on European fashions reported a vogue for *kimono*-sleeved dresses, thereby completing a circuit of cultural influence. Initially uptake of Western dress was class-based, with members of the socio-political elite adopting it immediately following the Meiji Restoration in a tactic that legitimised their positions both internally and internationally. Branches of the military took up Western-style uniforms and rules pertaining to the wearing of these were codified in the minute detail that post-structuralist Michel Foucault would interpret as examples of the 'micro-physics of power' exercised over discursively-constructed 'docile bodies' (Foucault 1977). Control by the state over dress extended to the educational sector and many schools in contemporary Japan still insist on a Prussian army-style uniform for boys and the British sailor-suit for girls. Later reaction against the *hai kara* style of the aristocracy found its expression in the wearing of Western clothing, while simultaneously eschewing its nuances and disrupting the codes it embodied. Known as *ban kara* (barbarian collar), the term still has currency in Japan – used to describe an ensemble of threadbare clothes and *geta* (wooden sandals) adopted by rebellious students.

Amongst the general population the division was based around gender – the majority of Japanese women did not take up Western dress until well into the twentieth century with traditionalists remaining suspicious of wearers of the new styles. Indeed, in 1916 a court hearing a case against a woman for assaulting her mother-in-law was told that the fact she wore modern clothing was evidence of her disreputable character. It has been suggested that the similarity of silhouette between *kimono* and nineteen-twenties shift dress facilitated the switching of styles. Certainly, the influence of American popular culture (as opposed to European high culture) in the form of jazz music, Hollywood films and the motorcar informed the behaviour of the infamous *moga* (modern girl), whose need for speed, addiction to fashion and sybaritic excesses led to characterisation of the period as one of *ero-guro-nansensu* (erotic, grotesque nonsense). The denizens of this contemporary incarnation of the 'floating world' soon attracted the attentions of an increasingly repressive state apparatus and the government would shortly pass regulations banning Western clothes and hairstyles on the grounds of fostering national unity prior to participating in global hostilities.

Following the Pacific War, the country was occupied by the United States for a period of seven years, during which time the *kimono* was placed at the back of the Japanese mental wardrobe. The garment is currently reserved for use on formal occasions: festivals, coming-of-age-day events, university graduation and weddings. In the latter it is common for bride and bridegroom to first appear in traditional dress before changing into Western-style formalwear. Seemingly derived from ancient religious rites, the Shinto ceremony was first introduced for the marriage of the Japanese Crown Prince in 1900 as a reaction against Westernisation – becoming standard practice only in the post-war period. Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni (1997) argues that the contemporary wedding performance creates a pastiche of an exotic oriental identity, one constructed in opposition to the significant Other of the West, and as such constitutes an example of the 'invention of tradition' (Hobsbawm, 1983) that operates to reaffirm national or cultural solidarity at times of fracture. The white wedding dress

was introduced in the nineteen-seventies – the point at which Japan began to become a major player in global sartorial culture. The country's success in this arena has been as much the result of the innovative dress practices of its various youth fractions as the creative outputs of its fashion designers. The performances of post-modern identities that take place on the streets of Tokyo's trend-setting Harajuku area and in other large cities by sartorial bricoleurs wearing garments and whole outfits drained of their connotative heft have become an integral part of the visual landscape of contemporary urban Japan.

Conversely, the costumed performances that were key to the project of modernity initiated in the late-nineteenth century by the Meiji Restoration had taken place in the private surroundings of the Rokumeikan – one of a number Western-style buildings designed by *o-yatoi* (foreign specialists), such as Josiah Conder. While the new government imported architectural expertise, private commercial concerns dispatched their own observers abroad. In 1896 Mitsukoshi sent engineer Yokogawa Tamisuke to the United States, where he visited Macy's, Bloomingdale's and Wanamaker. The company later built a five-storey main store in central Tokyo that was a replica of the latter and, at the time, the world's largest building East of the Suez Canal. The large Japanese merchants had traditionally provided cultural services to the community and the contemporary *depato* usually incorporates a fresh-food market, a whole floor housing a range of restaurants, numerous apparel boutiques and an exhibition space. The nineteen-thirties saw the advent of the 'terminal department store' as companies such as Keio, Seibu and Odakyu located on the peripheries of major cities constructed stores that incorporated stations and developed railway lines serving the outlying residential areas. The department store currently acts as the key cultural intermediary, identifying, editing and disseminating domestic and foreign goods to the "imagined communities of shifting networks" (Clammer, 1997, p. 106) that constitute post-modern consumer society in Japan. By controlling suburban transport systems (and often much of the real estate market), these institutions are able to deliver customer to the hearts of their commercial operations to offer them Western-style food, fashion and spectacle.

Notes

1. In the text Japanese names are rendered in the standard manner – family name followed by given name.
2. On seeing an umbrella in America in 1860, members of the diplomatic mission agreed that carrying such an object (known as *komorigasa* = bat parasol) in Japan would result in being cut down by a passing *samurai*.
3. Gradually pork and horsemeat entered the diet – artist Sir Alfred East records finding a menu offering "mouton with red currant dam" (*sic*) in his diary of 1889.
4. International demand for silk increased when disease ravaged European silkworm populations in the mid-nineteenth century. London's iconic Liberty department store owes its success to imported Japanese silk.
5. All governors were required to spend an extended period in the capital under a system known as *sankin kotai* (alternate attendance).
6. The regulation of time in the countryside was a fraught issue. Negative reaction to farm-workers wearing gold time-pieces led one village *jishukai* (punctuality association) to propose "giving up watches altogether" and "punctuality at all gatherings" at the same meeting (reported in Gluck, 1985, p. 185).
7. By mid-Meiji another store Daimaru late had become the most popular destination, but suffered when by-passed by the trolley-bus line.

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