

Between the 1870s and 1945, dress was a signifier of Japan's transition from an 'Oriental' country - subordinate to the West - to a bearer of 'universal' modernity in East Asia. By the early 20th century, when Japan had largely achieved diplomatic equality with the West and colonial dominion over parts of Asia, Western dress had come to be taken for granted by 'modern' Japanese men and used as a symbol of equal rights by some Japanese women.

Modernity, gender and the empire

Gender, citizenship and dress in modernising Japan

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The new military adopted Western-style uniforms shortly after the Meiji Restoration (1868) as it constructed a new Japanese masculinity. The Meiji emperor made a famous transition in his public representation from Japanese high nobility to Western martial manliness by changing his dress, hair, and posture. An 1872 photograph shows him in courtly attire that could have been pulled from a trunk stored away a millennium earlier, while a photograph from 1873, the first year of Japan's new national conscript army, depicts him in a Western-style field marshal's uniform. At the same time, colonial subjects were distinguished by their clothing and bodily adornment, although their 'traditional' dress was often part of an invented tradition encouraged by Japanese anthropologists to distinguish quaint natives from modern colonists. Modernity and imperialism toward the rest of Asia and modernity and anti-imperialism vis-à-vis the West were linked through dress.

Ethnic considerations cannot be unbundled from those of gender, as modernity was initially projected by masculine Japanese in Western dress. The Empress attempted to transform the image of femininity by appearing in public in 1873 with unblackened teeth and natural eyebrows (blackened teeth and plucked and repainted eyebrows had been essential for proper adult women for generations) and by wearing Western gowns in 1886. Her practices served as a model for elite ladies to dress in a 'modern' way to persuade Western diplomats that Japan deserved to be freed from its unequal treaties with Western nations. At the same time, female factory workers were put in Western clothing because long kimono sleeves could become entangled in industrial machinery. Except for farm women, who had always had an indigenous form of comfortable work clothes and adopted only bits and pieces of Western attire (e.g. aprons and cloth bonnets), women at the top and bottom ends of the social scale had political and pragmatic reasons to wear Western clothing in the late 19th century. In the early 1920s, some feminists seeking rights of citizenship identified Western clothing with rights held only by Japanese men, who had for several decades worn Western clothing in the public sphere. To be sure, women's choices in dress carried a variety of messages; by the late 1920s Western dress for women had come to be seen as fashionably modern (and not necessarily politicised), and many women's rights activists were equally comfortable in Japanese and Western garb. The gendered shifts in dress did not follow a single trajectory.

Civilisation and enlightenment - men in public

In 1853, several decades of Western countries pressing Japan to end its 'closed country' policy culminated in its forced opening by the United States and the imposition of unequal treaties with the US and European countries. Both government and private proponents of 'civilisation and enlightenment' (*bunmei kaika*), hoping to persuade the West of Japan's modernity and its right to diplomatic and commercial equality, advocated 'modernisation' to survive in the new international environment, propelling Japan into a whirlwind of changes in the decades after 1868. Dress reform was part of the government's modernisation efforts. It included not only policies concerning proper styles for the modern person interacting with Westerners, but also policies about how much clothing to wear. Japanese authorities in 1871 required male rickshaw pullers and day labourers to wear something less revealing than loin cloths, admonishing them not to be laughed at by foreigners. In 1872, the authorities required men to replace their samurai-style topknots with contemporary Western coiffures. Men conducting official business with Westerners or attending government functions were required to dress in the Western mode.



The young Meiji emperor was photographed in the centuries-old dress of the high court nobility in 1872. By the following year, his public representations shifted to clothing that could be read as typical of modern, mainly monarchs in Europe.

important markers in men's *yōfuku* were those of class, occupation, and wealth.

Modern clothing and the colonies

At the same time, *yōfuku* had not entirely lost its connotation of modern and civilised. That is, men's *yōfuku* also signified 'Japanese' as opposed to 'colonial'. Although Japanese men in the colonies did not confine their clothing choices to *yōfuku*, often wearing Japanese kimono at home or even in public, their tendency to wear Western styles, especially the uniforms of professionalism (e.g., military uniforms, scholars' and bureaucrats' suits), was not only a reflection of the growing naturalness of Western styles but also a way of distinguishing the 'natives' from modern Japanese. Taiwan offers a good example of the nexus of Japanese imperialism, gender, and dress. Soon after Taiwan was made a Japanese colony in 1895, the imperial government sent scholars into the island's towns and villages to describe the state of civilisation and society. Japanese men in professional *yōfuku* used cameras to capture for propagation and analysis the images of the 'backward' Taiwanese. Because the process implied that the Taiwanese were backward and the Japanese in their Western masculine clothing were 'civilised', there was a possibility of advancing Taiwanese civilisation over time, thereby justifying Japanese imperialism.



The Empress (1872, left) continued to wear Japanese clothing in public and private long after her husband abandoned it. As wives of statesmen were called on to play public roles at diplomatic events, they were required to wear Western dress to symbolise their - and Japan's - modernity - in 1886. The Empress set the tone.

Western dress signalled an abandonment of old court styles considered by the modernisers to be Siniticised and effeminate and therefore un-Japanese.

At the same time, private individuals undertook their own quests for modernity. Many saw that the way to challenge the Western threat was to become 'civilised and enlightened'. Gentlemen were to learn not only how to behave politely (unlike rough samurai), but also how to dress in ways that indicated that Japan was on a modernising trajectory. For the most part, Western clothes (*yōfuku*) were worn in public, where modern men did their work. Returning home, many slipped off the external symbols of civilisation and modernity and slipped on the relaxing kimono. Many would-be wearers of *yōfuku* in the 1860s and early 1870s were not sartorially inclined, mixing an umbrella with wooden sandals, a top hat with *hakama* (culottes), or an evening cape with an outdoorsman's shirt. In time, men in white-collar jobs in offices, schools, and government service, as well as working-class men in mines and factories wore versions of *yōfuku* identified in the West and in Japan with their class and occupation. By the end of the 19th century, Western clothing had been naturalised for men, and though still called '*yōfuku*', the term itself was increasingly drained of its Western meaning, coming to be translated simply as 'clothing'. The

Sartorial constructions of gender

Japanese women in the late 19th century, like colonial subjects, were in a contradictory position vis-à-vis modernity and dress. Japan itself, under the pressure of unequal treaties, continued to be viewed as 'feminine' in contrast to the 'masculine' West - a trope applied, in turn, by the Japanese to the Chinese by the end of the century. On the one hand, Japanese leaders and advocates of 'civilisation and enlightenment' wished to escape from their unwanted feminisation; on the other, many sought to preserve women as symbolic 'repositories of the past' in an era of dizzying change. If modern subjectivity or even citizenship were the end result of civilisation and enlightenment, then what place did women have? Feminists sought an expanded public role for modern Japanese women, but others believed women's roles should be in the intertwined public and private realms that the Japanese government had crafted with its valorisation of motherhood (private) in service of the state (public). What was a woman to wear in the interstices of public and private if, for men, *yōfuku* represented the public and Japanese clothes the private?

Women working in Japan's modern economic sectors wore Western style clothing, but unlike the case of the Empress, feminist women or, later, fashionable New Women and Modern Girls, little was said about them. Working women's clothes were not necessarily of their own choosing, and

they were donned for pragmatic reasons. No one wore them to make a statement - of the fashion or political variety. This type of alternative clothing included school uniforms, factory uniforms, and professional work clothes for teachers, nurses, and other working women. Alternative clothing in Meiji Japan set the stage for the popularisation of Western clothes after World War One, and made it possible for feminists to make a political statement with their choice of attire. Women had become accustomed, as children and as workers, to wearing *yōfuku* at least part of the time. If *yōfuku* was appropriate to women's participation in the public sector, it helped open the door to feminists' struggles for citizenship after World War One.

The institution ultimately responsible for the expanding thrust of the modernising state was the military. Gendered male, its uniforms were a unique type of *yōfuku*. The uniform created a central place in the modernising state for Japanese manhood and symbolised the projection of Japanese (masculine) power in Asia. It rendered Japanese males imperial subjects, a status that could not be similarly fulfilled by women who had no dress that similarly symbolised projection of power. Even while in the colonies, women who wore *yōfuku* were either fashionable in a modern sense or carving out a space for their personal development.

Dress, gender and the public realm

How one dressed was in part determined by one's location. Professional clothes or work clothes, which were often but not exclusively some form of *yōfuku*, were worn in the workplace, and Japanese kimono were more likely to be worn as comfortable garments while inside the home. Because the home was a locus of women's roles as imperial subjects, it was not, however, a 'private sphere' in the Western sense; the public and domestic spheres were mutually interpenetrated, and men and women occupied both. Thus, conservatives in the 1910s and 1920s were not frightened by women's passive existence in the public sphere; they were threatened by women's forceful declaration that the public world was their place, too, and they would define their role in that space as well as the clothing they would wear while in it. These women were not viewed as virtuous daughters in the textile mills, wearing the uniforms they were handed and sending pay packets home to hungry relatives in the countryside. Nor were they the (stereotyped) image of noble nurses or dedicated 'good wives and wise mothers', active in the public sector, it was believed, only on behalf of the nation or their families. Rather, the bright young women of the 1910s and 1920s who challenged the notion of virtuous women in the public sector were part of a cultural shift represented by a number of symbols, one of which was their modern, hip clothing. It was in that climate that feminists demanding the rights of citizenship emerged.

Stylish fashion worn by the New Women of the 1910s and the Modern Girls of the 1920s could be provocative, in both senses of the term, both challenging old norms and being sexually charged, linking power and female gender representation in ways that factory uniforms did not. The Modern Girls of the 1920s were working women of modest means who enjoyed some independence, worked as typists, teachers, nurses, telephone operators, office workers, and sales clerks, and wore the stylish clothing of women of greater wealth. Many had girls' higher school educations. Their independence and disposable income led critics to suggest they were promiscuous. Modern Girls made exhilarating copy in newspaper and magazine articles as well as in novels, scandalised some of the public by claiming some degree of independence as agents of their own lives, and represented most clearly the modern era in which men and women occupied the same space.

Occupying the same space but not sharing the same rights encouraged feminists to intensify their demands for equality during the reign of the Modern Girl. Even if most Modern Girls were more focused on consumption than on politics or militancy, many worked to enhance women's rights in the public arena. Photos of feminists at work throughout the 1920s show them wearing a mix of Western and Japanese style clothing. Street scenes indicate that women in general were as comfortable with Western as with Japanese clothes, and both styles came to be seen as normative by the end of the decade. This changed rapidly with the onset of World War Two. In 1939, women were pushed to wear *monpe* (baggy work trousers) even in the city, a considerable sacrifice for Japan's fashionable women.

In modernising Japan, dress reflected public policy; it was a tool of imperialism and a marker of citizenship, nationality, and ethnicity; and it defined notions of gender and modernity. By adopting Western clothes, Japanese manhood was empowered to build an empire and to project outward both its military and 'civilising' missions; by devising practical (often though not always Western-inspired) clothing to wear in public, Japanese femininity could claim a space in the public sector into which feminists could insert themselves. In both cases, a gendered construction of citizenship was an essential part of a Japanese modernity defined by the state and signified by individuals' clothing choices.

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In spite of the nationalist claim to have escaped Western colonialism, Thailand (known until 1939 as Siam) was exposed to Western influences as much as colonial Southeast Asia. It is thus no surprise that portraits of King Chulalongkorn, (Rama V), dressed in western-style suit or uniform act today as signifiers of Thailand's status as a modern nation. Becoming modern in the high imperial age, when nations were ranked according to social and technological progress, required not only the demarcation of territorial boundaries, the establishment of a civil service and standing army, infrastructures and public education, but also acceptance of Western standards of public decorum and self-presentation.

Refashioning civilisation

Dress and bodily practice in Thai nation building

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The domain of bodily practice - encompassing personal hygiene, dress, deportment and language - was central to the nation-building project initiated in the 1890s by the Thai monarchy and continued, after the change of political system in 1932, by the bureaucratic-military elite. The royalty selectively adopted since the 1860s Victorian corporeal and sartorial etiquette to fashion 'civilised' (Thai, *siwilai*) personas, which were publicised both domestically and internationally by means of mechanically reproduced images (photographs, book engravings and postcards). In the early 20th century Western dress and accoutrements became popular with Bangkok's embryonic middle class, who increasingly defined what was fashionable or 'up-to-date' (*samai mai*). Under the authoritarian government of the early 1940s bodily practice was policed through legislation so to discipline the body politic while pursuing modernisation.

Although the early-20th century reform of bodily practice made social and geographical distinction within Thailand more marked, selection and hybridisation were part of the very process by which Western dress and etiquette were localised. As a result, both the adoption and the occasional rejection of foreign corporeal and vestimentary norms enjoyed local legitimation. So, while Asian nationalists rejected Western dress as a symbol of foreign domination and fashioned instead a 'national' dress to express the cultural soul of the oppressed nation, no 'Thai' dress was codified until the 1970s, when a neo-traditional costume was fashioned in accordance with the self-Orientalising that underpinned Thailand's new international visibility as an exotic tourist destination.

Restyling civilisation's accoutrements, 1870s-1920s¹

The diffusion of the Western bourgeois regime of corporeal propriety by the agents of imperialism (colonial officials, missionaries) in Africa, the Pacific and parts of Asia in the course of the 19th century, determined the global standardisation of bodily practice. But in Siam, where Christian missionaries made only marginal inroads, it was the court that led the way to civility. By 1897, when King Chulalongkorn journeyed to Europe with a large retinue, the body of the Thai royalty had become a living - indeed, travelling - advertisement of the modernising mission by which the Chakri dynasty asserted its legitimacy in Southeast Asia's new colonial order. In fact, reliance on cultural practices and materials as a means to connect to the dominant civilisation of the day was not a novelty for the Thai royalty.² In Central Thailand's Indianised courts corporeal techniques of self-presentation, from deportment to speech, were highly developed. Tropical climate discouraged elaborate dress except for Brahmins and royalty; still, sumptuary laws regulated clothing's usage as late as the mid-1850s, as attested by the British envoy John Bowring.

The court dress reform saw a fundamental shift from wrapped to stitched vestimentary regime. In the reform's initial phase (1870s and 80s), hybrid court attires were created by matching a high-necked lace blouse (for females) or colonial-style jacket (for males) with the unisex lower wrap (*chongkrabaen*), now often of European silk; import-

Inventing sartorial traditions: King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit, late 1950s

