

Recording the Clothing Life: Kimono and Dress Fabrics in 1930's Yokosuka and Tokyo

Rie Mori

Japan Women's University

Abstract

In 1940, Kobayashi Takako, newly graduated from the Japan Women's College, began recording her and her family's clothing life in an extraordinary way. She collected every piece of fabric she found around her, cut it to approximately 4 by 8 cm, stuck each on a postcard-sized piece of paper, and added a commentary. The cards finally totaled 216. The fabric pieces had been part of Kobayashi's kimono and dress; her mother's, grandmother's, father's, and housekeeper's kimonos; their bed clothes; and other such things.

What makes the collection unique and valuable is Kobayashi's commentaries, in which she wrote of the origin and life of the fabrics: when and where the family members had procured them; who and how they created the kimonos and dresses from them; and who and how they remade these garments into nightclothes, a doll's dress, and cushion covers. Her father, an office worker, had been a professional serviceman in the navy and her mother was a middle school teacher. Her family, evidently of the middle class and intelligentsia, lived in Yokosuka, a naval port city near Tokyo, and in her student days Kobayashi lived in a dormitory in Tokyo. Therefore, based on her collection, we can precisely characterize the clothing life of a middle-class family in a 1930's Japanese naval port city and the capital.

Kobayashi's conception could be traced to her graduation thesis, which was itself extraordinary and valuable. She recorded everything that was in her house, by text and drawings, on the suggestion of the renowned architect and sociologist, Kon Wajiro, who then taught at Japan Women's College. Through the fabric collection, however, Kobayashi directly sampled people's fashion practice and experience, in contrast to Kon's approach to the appearance of contemporary fashion.

Keywords: *Fabric Collection; Fashion; Kimono; Modern Japan; Modernology*

Introduction

In April 1940, Kobayashi Takako (1), who had graduated from the Japan Women's College (now Japan Women's University) four years before, began recording her and her family's clothing life in an extraordinary way. She collected every piece of fabric she found around her, cut them into small pieces, stuck each on a postcard-sized piece of paper, and added a commentary. The cards finally totaled 216 (2). The fabric pieces had been part of Kobayashi's kimono and dress; her mother's, grandmother's, father's, and housekeepers' kimonos; their bed clothes; and other such things. She finished the work in October of the same year.

What makes the collection unique and valuable is that it preserves the actual material of 1870s–1930s Japanese fabrics, along with the related commentaries and user testimonies. She

collected many different sorts of fabric in her house, from her great-grandmother's handwoven cloth to her late elder sister's baby kimono, her mother's *hakama* for the school uniform, her father's gardening wear, even their housekeeper's working clothes. Her commentaries describe her impressions of the fabrics, as well as their origin and life: when and where the family members had procured them; who and how they created the kimonos and dresses from them; and who and how they remade these garments into nightclothes, a doll's dress, and cushion covers (3).

Kobayashi's idea could be traced to the graduation thesis she submitted to the Japan Women's College in 1936, which was itself extraordinary and valuable. In the thesis, she recorded everything that was in her house, by text and drawings, on the suggestion of the renowned architect and sociologist, Kon Wajiro, who was teaching at her college at the time. In the paper's final section, I will discuss Kon's influence on Kobayashi and the differences between their work.

Andrew Gordon argues, in his book on the sewing machine in modern Japan, that 'the sewing machine tracks the story of an expanding consumer society in an era of wartime modernity' (4) in 1930s Japan, and that 'the 1930s was a time of both mobilizing for war and deepening of modernity' (5). Kobayashi was in high-school and college in the 1930s, during which Imperial Japan staged the Manchurian Incident (1931) and Shanghai Incident (1932), and launched the second Sino-Japanese War (1937-45). In this period, people--especially urban middle-class people--in the Japanese Empire enjoyed a growing consumer culture based on the war booms, which resulted in 'magazine spreads on the latest fashions, the growing popularity of sewing schools, the increased numbers of women dressmakers, the spread of home-made or custom-made Western dress among women [etc.]' (6). The Kobayashi collection, created in 1940, includes many pieces of fabric often purchased in department stores and sewn into fashionable Western clothing or trendy kimonos, which provides us with a vivid illustration of the consumer clothing culture in 1930s urban Japan.

Kenneth J. Ruoff notes that:

The patriotic environment of the 1930s intensified many forms of consumerism [...]. The boom in tourism, publishing and retail sales (e.g. department stores) peaked at the time of the 2,600th anniversary celebrations, which coincided with the third year of war with China. (7)

The 2,600th anniversary of the Empire of Japan was celebrated mainly in November 1940, one month after Kobayashi completed her fabric collection. Many related large and small celebratory events were held throughout 1940; and it was in this context of a nationwide consumer boom and celebratory atmosphere that Kobayashi worked diligently on her collection.

At the same time, however, Kobayashi often mentions, in her notes on the collection, inconveniences caused by the war, such as deterioration in the quality of clothing fabrics, and aerial bombing blackouts which had been enforced by the Japanese government since April 1938. The Kobayashi collection accurately depicts 'the coexistence of dark and of light, of suffering and of joy' (8), in 'a time of both mobilizing for war and deepening of modernity.'

The Kobayashi Family

According to her notes in the graduation thesis, the members of the Kobayashi household included Takako's grandmother, Ida Roku (who unfortunately passed away in December 1937), her mother Iku, her father Nobuaki, Takako herself, and a live-in housekeeper 「女中」 named Yanagisawa Ine, three years younger than Takako.

Kobayashi Takako was born in 1916. After graduating from Yokosuka Girls' High School, she entered the Japan Women's College, one of few private higher education institutions for women in Japan at the time. During semesters, she lived in the college dormitory in Mejiro, a

suburb of Tokyo. She submitted her graduation thesis in March 1936, received it back from the college after graduation, and finally completed it in April 1938, which illustrates her enthusiasm for the study. She spent the years immediately after graduation, during the Asia Pacific War (1937-45), doing housework and taking lessons in things such as the tea ceremony, ikebana flower arrangement, and the piano, as well as completing her graduation thesis and building her fabric collection. After Japan's defeat in the Asia Pacific War and the subsequent collapse of the Japanese Empire, Kobayashi worked as a dormitory supervisor at the Japan Women's University for several years, and maintained a close relationship with Kon Wajiro until he passed away (9).

Kobayashi's mother Iku, born in 1886, was a girls' high school teacher, having graduated around 1907 from the Tokyo Women's Higher Normal School 東京女子高等師範学校, the oldest women's normal school and at the time one of only two governmental higher education institutions for women. In 1912, she became a teacher at Yokosuka Girls' High School, which her daughter would attend some years later.

Kobayashi's father Nobuaki, born in 1880, was the manager of the accounting section of the Yokosuka branch of the Tokyo Electric Light Company 東京電燈株式会社, one of the predecessors of TEPCO 東京電力. He was also an ex-navy colonel who had been stationed in the Penghu Islands in the Taiwan Straits.

The family, then, which included a female educator graduated from the highest ranking school for women, and an ex-colonel and account manager for a large company, was evidently of the middle class and intelligentsia, familiar with advanced ways of living and thinking.

In addition, the family's house was in Yokosuka, then a large naval port city near the Japanese capital of Tokyo, as Nobuaki had been engaged in the Navy. During the Asia Pacific War (1937-45), Yokosuka was full of energy as a large number of seamen and war-related industries and their employees moved in; and Kobayashi and her mother often shopped at department stores not only in Yokosuka, but in Tokyo's Ginza district, the most fashionable district in Japan at the time.

In the following section, several examples from the collection will be detailed.

Examples from the Collection

A piece of thin plain weave silk with plaid pattern of white and light blue (Fig. 1) is accompanied by the following commentary:

Around Takasaki, in Gunma Prefecture, it was customary for married women to dress in their best summer clothes, called *ikimitama*, when they visited the grave of their parents' ancestor for the first time after marriage. Grandmother said this fabric was used in the undergarment of her *ikimitama* when she was 19 years old.

As Kobayashi's grandmother was born in 1855, we are here given a precious glimpse into the customs of the middle class in the North Kanto area in the late 19th century, including actual material from the time, along with the user's testimony.

A piece of very thin plain weave wool, with a stenciled pine and snow pattern (Fig. 2), is described as part of the grandmother's casual *obi* sash that Kobayashi's mother had sewn in her high-school sewing class, which included Hiratsuka Raicho, one of Japan's notable early feminists. Thus, we learn that Kobayashi's mother and Hiratsuka were classmates and took sewing classes together (10).

Furthermore, according to Kobayashi's commentaries, her mother took sewing lessons in Western-style children's clothing production around 1921, when Takako was six years old. The lessons were conducted in the Yokosuka branch of the school established by Namiki Isaburo, a

pioneer in sewing education in Japan and the founder of the *Bunka Saihō Gakuin*, now the Bunka Fashion College. The Kobayashi collection includes 10 fabric pieces from children’s clothing sewn in the school by her mother.

On a woolen fabric piece with deep blue and white plaid (Fig. 3), Kobayashi comments:

Fabric of Takako’s Western-style clothing, No. 1.

In 1921, the late Namiki Isaburo, founder of the *Bunka Saihō* (now the *Bunka Fukusō Gakuin*) began teaching sewing classes in Yokosuka as the first step in his creation of the sewing school. Mother took the classes in order to make Western-style clothing for Takako, then 6 years old. This is a remnant of a dress she made in the class.

And on another woolen fabric piece, with blue, red, black, and white plaid (Fig. 4):

Fabric of Takako’s Western-style clothing, No. 4 (sewn in Mr. Namiki’s class).
Dress.

I probably wore this as a third grader at the elementary school. I remember running a race in this on sports day.

It is highly valuable that we can study actual fabrics and user testimonies concerning Western-style sewing classes at the beginning of the 20th century in Japan.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

The collection also includes five fabric pieces from kimonos worn by the live-in housekeeper which were given to her by her employers, perhaps Kobayashi’s mother or Kobayashi herself. Made of relatively coarse cotton or wool, with large and brightly colored patterns, the pieces and commentaries offer insights into the actual material worn by a young female servant in an urban middle-class home in 1930s Japan.

Kobayashi’s Collection and Kon Wajiro’s Works

In 1912, the architect and sociologist Kon Wajiro arrived at Waseda University, where he taught until 1959. Over his career, he often also taught in other institutions, including the Japan Women’s college, where he taught from around the late 1920s to the 1940s. From 1917 on, he participated in investigations of traditional houses in rural and agrarian areas, which gradually evolved into research on contemporary urban life; and in 1927, he proposed a new form of investigation, called modernology, which is the study of contemporary material objects through making written and

illustrated records of them. His and his co-researchers' renowned and important works include the *Shirabemono* (Investigative) exhibition in 1927, the book *Moderunorozio: Kōgengaku* (Modernology) in 1930, and the book *Kōgengaku Saishū* (Modernological Method Collection): *Moderunorozio* in 1931 (11). Modernology is characterized by its methodology, in which contemporary objects are sketched and recorded, as they are, in scrupulous detail.

Kobayashi's work for her graduation thesis, 'A Family Viewed through Modernology' 考現学より見たる一家庭, was conducted under Kon's supervision. She wrote, in the afterword, that she discussed her thesis with Kon, and was advised to 'make a list of all the things in your house and sketch them,' which, Kon said, would constitute the first study of the contemporary life of the urban middle class in Japan. The thesis clearly reflects Kon's methodology, and achieved significant results.

In her fabric collection, however, Kobayashi developed her own distinctive methodology, to capture people's individual and unique experiences of clothing, describing the history of the fabric pieces based on the family members' memories, and including the members' feelings toward them. Through the fabric collection, one might say, Kobayashi probed deeply and with keen insight into people's fashion practice and experience, whereas Kon and his co-researchers focused more on the appearance of their contemporaries' way of life and fashion. In other words, Kobayashi was able to capture the meaning and sentiment behind the sewn fabrics and worn clothes, though her scope was limited to her family members, while Kon stayed on the surface of people's lives, but over a broader range.

Conclusion

The fabric collection of Kobayashi Takako provides us with unique and valuable insights into the clothing lives of the middle class in Yokosuka and Tokyo, through actual fabric pieces, commentaries, and user testimonies. As further research, we plan to analyze the quality of material, color, and design of the fabric pieces, and the relationships between them and the contemporary fashion trends and wartime regulations.

Notes

1. The Japanese personal names in the paper are written with the surname first, following the usual East Asian order.
2. The Kobayashi Takako Collection is today housed by Naruse Jinzo Memorial Hall at Japan Women's University, which generously provided all figures in this paper.
3. Rie Mori, "Kobayashi Takako no ifuku hyōhon: 1870-1930 nendai no chūryūcatei no iseikatsu [the Kobayashi Takako collection: clothing lives by urban middle class in 1870s -1930s Japan]," *Naruse Kinenkan* 33 (2018): 60-67.
4. Andrew Gordon, *Fabricating Consumers: The Sewing Machine in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 119.
5. Gordon, *Fabricating Consumers*, 120.
6. Gordon, *Fabricating Consumers*, 126.
7. Kenneth J. Ruoff, *Imperial Japan at Its Zenith: The Wartime Celebration of the Empire's*

2,600th Anniversary (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2010), 24-25.

8. Ruoff, *Imperial Japan at Its Zenith*, 18.
9. Tomoko Hayashi, “Shōwa shoki no sumai to kurashi no kōgengaku: 80nen no toki wo hete Nihon-joshidaigaku ni modotta Kobayashi Takako no sotsugyō-ronbun [Modernology on housing and life in the early Shōwa period: The graduation thesis of Kobayashi Takako],” *Naruse Kinenkan* 31 (2016): 18-33.
10. Tomoko Namba, “Kobayashi Takako no ifuku hyōhon ni miru kindai Nihon no josei no iseikatsu (1): Haha Iku no jogakusei-jidai to tsūgakufuku [Modern Japanese women’s clothing lives viewed through the Kobayashi Takako collection: schooldays and school clothes of Takako’s mother Iku],” *Naruse Kinenkan* 36 (2021): 41-61.
11. Hayashi, “Shōwa shoki no sumai to kurashi no kōgengaku,” 18-33.

Author Biography

Rie Mori

Rie Mori is a professor of fashion history at Japan Women’s University in Tokyo, Japan. Her research interest is in modernization of both traditional and Westernized fashion in East Asia. Her publications include “Kimono hyōshō no minzoku-shugi to teikoku-shugi,” in *Gurōbaru Kankeigaku 5: Mienai Kankeisei wo Misesu*, eds. Hiroshi Fukuda and Emi Goto (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2020, 26-44), which is scheduled in 2022 to be published in English translation as “The kimono exposed: through modernization and imperialization,” “the monpe as a totalitarian costume: Japanese farmer work pants as a wartime uniform for women in the Japanese empire,” in *Lessons to Learn?: Past Design Experiences and Contemporary Design Practices -Proceedings of the ICDHS 12th International Conference on Design History and Design Studies*, eds. Fedja Vukić and Iva Kostešić (Zagreb: UPI2M Books, 2020, 393-396), and *Momoyama Edo no Fasshon Rīdā: Egakareta Ryūkō no Hensen* [Fashion leaders in Momoyama and Edo period: Fashion depicted in genre paintings] (Tokyo: Hanawa Shobo, 2007).