

EAST ASIAN POPULAR CULTURE

# Fashion, Identity, and Power in Modern Asia

EDITED BY **KYUNGHEE PYUN**  
& **AIDA YUEN WONG**



# East Asian Popular Culture

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Kyunghee Pyun · Aida Yuen Wong  
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and Power  
in Modern Asia

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Kyunghee Pyun  
Aida Yuen Wong

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction

*Kyunghee Pyun and Aida Yuen Wong*

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Fashion history is a fertile terrain for encapsulating issues of gender and the body, power and control, commerce and manufacturing, and art and popular culture. This collection of fourteen essays on East Asia ca. 1880s–1960s presents not only the familiar kimono, *qipao*, and *han-bok*, but also lesser-known developments in military and school uniforms, religious vestments, ritual garments, accessories, and textile trades. Fashion—whether referring to its neutral synonyms of garments/clothing/dress or to the embodiments of change and allure<sup>1</sup>—is presented here as a heterogeneous medium to which East Asians widely and repeatedly turned to assert allegiances, influence behaviors, and reshape society. For our purpose, fashion (including clothing, hair, accessories, and fabrics) was not limited to the pursuit of chicness among the moneyed class. Prevalent struggles, such as whether and to what extent Western styles should be adopted, fired up debates on a national, even

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international, level. Who could wear what was seldom a one-person decision. Modernizers, colonizers, and sovereigns privileged certain fashion practices to their own goals, and others followed. In volatile times, the maintenance of traditional attire and accouterments could represent a form of resistance across the political spectrum, but it could equally be made to serve authoritarianism. *Fashion, Identity, and Power in Modern Asia* focuses on the transitional states of late Qing to early Republican China, Meiji to Taishō Japan, colonial Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, where imaginations collided.

Asian fashion history has a robust material foundation in the West. Chinese dragon robes, Japanese kimono, and Korean *hanbok* have long been collected by institutions such as the American Museum of Natural History and the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM, renowned for maritime trade arts) and by mainstream fine arts museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Minneapolis Institute of Art, the Brooklyn Museum, the Royal Ontario Museum, and the Victoria and Albert Museum. For a long time, however, items of Asian clothing were largely seen by non-Asians as ethnic costumes, classified under textiles and the decorative arts. This background does not take away from the related scholarship produced on materials, dyes, motifs, and production processes,<sup>2</sup> aspects to which contributors to this book pay close attention too. In the West, Asian clothing articles were first marketed as curiosities—in Chinatowns, for example. While certain clothing types, such as costumes of the Noh theater, eventually garnered attention as objects of art with complex histories, many Asian historical garments including the kimono first encountered Western viewers at souvenir boutiques or world expositions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>3</sup> In these contexts, the deeper significance of garments as markers of rank, wealth, marital status, metaphysics, cultural nationalism, and so forth tended to be poorly accounted for.

More problematic is when museums in the twenty-first century still subject Asian fashion to superficial, Orientalizing readings. It is not uncommon to see kimono being exhibited with Japanese swords and armors, reflecting the parochial fascination with samurai culture. But audiences are becoming more critical. In 2015, controversies rose up around Claude Monet's 1876 *La Japonaise* (Camille Monet wearing a blond wig and a bright red kimono), when the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, invited visitors to don a replica kimono and stand in front of the painting to have their pictures taken.<sup>4</sup> This type of presentation

reinforces certain Asian stereotypes also seen in movie characterizations such as the kimono-clad assassin O-Ren Ishii in *Kill Bill* (2003), which also features the *qipao*-clad Sofie Fatale. Fortunately, scholarly research on kimono is increasingly available in English, such as, recently, Anna Jackson's *Kimono: The Art and Evolution of Japanese Fashion* (2015) and Terry Satsuki Milhaupt's *Kimono: A Modern History* (2014).<sup>5</sup>

In recent years, blockbuster museum exhibitions in honor of Western fashion designers or celebrity wearers at Fine Arts museums have gradually helped to widen the discourse. Inquisitive curators want to tell alternative stories about creativity and agency. A representative recent exhibition was “Georgia O’Keeffe: Art, Image, and Style” at the Peabody Essex Museum where O’Keeffe’s clothing was presented as reflecting her modernist aesthetic and reinforcing the austere public persona she so keenly cultivated.<sup>6</sup> The performative aspect of fashion as integral to the larger oeuvre of an artist will also be the theme of a major show on Frida Kahlo at the Victoria and Albert Museum (June–November 2018). While delving into overlooked connections, these exhibitions seek to inscribe new significance to fashion and self-fashioning.

Asian clothing history appears to be on the cusp of similar revisions. In the past decade or so, for example, museums have attempted to re-narrate the history of Chinese textiles from scholarly perspectives.<sup>7</sup> A more notable accomplishment is *Changing Clothes in China: Fashion, History, Nation* (2008) by Antonia Finnane, who excavates dresses from printed sources from the late Qing dynasty to the Cultural Revolution of the People’s Republic of China.<sup>8</sup> Taking a specific view on “fashion,” Finnane tightens the links between the shifting nature of people’s dress to major sociopolitical events. The present volume is aligned with Finnane’s approach. Similarly emphasizing a sociopolitical framework is *Visualizing Beauty: Gender and Ideology in Modern East Asia* (2012) edited by Aida Yuen Wong. While focusing on the constructs of “traditional women” and “new women,” essays in that volume draw upon a diverse range of sources such as fashion journals, interior design magazines, newspaper illustrations, and paintings of and by women. Concepts of beauty and womanhood in changing societies did impact the way women dressed themselves. And, like *Visualizing Beauty*, the present book brings together materials on China, Japan, and Korea. This opens up a broader transcultural perspective than attempted previously on the topic of Asian fashion.<sup>9</sup> Another distinguishing feature of this book is the

special efforts made by leading dress historians to treat fashion items as primary sources, adding new insights to information derived from visual analyses and textual descriptions. But in the end, this collaborative volume seeks to break the artificial boundaries between art history, fashion history, visual cultural studies, economic and political history, and gender studies. Woman's history has evolved since the fall of the Qing in 1911, the Meiji Restoration (1868–1912), or the fall of the Joseon dynasty and the Korean Empire or the Daehan Empire (1897–1910). The 1910s marked the beginning of women's suffrage activities in China, while the 1919 March First Movement in colonial Korea had many female supporters. Although modern dress reforms impacted both males and females, their evolution could not be divorced from women's participation in social reforms.

Dress reform was not a uniquely East Asian phenomenon. Patricia Cunningham has placed new fashions in relation to the promotion of women's health and their social role in Europe and America at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> Several scholars define dress reform movements in the West in conjunction with women's suffrage.<sup>11</sup> From the 1850s to the 1890s, women in Victorian England called for liberation from opulent or irrational fashion styles, which continued into the Progress Era in the USA from the 1890s to the 1920s. Social activists proposed a rational design for women's dress, covering the body comfortably without restricting daily activities. Nonetheless, women's dresses remained largely decorative and not conducive to active lifestyles. For example, Gayle Fischer demonstrates how women wearing pantaloons were judged rebellious or unconventional.<sup>12</sup> Amelia Jenks Bloomer (1818–1894), an advocate of women's rights and temperance, was associated with the so-called Bloomers, referring to those women who favored loose-fitting trousers instead of a skirt worn with a short jacket. Emancipation from corsets, crinolines, or bustles was a long and laborious process. Less-restrictive wear was sanctioned for women who worked in the fields, but women like Mary Edwards Walker (1832–1919) were arrested for wearing pants in 1866.<sup>13</sup>

Historically, extensive dress reforms tended to go hand-in-hand with forced political changes. The second half of the nineteenth century, the starting point of this book, was a tumultuous time not just for Asia but also for Europe and North America. The Civil War in the USA had just ended in 1865, while Japan entered a new era with the demise of the Tokugawa Shogunate in 1868. A little over a decade before,