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## Kimono Rental, Tourism and Sartorial Expression

Elizabeth Kramer

A group of female friends, dressed in kimono, are strolling through the ‘Kimono Forest’ at Randen Tram Station in Kyoto (KIM263). It is a common sight as one continues on past the shops of Arashiyama to the Sagano Bamboo Grove and its nearby temples, one of the most photographed tourist destinations in the city. A day trip to many popular sites in Japan reveals that this sartorial practice is on the rise. Groups of women, families, young couples, and busloads of tourists and school children

from across East Asia (including Japan), as well as from Europe, America and beyond can be seen wearing kimono whilst enjoying the attractions. Since the late 1990s business literature has strongly encouraged ‘experience creation’, in which customers are actively involved in events for which the memory becomes the product<sup>2</sup> and tourist studies have argued that this active rather than passive engagement enhances tourists’ experiences and memories of place.<sup>3</sup> Of particular interest here is the sartorial performance that dressing-up in kimono affords sightseers and its relation to contemporary kimono fashion. This activity is enabled by thriving kimono rental agencies, which encourage tourists to immerse themselves fully in the history and culture of Japan by donning a kimono and going for a stroll. These companies not only provide kimono and kimono accessories – such as obi, *geta*, *tabi*, *haori*, hair accessories, Japanese-style handbags and parasols – at incredibly competitive prices, but also, crucially, kimono dressers to clothe clients correctly, as well as hair and make-up artists to help complete the look.<sup>4</sup> They also offer further services, such as left luggage areas, as well as add-ons including a tea ceremony or sushi lunch to enhance the cultural experience, or a professional photographer to produce high quality images to commemorate the event.

The kimono rental business, aimed at tourists, mirrors that which enables native Japanese to rent kimono for auspicious occasions such as weddings, coming of age and graduation (ch.14). They use bilingual websites, however, as well as print signage to appeal to a much broader clientele, although sometimes the Japanese language advertisements include additional services offering more formal attire.<sup>5</sup> A variety of historical circumstances has resulted in the traditional association between kimono, beauty and women wearers, but rental companies offer a range of packages to attract male as well as female customers, families, tour groups and couples. Groups and couples often receive a discount, with some companies offering special arrangements for large parties as demonstrated, for example, by Akahime Kyoto Kimono Rental whose ‘Standard Kimono Group Stroll Plan’ can accommodate up to 200 people.<sup>6</sup> Kimono rental is also a prevalent dating activity that can be captured through photographs, the occasion heightened by the stand-out ensembles that complement the picturesque sites visited by the couple. By populating sightseeing areas, tourists in kimono become active agents; they ‘not only consume experiences but also co-produce, co-design and co-exhibit them, once they enact them and retell or publish them afterwards’<sup>7</sup> on social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook (KIM264). Rental shops are conveniently

located near favourite tourist sites and travel writers claim that the appearance of kimono enhances the attraction of these places:

Keen to stroll around the streets of Tokyo in a kimono, and maybe take a lot of photos in the process? A nice kimono will go well with the cherry blossoms, or a temple or shrine in the background. You don't have to worry about not having your own kimono or not knowing how to wear one, as there are heaps of kimono rental shops in Tokyo that are happy to offer a hassle-free kimono-wearing experience to tourists.<sup>8</sup>

Kimono rental websites and printed materials fully describe the process of getting dressed (and undressed) in a garment that can be difficult to put on without prior knowledge, thus making the unfamiliar approachable and removing the fear of embarrassment. Travel bloggers have been sponsored to share their experiences of being dressed in kimono with a global audience.<sup>9</sup> In the case of the 'stylish adventure' blogger Elle Croft, only two of the twenty steps describing her visit to Kitsuki in Kyūshū record the tourist sites, the focus of the blog being the selection of kimono and accessories, being dressed and undressed, and the sensation of this experience.<sup>10</sup> Another travel website encourages visitors to 'Get creative in mixing and matching',<sup>11</sup> and kimono rental shops offer a large range of kimono and accessories from which to select an outfit (KIM265). Sheila Cliffe's reflections on the engagement between practiced kimono wearers and fashion can be useful in thinking about this experience for the uninitiated:

Perhaps more than any other garment the kimono demands the fashion skills of its wearer. The fashionability or otherwise of an outfit is in his or her hands. His or her ability to coordinate the kimono, obi, and accessories determines whether or not the outfit has impact. It is for those who like to take decisions and who enjoy

Opener???

KIM266  
ADVERTISEMENT FOR WARGO  
HAKAMA STYLE BOOK  
Kyoto, 2018  
Wargo

KIM264  
WOMEN WEARING RENTAL  
KIMONO AT THE SENSŌJI TEMPLE  
IN ASAKUSA, TOKYO  
Tokyo, probably 2018  
True Japan Tours

Opposite

KIM265  
SELECTING OBI TO WEAR WITH  
KIMONO AT KYOTO KIMONO  
RENTAL WARGO, ASAKUSA  
Tokyo, 2019  
Photograph by Allie  
Yamasuchi



the challenge of coordination. The kimono wearer is usually a person who enjoys ... the planning and the thinking which goes into getting dressed ... Kimono wearers are craft consumers who are by nature creative and dress to be in the gaze.<sup>12</sup>

The fashionability of kimono-wearing is further enhanced by the option of having one's hair styled and make-up done.

While the process of dressing-up and being photographed was formerly confined to the studio, ever greater numbers of tourists are taking to the streets in kimono. This activity has been supported by the correct dressing advice offered by the rental companies but also emboldened by the visibility of kimono-wearing groups (including both Japanese and non-Japanese wearers), such as Kimono de Ginza (established in 1999) or Kimono de Jack.<sup>13</sup> Informal kimono wearing groups have been growing in number since the turn of the century. They are composed of people of all levels of experience when it comes to wearing kimono, who meet regularly to dress in and discuss kimono. As the name Kimono de Ginza implies, these groups meet to be seen in fashionable areas to 'set themselves against the hegemony of western clothing by wearing Japanese dress'.<sup>14</sup> Kimono de Jack likewise 'hijack' public spaces, showing up in large groups to enjoy and visibly showcase their kimono.<sup>15</sup> As Sheila Cliffe has argued, 'The emergence of kimono wearing groups in the streets was significant in encouraging new kimono wearers.'<sup>16</sup>

The kimono rental company advertisements, aimed at tourists, demonstrate an understanding of what is currently fashionable among kimono wearers. Many rental plans feature colourful, patterned kimono reminiscent of the chic designs of the early twentieth century. These have been made fashionable by magazines like *Kimono Hime* [Kimono Princess], founded in 2002 with the aim of making kimono desirable to a young audience. The publication depicts youthful, often celebrity, models, dressed in vintage or new garments made of inexpensive fabrics such as cotton or polyester, which are coordinated with a variety of accessories not usually paired with kimono.<sup>17</sup> This publication has gained in popularity not only in Japan but also abroad, a group of international online friends creating a tribute magazine called *Go Hime*.<sup>18</sup> In Japan a fashion for wearing kimono and *hakama* among graduating students of all ages has swept the country. Wargo, a kimono rental company with 18 shops around Japan, published *Hakama Style Book 2018* with images styled and photographed much like those presented in *Kimono Hime* or *Go Hime* (KIM266). The clothing illustrated almost exclusively echoes the bold, modish designs of the early twentieth century. Many *hakama* plans are now advertised by the tourist kimono rental companies, which emphasizes the 'retro' nature of the patterning and styling.<sup>19</sup>

Rental agencies engage actively with kimono fashion trends, as well as offering their wearers the experience of selecting ensembles in which they can become part of an attractive spectacle in the places they visit. This increasingly popular service demonstrates the growing 'multi-sensuous' nature of tourism, which 'relies more on being, doing, touching, in addition to seeing'.<sup>20</sup>

