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Could it have been the mid-19th century, when US Commodore Matthew C. Perry and his fleet of armed vessels reached the bay of Edo (present-day Tokyo), to force trade relations with the island nation – a country that had all but sealed itself off from the West for centuries?

The Japanese knew exactly what was in store for them. Western gunboat diplomacy, including the Opium Wars in China, followed one and the same pattern: the breakup or dissolution of national sovereignty followed by a second step – dictating the terms of trade. To avoid this fate, Japanese elites decided to rapidly transform Japan into a fortified industrial country that could compete with the West. Though the tour de force became known as the “Meiji Restoration” (after the Emperor at that time), it was more of a revolution that affected all aspects of Japanese life from 1868 forward.

The shogunate was replaced by a constitutional monarchy, whereby significant parts of the new constitution matched that of the Prussian Reich (including the same, fatal clause that shielded the military budget from parliamentary scrutiny). The new dress code followed Western models as well; Emperor Meiji dismissed the traditional clothing of Chinese origin as “effeminate.” The kimono, now worn or shown by men mostly in private, gradually took on a new role: as a reflexive guarantor of Japanese values. These



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values could be expressed both in the kimono's ceremonial function (also for children) and in its media function as civilian propaganda. Women, in their role as guardian of tradition under patriarchal conditions, continued to wear the kimono in public as well, although exceptions such as the moga- (derived from "modern girl") proved the rule.

Among the cornerstones of the island nation's modernization were its powerful navy and merchant fleet. One of the first Japanese steamers was the Newcastle-made "Yamashio Maru" (1884), the original model of which is on view in the Johann Jacobs Museum. The example of this ship, which both transported Japanese migrant workers to Hawai'i and served as a torpedo mothership during the first Sino-Japanese War (1894/5), sheds valuable light on the complex drama of Japanese modernization.

Japan begin?



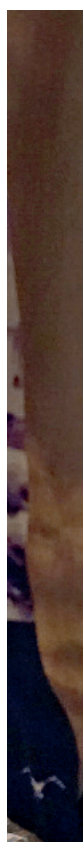
Processes of modernization and industrialization increased the Japanese need for raw materials and foreign exchange. Very much in the style of European imperialism, the new regional power began to secure economic spheres of influence in East Asia. In the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-95), Japan conquered present-day Taiwan and the Ryukyu Islands, which continue to haunt the news as an area of conflict. Japan saw another victory with the Russo-Japanese War (1904/5), when it captured the southern tip of Manchuria and the Korean peninsula. The Japanese triumph over the Russians represented a beacon for the Japanese; it was the first time a non-Western power had successfully defeated a Western army since the Middle Ages.

Japan profited from the First World War in its new role as an exporter of ammunition and other materials. It sat on the side of the victors at the Versailles Peace Conference, next to the United States, Great Britain, France and Italy, the countries responsible for creating the postwar order. Tokyo, which was rebuilt after a devastating earthquake in 1923, developed into a dynamic metropolis, with a population that grew from 3.7 million (1920) to 7.4 million (1940) (compared to 6.9 million in New York [1930] and 4.9 million in London [1930]).

Japan annexed resource-rich Manchuria in the 1930s, and used it to launch a war against China in 1937. Imperialist visions of a "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" under Japanese leadership continued in the context of the Second World War, leading to Pearl Harbor and later, Hiroshima.

Looking at the kimonos with this transformative, groundbreaking era in mind, a contemporary viewer will note a parade of themes including modern technology, military strength, colonial expansion and highly individual, though selfless heroism. Adding to this is the aesthetics of the modern city with its skyscrapers, bridges, cars and railways and the visual language of cinema, fashion and advertising.

All of these rather disparate elements are conceptually and technically interwoven with each other in a virtuosic way; the forms of omoshirogara are entirely consistent. The key to their success lies in the same capacity for abstraction that has fascinated the West since its first encounters with Japanese culture.



NAGAJUBAN (man) with a map of Manchukuo, silk
Japan 1930s

Lines meander across surfaces, drawing a picture of Japan's territorial expansion. The three Chinese provinces of Heilongjiang, Jilin and Liaoning in the upper part are marked with gray and beige, while the Korean peninsula (colonized 1910) is kept a reddish brown. The discreet coloring traces back to the "48 brown and 100 gray tones" that Sen no Rikyu- (1522-91) once propagated in terms of focusing on the essentials for the Japanese tea ceremony. The lines in turn show the rail network for the Japanese railroad company Mantetsu.

Mantetsu was a driving engine of Japan's modernization. Supplies of coal, steel and soybeans clattered into resource-poor Japan along its railway lines, which were rapidly installed with the help of tens of thousands of Chinese coolies. Japanese migrant workers traveled to Manchukuo on the way back. The workers hired themselves out as farm laborers, mine removers or in brothels (tens of thousands of daughters of impoverished farmers and fishermen were bought by organized pimps rings and forced into prostitution, especially during the the Meiji era. They were known as karayuki-san or "Woman who went over there"). Newspaper clippings in the middle of the map report of a Chinese bomb attack on the Mantetsu. This "Mukden Incident" on September 18, 1931 marked a critical turning point in Japan's colonial strategy. If the expansion was economically motivated at first, the attack served as a pretext for a military invasion, leading to the creation of "Manchukuo," a puppet state governed by the last Chinese emperor Henri Pu Yi. After 1945, it came to light that the incident was staged and perpetrated by officers of the Japanese Kwantung Army.

Omoshirogara-Japan's Path to Modernity was inspired by and developed in collaboration with Prof. Dr. Hans B. Thomsen (University of Zurich, East Asian Art History) and his students Sara Gianera, M.A., Leonie Thalmann, B.A., Fabienne Pfister, B.A., Anna-Barbara Neumann, B.A., Anjuli Ramdenee, B.A., and Alina Martimyanova, M.A..

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