Staging Japanese Femininity: Cross-cultural Dressing in Australian Photography

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Abstract

The popularity of Japanese inspired dress in portrait photographs of middle-class Australian women and girls during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries offers new insight into cross-cultural dressing and its links to identity. Rather than simply mirroring Orientalist fantasies of the distant and exotic East, these photographs indicate how Anglo-Australian women’s material cultural practices spoke to their own experiences of modernity and their impressions of Japanese femininity. Through their production and consumption of Japanese inspired fashion, musical theatre, decorative arts and travel photographs, these women were encouraged to respond to their admiration of Japanese femininity with their own embodied performances for the camera. Photographs of Australian women and girls in kimonos also illuminate the complexity of Australia’s cultural engagement with Japan in the era of the racially exclusive ‘White Australia’ policy and Japanese Imperialist incursions in the Asia-Pacific region. In staging their perceptions of Japanese femininity at home and in the photographer’s studio, Australian women also reconciled a series of conflicting ideals associated with dress reform, women’s suffrage and the ‘new woman’.

Keywords: Australia, Japan, kimono, photography, women
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In 1904, thirteen wide-eyed schoolgirls crowded into the Pusterla Studios in the Australian town of Albury, New South Wales dressed in bright floral kimonos and obis, wearing chrysanthemums in their hair and clutching decorative Japanese fans (Figure 1). Carefully arranged in front of a backdrop painted with blossoms to resemble a Japanese screen, the young Anglo-Australian girls held their fans aloft or stretched out their arms to display the wide sleeves of their kimonos. Despite the formal staging of this group portrait, the facial expressions of the girls – ranging from boredom and awkward shyness to excitement – exposes them as amateurs playing masquerades rather than seasoned theatrical performers.

This Pusterla Studios photograph is part of a curious but little known trend that pervaded Australian photography during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Across the country, in cities and towns, in professional photography studios and in homes, Anglo-Australian women and girls adopted Japanese inspired costume and performed for the camera. Variously incorporating Japanese screens, fans, umbrellas, furniture and decorative hair ornaments, as well as the ubiquitous kimono, these photographs not only reflect the contemporary popularity of Japanese goods in Australia and Europe, but also provided an opportunity for women and girls to inhabit and enact what they imagined to be Japanese feminine values and identities. Far more complex than just another staging of Orientalist fantasies of an exotic and alluring Japanese ‘Other’, these photographic performances were entangled with a burgeoning modernity in which Anglo-Australian women sought to understand their own place at home and in the Asia-Pacific region on the outskirts of the British empire. Their impressions of Japanese femininity were embedded in an array of imbricated material practices including the clothes that they made and wore, their patterns of entertainment, the magazines that they contributed to and consumed, and
the photographs that they collected and shared with friends. These intriguing photographs also offer valuable insight into historical perceptions of Japanese and Australian femininity at a time when dress reform, women’s suffrage and the ‘new woman’ were challenging Victorian ideals.

**Cross-cultural Dressing and the Orientalist Critique**

In examining photographs of kimono-clad Australian women and girls, this article both builds on and diverges from other studies of cross-cultural dressing. Practices of cross-cultural dressing have increasingly attracted the attention of historians and cultural critics, who have examined its various manifestations in Europe, the United Kingdom, North America and colonial countries in masquerade balls, artistic portraits and theatrical performances (Castle 1986; Guth 2000; Roberts 2005; Mayer 2012; Thoral 2015).

Addressing colonial Algeria, Marie-Cecile Thoral acknowledges that this practice is a particularly compelling mode of cross-cultural encounter because dress is “one of the most powerful outward indicators of identity and social status” (2015, 57–8). Thoral usefully frames dress as an interface between the individual and the social group, as well as between the intimate sphere of the body and identity, and the social and political spheres.

The combination of cross-cultural dressing and photography explored here furthers this process by placing the body and the home at the intersection between the public and the private, the local and the global. Both photography and dress are powerful means through which people can construct and present their identities to others. Portrait photographs have historically been used to visualize class affiliation, social status and the relationships between sitters, as well as their personal interests. Whether staged in the photographer’s studio or in the family home, these social, spatial and political practices were largely embedded within the domestic environment as the site where the photographs were
collected, shared and consumed. Yet dressing as a figure from a foreign land also allowed women to interpret, incorporate and stage their responses to international inscriptions of femininity and the place of their own nation in relation to others.

Some scholars have interpreted the cultural and political implications of cross-cultural dressing in light of histories of Western Orientalism. Mary Roberts describes cross-cultural dressing in nineteenth-century European visual arts as “an eloquent distillation of the Western Orientalist’s desire for power over the Orient” (2005, 70). As a form of cultural appropriation, cross-cultural dressing reduces other cultures and peoples to costumes that can be ‘tried on’, effacing histories of colonial oppression and denying the specificities and complexities of cultural identities. According to Terry Castle, wearing foreign costumes for portraits and masquerade parties allowed eighteenth-century Europeans to familiarize themselves with a strange yet alluring Other: “exotic costumes marked out a kind of symbolic interpenetration with difference – an almost erotic commingling with the alien … a way of embracing, quite literally, the unfamiliar” (1986, 62. See also Mayer [2012, 281-98]; Riding [2008, 48-81]). These interpretations of cross-cultural dress rely on a limiting system of hierarchized binary oppositions in which the authority of the civilized, rational Western self is secured in opposition to the feminine, exotic and sexualized Other of the East.

Such a binary logic is also evident in analyses of European cultural interpretations of Japanese femininity (Kondo 1997; Broinowski 1992). A much-cited example is Puccini’s opera Madame Butterfly (1904), which tells the story of the young Japanese woman Cio-Cio-san, who marries a US naval officer and eventually commits suicide after he abandons her and she is forced to give up her child. Dorinne Kondo summarizes the symbolism of the opera with recourse to a familiar framework of hierarchized binaries:

In Western eyes, Japanese women are meant to sacrifice, and Butterfly
sacrifices her “husband,” her religion, her people, her son, and ultimately her very life . . . the predictable happens: West wins over East, Man over Woman, White over Asian. (1997, 34–5)

Alison Broinowski (1992) uses the phrase “Butterfly phenomenon” to similarly describe the rendering of Japan as a fragile, feminine land subject to the demands of the West. In contrast to these analyses, reviews of Australian performances of Madame Butterfly from the early twentieth century reveal that the tragic story had “universal appeal” to some audiences who identified with the opera’s themes of “immortal love” and empathized with its heroine (“Mary Pickford” 1916; “Madame Butterfly” 1911). These reviews suggest that for female audiences especially, there was a degree of tension between the ‘Othering’ associated with Orientalist fantasies and Anglo-Australian women’s identification with Japanese inspired culture and characters.

In her study of white women’s role in American Orientalism, Mari Yoshihara argues that Madame Butterfly raises critical questions that are “as much about white women and America’s race and gender relations at home as they are about US engagement with Asia” (2003, 5). In performing their impressions of “Asian-ness” through cross-cultural dressing, white women amalgamated notions of Asian femininity with America womanhood and, in some cases, used it as a vehicle to perform “an exoticized female sexuality” that is “outside the Western conventions of propriety” (115). The inscriptions of Japanese femininity with which Australian women and girls were encouraged to identify were not limited to this persistent stereotype of the sexualized Asian ‘Other’. There were undoubtedly stereotypes of the sensuous ‘geisha girl’ circulating in Australia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, not the least in musical theatre. A delicate and alluring Japanese femininity was performed in several shows in Australia during this time including The Mikado, The Geisha, Moonlight Blossom, The Japanese Nightingale and The
Darling of the Gods. However, the dominance of Orientalist critiques obscures the more nuanced array of representations of Japanese femininity circulating in Australia during this period, which we argue below helped to shape women’s dress, identities and photography practices.

Moreover, several historians have stressed that the dualisms opposing the civilized, modern, implicitly masculine, Western self with the exotic, traditional, feminine, Eastern ‘Other’ are inappropriate when analyzing Australia-Japan relationships (Pham 1999; Lincicome 2011, 26; Harada 2009). As an outpost of the British Empire located on the fringes of the Asia-Pacific, Australia did not sit easily within the East/West paradigm. In 1910, English travel writer John Foster Fraser summarized this condition where Australians

are far removed from those parts of the world where the white races originated, and are next door to races which are yellow, brown and black. Therefore we have the striking phenomenon of a race from the west being implanted in the east. Time and distance are considerably obliterated in these days of telegraphs and fast steamers. Geographically, however, Australia is an oriental country. (1910, 214)

P.L. Pham much later expressed the comparable view that Japan is “neither fully Oriental nor Occidental, neither Eastern nor Western” (1999, 163). Japan’s imperialist activities in parts of Asia, its Meiji-era adoption of European models of modern industry and infrastructure, the recognition that Japan received from Britain as a mighty naval and economic power, and Japan’s attitudes of racial superiority towards other Asian countries, are amongst the many examples cited by others as evidence of how the binary model opposing East and West fails to reflect the geographic, cultural and political history of Japan (Nishihara 2005, 245; Harada 2009, 7–8, 27–28, 90, 158–60; Pham 1999, 163 and
179). Anglo-Australian women and girls’ adoption of Japanese inspired dress for photographic portraits must therefore be understood in light of Australia’s specific historical relations with Japan, and the material cultures through which women reimagined these relations for themselves in their daily lives.

**Japanese Goods and Australian Women’s Material Cultural Practices**

As in Europe and North America, Japanese goods and imagery pervaded middle-class women’s material cultures in Australia between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A craze for things Japanese emerged initially in response to Japan’s participation in the Melbourne International Exhibition in 1875, the Sydney International Exhibition in 1879, the Exhibition of Melbourne in 1880-81, and unofficial displays at the Centennial International Exhibition in Melbourne 1888-9. Japan was also a regular participant at International Exhibitions in Europe, Britain and the United States, as it was eager to foster trade, heighten a sense of national identity, and garner international prestige (Conant 1991, 79). Along with displays of the nation’s achievements in agriculture, education and technology, Japanese courts exhibited highly appealing goods such as vases, toys, hair ornaments, fans, lacquerware, tea sets and silks, which were available for visitors to admire and purchase.

Australian media responses to the Japanese Courts indicate that the fashion for these goods was intimately connected to Australia’s own burgeoning modernity and international outlook (“The Intercolonial Exhibition” 1875; “Official Record” 1881; “The Japanese Commissioners” 1880). Reviewers recognized Meiji Japan’s economic and technological development and were eager to link Australia politically and economically to it (Kornicki 1994, 28). Trade was a particular focus, as commentators noted Japan’s proximity to Australia, and the potential for “friendly alliance and unfettered commerce that will yield
harvests of good for the future generations of both bright lands” (“The Melbourne Exhibition” 1875). Japanese officials expressed a similar desire to boost trade and communication with Australia. Harno Sakata, the Japanese Commissioner to the 1874 and 1880 exhibitions, promoted these connections:

As every one knows, the distance between the two countries is not very far, and if special arrangements can be made through the direct route, the mutual communication can be effected in about three weeks, and, consequently, the national intercourse between the two countries will be increased more and more hereafter. (“Presentation to the Colony” 1880)

Goods such as fans, Japanese umbrellas, paper lanterns, lacquerware and folding screens became symbolic of Australia’s outlook to Japan (“The Melbourne Exhibition” 1875). Japanese importers and retailers like Numashima Jirobei in Melbourne helped to satisfy the expanding market for Japanese goods during the boom years of the 1880s, and Mikado Bazaars opened in Perth and Sydney in the 1890s. Approximately 580,000 sensu (folding fans) and 480,000 uchiwa (round fans) were imported to Australia between 1882 and 1889 (Murakami 1999, 82). The interest in Japanese goods extended to the Australian art world, where fans, parasols and kimonos became evident in the paintings of Charles Condor, Arthur Streeton and Tom Roberts from the 1880s.

The ubiquity of Japanese fans, screens and teacups in photographs of Australian women and girls in Japanese costume attests to the popularity of these goods, and the importance of the domestic environment as a site where they were collected and used. A photograph of a young Adelaide woman, Beatrice Jones, and her companion (Figure 2) shows the pair wearing Japanese inspired floral robes and decorative hairpins. They pose with a fan, folded Japanese umbrella, teacups and a Japanese teapot that sits on a lacquered bamboo table on the verandah of a private residence. Importantly, this photograph reveals
that these objects were not simply collected as decorative objects for the home, but were incorporated into embodied cultural practices. Such photographs of cross-cultural dressing indicate how Japanese goods and dress were embedded in what Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes refer to as “gendered material practices” (2009, 1-2). In contrast to reified studies of the objects themselves, the concept of gendered material practices acknowledges the interactions between subjects and objects. It also addresses how women manipulated and participated in the material world to construct social meanings that did not necessarily operate within prescribed boundaries of gender or race – themes that will be addressed further below.

Anglo-Australian women’s experiences of modernity, and their impressions of Japanese femininity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were shaped by a variety of gendered material practices that focused on women’s bodies, appearance and performances. Historian Clair Tanner describes how modernity in late nineteenth century Melbourne multiplied “the ways in which the category ‘woman’ was apprehended, defined and regulated through processes that pictured, looked at and saw women” (2010, 26). Images of women’s bodies and performances became increasingly evident across the country thanks to new printing technologies and the illustrated press. Representations of Japanese women also permeated these outlets. In 1871, *The Illustrated Australian News for Home Readers* (Figure 3) published the engraving “Japanese Ladies at their Toilet”, which presented the women’s bodies from multiple angles to maximize visibility of their hairstyles, kimonos, obis and wooden shoes as they were dressed.

The proliferation of mass-produced photography and travel furthered this movement of Japanese themed imagery into middle-class Australian homes. From the 1860s, Japanese souvenir photographs produced in professional studios by figures such as Felice Beato, and later Baron Raimund von Stillfried, Kusakabe Kimbei and T. Enami
could be purchased in Yokohama and brought back to Australia as individual photographs or in elaborate albums to delight family and friends. As they were collected, cut, pasted and arranged in albums to be passed amongst loved ones, these photographs became part of women’s social space in the home. These souvenirs of travel also helped collectors to feel connected to a world beyond Australian shores and to locate their own identities within that world. Some studios, including Kimbei’s, invited tourists to perform their personal affiliation with Japan by donning costumes for their own Japanese style portrait. Christine Guth asserts that such photographs provided an opportunity for self-fashioning that underscores “the potential of the camera as a creative tool for subverting social and racial stereotypes and creating individual identity” (2000, 606). As well as authenticating their experiences of Japan, these costume portraits allowed travellers to engage with the “recognized symbolic power of clothing” (608), and identify themselves with the aspects of Japanese culture that they admired.

An enterprising Melbourne photographer, George Rose, circumvented the need for Australian collectors of Japanese photographs to take the long journey to Japan. During his visit to Japan in 1904, Rose made an arrangement with studio photographer T. Enami to publish his photographs in Australia. Amongst the many Enami photographs that Rose distributed in Australia are Japanese Geisha Girls Dancing the Fan Dance to the Music of the Shamisen (Figure 4), Japanese Ladies Having Dinner, Japanese Ladies Admiring the Cherry Blossom in Ueno Park, Japanese Girls Enjoying the Beauties of Nature, Japanese Ladies Resting at a Teahouse, and Japanese Ladies Admiring Flowers and Out for a Gossip. As reflected in Rose’s catalogue, images of women dominated Japanese souvenir photography (see also Wakita 2013; Gartlan 2005, 5–26). Women in kimonos, described in popular travel memoirs as “a living art” (Jerome 1904, 32; Menpes 1901, 132), came to symbolize the essential Japan. Rose’s distribution of Enami’s photographs, as well as many
of his own, as stereographs added to the experience of these images. Stereography was a popular form of photography thought to be particularly suited to the depiction of foreign lands due to the illusion of three dimensions created (Schwartz 1996, 16). In the closed viewing field of the stereoscope, which was held right up to the face, photographs of Japanese women dancing or making tea not only offered a form of simulated travel without leaving the home, they took on the appearance of a theatrical performance that could be reinterpreted and reenacted in Australia.

Representations of Anglo-Australian women wearing kimonos were also popularized in musical theatre and the thriving visual culture that surrounded it. Posters and programs featuring the characters from The Mikado, Moonlight Blossom, The Japanese Nightingale, Madame Butterfly and The Darling of the Gods contributed to the catalogue of costumes, poses and movements that were mimicked in amateur photographs. An illustration in The Australasian Sketcher with Pen and Pencil from 1886 details the costumes of characters from The Mikado (Figure 5). Common poses evident in this sketch, such as the woman stretching out her arms to accentuate the deep sleeves of her kimono, as well as fan dancers on their knees or holding their fans behind their head, were replicated again and again. Photographs featuring the costumed stars of The Mikado and other theatrical productions were sold to an eager public through photography studios. Publicity photographs, like W. J. Pater’s set of twelve photographs of the vaudeville child star “Little Sadie” (Figure 6), were published in newspapers or sold in sets of postcards and collected in the home. Holding her fan behind her head, or standing with her head tilted to one side while clasping her fan in front of her brocade-trimmed kimono, Sadie performed poses considered typically Japanese as a result of decades of repetition in theatrical performances and visual culture. Such images of children in Japanese dress had particular
appeal amongst Australian audiences, as they conjured notions of Japanese innocence and its perceived youth as a modern nation (Pham 1999, 169–70).

The schoolgirls’ visit to the Pusterla Studio in Albury, where they were photographed posing in their ‘geisha’ costumes, was motivated by such theatrical performances. The comic opera *The Geisha* was well known in Albury. Professional companies toured the production to the regional town in 1899 and the Albury Operatic Society produced its own version in 1904, the same year that the Pusterla photograph was taken. It is likely that these girls were in costumes designed for a performance of their own, as the local press praised a group of schoolgirls for their Japanese costumes and dainty dance at the Albury and District Combined School Demonstration in 1904 (“Albury and District” 1904). Pusterla’s photograph also belongs to a larger tradition of portrait photography associated with fancy dress balls. Professional photographers like Melbourne’s J. W. Lindt welcomed partygoers to their studios to sit for special costume portraits, and even opened their studios after hours for “ladies and gentlemen who wish to be photographed in evening dress or fancy costume” (“Wonder of Photography” 1915). Utilizing the latest in flash technology photographers were also known to set up temporary studios at fancy balls (“Photography Extra-Ordinary” 1898). By the turn of the century newspaper social pages regularly featured photographs of guests at fancy dress parties, including many women and girls posing in Japanese costume (see, e.g. “Children’s Fancy Dress Ball” 1899; ”Prize-winning Costumes” 1901; ”At the Children’s Hospital Ball” 1903). Fancy dress photography provided an opportunity to perform an exaggerated or embellished aspect of one’s persona. While often produced in the privacy of the home or the photographer’s studio, these photographs were shared publicly in the press or within one’s social circle to garner social status.
This lively material culture not only stimulated the adoption of Japanese costume for amateur and studio portrait photographs, it was connected to women’s fashion. A reviewer of *The Geisha* for *The Brisbane Courier* in 1889 predicted that the “exceedingly rich, and manifestly beautiful” costumes in the show would cause an “epidemic of ‘geisha fever’” (“Evening Entertainments” 1899). Similarly, a contributor to the women’s fashion section of *The Brisbane Courier* in 1904 noted that the enthusiasm for *The Darling of the Gods* would create a “Japanese craze this season”:

> It is not so much in the way of decorations that we shall be possessed of the Japanese fad as in our dress. The kimono is already with us in the form of evening coats, tea gowns, and tea-jackets, but it is safe to predict an outbreak of Japanese embroideries and buttons, and the sash, already a feature of women’s dress, is almost certain to be transformed in the obi. (“Woman’s World” 1904)

Photographs and illustrations of Japanese women wearing kimonos provided added inspiration in the Australian women’s fashion magazines *The New Idea* and *Vanity Fair* during this period (“Japan and Russia” 1904; “Life in Japan” 1904; “The Future Mikado of Japan” 1904; “The Empress of Japan” 1905). *The New Idea* praised the empress consort of Emperor Meiji, Empress Haruko (1849-1914) as “a woman of high intelligence and a poetess of no mean order” (“The Empress in Springtime” 1909). The Emperor and Empress stimulated the modernization and internationalization of Japan during the Meiji era (1868-1912) through changes to Japan’s social structures, political systems, infrastructure, military, economy, education system and international relations. Reflecting their desire to embrace modern European ways, the Emperor and Empress were often photographed wearing European style dress and actively promoted its adoption in Meiji Japan. Despite this record, *The New Idea*’s picture of the Empress was based on a decades-
old official portrait taken by Kuichi Uchida in the 1870s, in which she wore elaborate
Japanese ceremonial dress. The magazine thereby reinforced prevailing stereotypes of
Japanese femininity as essentially traditional.

**Fair Japan, White Australia and Japan’s Might in Region**

The enthusiasm for Japan in these Australian forums is striking because it occurred in a
case characterized by tense official relations between the two nations as a result of
Australia’s Immigration policy. The Immigration Restriction Act 1901, generally known as
the ‘White Australia’ policy, was one of the first bills to pass the newly formed federal
government. Intended to protect the local labour market, the Act was also underpinned by
racist ideologies. It restricted the immigration of “coloured races” to Australia by requiring
non-European people to sit a convoluted dictation test in any European language (Deakin
1901, 4804; Immigration Restriction Act 1901, s 3a). Disputes between Australia and
Japan over the Act remained heated throughout the early twentieth century; the historian
Henry Frei describes how the issue generated nine thick volumes of documents in Japan’s
diplomatic Record Office between 1897 and 1921 (1991, 83). Rather than opposing the
system of racial hierarchy that underpinned the Act, Japan was offended by the position
that it had been allocated within that hierarchy as a “coloured race” (Eitaki 1901, 7; see
also Broinowski 2001).

Official relations were further tested by Japan’s military victories in the Pacific
region. The Japanese Navy’s defeat of the Russians at Tsushima in 1905 received
extensive attention in the Australian press, and repositioned Japan as a mighty naval
power. This impression was reinforced by much publicized visits of Japanese naval
training squadrons to Australian ports between 1878 and 1935, including visits in 1903,
1906, 1910 and 1913. While these visits and related public spectacles were happily
enjoyed by much of the public, government responses to Japan’s growing naval strength were less enthusiastic. Three weeks after the Battle of Tsushima, the soon-to-be Prime Minister Alfred Deakin expressed his concern that Australia was within “striking distance of no less than sixteen foreign naval stations”, noting that Yokohama was the strongest (“Important Statement” 1905). The deputy Prime Minister, Allan McLean, similarly warned:

that sense of security we have always considered we derived from our great distance from the bases of all the great military or naval powers of the world has now been removed. We now find one of the great naval and military powers of the earth within a very short distance of our shores. (“Mr McLean’s View” 1905)

Amid this unsettled political atmosphere, cultural representations of Japan as delicate, feminine and artistic played an important role in countering more threatening perceptions of the Imperial nation. Miya Mizuta argues that the Japanese government used conceptions of a feminized Japan strategically as a “façade” while “it advanced militarily into other parts of Asia” (2006, 35–6). Mizuta examines the Japanese contribution to the 1904 St Louis World Fair, which included “350 of Japan’s fairest and handsomest geisha girls”. The title of the Japanese pavilion “Fair Japan” reinforced the impression of Japan as an “artistic, feminized nation” (35).

In The New Idea, representations of gentle, refined Japanese women had a comparable effect, but sat alongside praise for the heroism and bravery of Japanese wives and mothers during the Russo-Japanese War. An issue published in 1904 included an article written by Pierre Loti, which was printed in American newspapers in the early 1890s. In comments that seem incongruous with the article to follow, the editors’ introduction praised “the heroism of the women of Japan; of their readiness to sacrifice
their sons, their husbands, and themselves, on the alter of War” (40). By contrast, the main text was replete with Loti’s Orientalist descriptions of Japanese women’s dainty bodies, their “childish hands and busts” and “painted faces, whiter and pinker than a fresh bon bon” (40). Along with the editors’ introduction, the title they gave to this article “Our Japanese Sisters” underscores the way Australian readers were encouraged to relate to Japanese women in ways that did not always correspond neatly to masculine, European stereotypes. Reinforcing the links between Japanese femininity, performance and appearance established in the text, the article was illustrated with a full page montage of five photographs taken by Miss Nell Brownlow Cole from Brisbane of a little Anglo-Australian girl dressed in a kimono, posing with a fan and making tea in front of a Japanese screen. Together, the photographs and text encourage Australian women to identify with the values they attributed to their “Japanese sisters,” and frame Japanese femininity as not only artistic, beautiful and heroic, but a fashion that may be ‘tried on’ through costume and performed for the camera.

Good Wives and Wise Mothers

The New Idea fostered this kind of identification with Japanese women by showing readers diverse aspects of Japanese women’s family life, home and culture, and celebrating Japanese women’s artistic abilities, work ethic and integrity. Between June and December 1908, it published a serial in seven monthly installments written by Henrietta P. Serjeant titled “The Flirtations of Four: the Story of an Australasian Trip to Japan.” In the episode where the characters visit a Japanese home, Serjeant presents hard-working Japanese wives and mothers as the true women of Japan: “But to know the daughters of the Empire intimately, to know them differently, to recognize them not as flowers merely, but as forces potent – Come! See the woman of Japan in one of the homes of Japan” (807). Such
articles built on a larger discourse, popularized in Japan and evident in Australian travel writing, in which women wearing kimonos became important symbols of Japanese national identity and pride.

The characterization of Japanese women as *ryōsai kenbo* or “good wives and wise mothers” gained momentum in Japan in the late nineteenth century (Ashikari 2003, 55–79). Rebecca Copeland (2006) argues that this ideological principle was promoted in reaction against a period of pedagogical experimentation in the 1870s. Female students taking advantage of new educational opportunities came to challenge gender norms. Some students adopted European or masculine clothing, cut their hair short or styled it in a European fashion, and pursued independent lives. These changes proved controversial and led to girls being criticized for being mannish or promiscuous. When the government reshaped state education according to principles of *ryōsai kenbo* in the 1880s, it focused more heavily on women’s domestic roles (15-22). Japanese traditions of feminine restraint were fused with British conceptions of the Victorian woman – an ideal of motherly virtue that was similarly evident in other nations undergoing processes of modernization (Ikeda 2010, 540). The kimono became central to *ryōsai kenbo* as a sign of Japanese ethnicity and national identity that could also be promoted internationally. Middle-class women who had experimented with modern European clothes in the 1880s returned to the kimono in the last years of the Meiji era in an effort to “appear proper by classic Japanese standards – that is, according to a reinterpreted version of the clothing style of the old samurai class” (Dalby 1993, 101). Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni (1999, 353) similarly argues that the cultivation of the single-mode decorative kimono during this period was an “invented tradition” that helped construct a new, distinct cultural identity that distinguished modern Japan from European models of modernity.
During the early twentieth century, representations of Japanese women as good wives and wise mothers filtered to Australia through travel writings published in newspapers and books. A contributor to the *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miner’s Advocate* in 1904 contrasted the image of wise and obedient Japanese wives and mothers with stereotypes of the butterfly-like “gay, careless and sunny” geisha popularized in “pretty postcards” and musical theatre: “Never was a more serious error of judgment committed. Japanese women as a whole do not resemble ‘Mimosa San,’ any more than Englishwomen as a whole resemble the chorus girls of a Christmas pantomime” (“The Japanese Girl” 1904). Similarly, British-born Australian travel writer, poet and journalist Helen Jerome differentiated the geisha from the good Japanese wife and mother in her much-promoted book *The Japan of Today*, published in 1904:

> I do not know of any more startling contrast between any two conditions of life, than that existing between the butterfly, painted, and laughing existence of the geisha, and the dull, drab, immured, submissive, monotonous, but highly respectable life of that ‘honoured interior,’ the citizen wife… It reminds me just a little of the curious attitude of our own men, who demand all the virtues in wife and sister, whilst enjoying their very absence – in women of another relation. (30)

Although Jerome describes their “self abnegation” as noble, unselfish, modest and respectable, she is also very critical of what she perceives as Japanese women’s subservience to their fathers, husbands and brothers, and generally casts these men as contemptuous oppressors (19). Her comments encapsulate the way in which Japanese women operated as a metonym for ‘traditional’ Japanese culture in Australia, while their supposed mistreatment by Japanese men was also used to judge the state of Japanese ‘civilization’ and the extent of Japanese social development.
Such impressions as hard-working, dedicated and unselfish wives and mothers help to explain why so many middle-class Anglo-Australian women and girls sought to identify themselves with Japanese women in late nineteenth and early twentieth century fashion and photography. Entertaining provided occasions for women to express this identification to their peers. *The New Idea* offered a detailed, instructive account of a young woman’s Japanese-themed afternoon tea party. Readers were told how they could make decorations of blossoms, Japanese umbrellas and lanterns, and food including cherry tarts, iced tea and soup served in Japanese bowls to create the stage for a pretty, elegant tea party (Herrick 1904, 236–8). A series of three photographs produced by amateur photographer Harold Leopold Godden, shows an Australian tea party in which the guests adopt Japanese inspired dress (Figures 7 and 8). Godden was a farmer from Tamleugh, north of Violet Town in the state of Victoria with a keen interest in photography, and here his skills were enlisted to produce a memento of the tea party. Many of the women in Godden’s photograph wear flowers or decorative pins in their hair, and hold up their fans and cups as they perform for the camera, alluding to values ascribed to Japanese femininity such as delicacy, tradition, beauty and generous hospitality. A bowl of cherries sits in front of the sitters as another signifier of the ‘land of the cherry blossom’ (Figure 7). The photographs combine the tropes associated with Anglo-Australian domestic photography – such as the formal gathering of family and friends in the garden – and Japanese inspired poses and props – like a tilt of the head and seating on the ground – that would have been familiar from theatre posters, magazines, post cards and commercial photographs like those distributed by George Rose. In one photograph (Figure 8), three women are posed with their arms outstretched to emphasize the wide sleeves of their robes and the movement that they afforded.
The homemade costumes worn in Godden’s photographs reference Japanese kimonos very loosely. European perceptions of the kimono as a dressing gown or bathrobe had been popularized since the 1860s, and visualized in paintings by James Tissot and Auguste Renoir, amongst others (Milhaupt 2014, 141). Tea gowns and dressing gowns that adapted some of the features of the kimono including pendulous sleeves, embroidery and floral prints had been available in Australian department stores since the late nineteenth century. Homemade Japanese inspired robes were a popular alternative to the store bought. While the kimono was promoted to budding sewers as a simple project “even for one quite ignorant of dressmaking” (“How to Make a Japanese Gown” 1897; see also Slade 53), its cultural and structural complexities were mostly lost to Australia wearers. For instance, sleeve design, length and fold communicated age and gender differences in Japan (Dalby 62). Furthermore in the late Meiji era, Japanese women wore kimonos in an elaborate ensemble of coordinated layers of colour and pattern that wrapped the body covering arms, legs and the chest (Dalby 91). Australian and European views of the kimono as loose fitting, comfortable and convenient to wear demonstrated a distinct lack of familiarity with how it was actually worn in Japan and the level of restriction it imposed on movement.

**Dress Reform, the New Woman and the Japanese Robe**

The loose, open necked robes worn by the women in Godden’s photographs would have been a pleasant contrast to the standard daywear for middle-class Australian women at the time. Although European aristocratic evening wear of the period exposed limbs, backs and the bosom (Steele 1985, 110; Dalby 1993, 80), daywear was more conservative and featured restrictive high lace collars, corsets and long skirts. As they performed the role of the artistic yet hard-working and generous Japanese wife and mother, the women in Godden’s photographs could escape the confines of such ensembles, if only for an
afternoon. One woman seated in Godden’s larger group photograph seems less confident about the relatively low v-shaped neckline of the robe, and wears her high-collared lace blouse underneath. This clothing combination hints at a certain tension between the more relaxed style of these Japanese inspired robes and codes of propriety for feminine dress at the time.

The dramatic contrast between Japanese robes and conventional daywear are evident in a comparison of the photograph of Beatrice Jones and her friend in Japanese inspired costume (Figure 2) and a formal portrait from the Jones family collection (Figure 9), both taken in 1895. In the latter, Jones, her brother and their companions are all impeccably dressed as they are served afternoon tea in the garden. The men wear three-piece suits and top hats, and the women are covered head to foot in long skirts, gloves, frilly scarves and bonnets. Describing Victorian propriety, Valerie Steele explains that such coverage was “crucial to a ‘respectable’ appearance” for both men and women (1985, 73). The placement of the standing men behind the women, who are seated with their hands resting neatly in their laps, at first glance suggests clichés of Victorian femininity as passive and submissive. However, in studies of British, European and American fashion, several scholars have been critical of such assumptions, and stressed Victorian women’s agency in defining their identities through dress (Steele 1985, 4, 93, 105, 133; Maynard 1989, 331-2; Monden 2013,167). To Steele, “women’s self-images and sexuality were not completely male-defined… the clothing of Victorian women reflected not only the cultural prescriptive ideal of femininity, but also her own aspirations and fantasies” (100).

The photographs of Beatrice and her companion suggest that they were similarly active in the construction of their self-images through their dress. The pair went to considerable lengths to convey contemporary ideals of feminine beauty in their dress and poses, and thoughtfully complemented the textural folds of their scarves with the roses
placed between them on the table. Appearance was an important expression of social standing. As in Japan, Australian women’s fashion acted as a signifier of social order, national identity and pride. A single woman’s appearance was critical in attracting potential husbands, and a wife’s appearance was an indicator of the social standing of her husband (Maynard 1989, 332). European fashion worn in Australia also marked the white populations’ connections to the British ‘motherland,’ and represented a “conscious desire to emulate a world disassociated from the antipodes” (Taylor 1999, 125). Such expressions of British and European refinement had particular significance in Adelaide, a city that proudly differentiated itself from other Australian cities as it was not founded as a penal colony.

For the photograph of Jones and her companion dressed in Japanese robes, the women created an alternative self-image set at a Japanese tea party. This occasion provided an opportunity to adopt less restrictive clothing while still creating an impression of feminine beauty. Although women were generally economically dependent on men, this photograph highlights that women’s self-representations were not defined completely by dominant gender discourses. Dressed in her loose, flowing Japanese robe, Jones sits on a cushion on the floor with her legs crossed, her shoulders rounded and spine in a relaxed curve – a dramatic contrast to her posture in the garden photograph. These contrasts in clothing and posture also indicate why Japanese robes became a recurrent reference point in the dress reform movement.

Both in Britain and Australia, the (false) perception of the kimono as a flowing garment that was easy to wear, put on, take off, and followed the natural curves of the female body offered dress reformers an appealing alternative to stays and corsets (Fukai 1994, Kirk 2008). Supporters of dress reform argued that fashionable dress and the use of toxic clothing dyes injured women’s health, marred women’s ‘natural’ beauty and reflected
women’s position of social, economic and political inferiority (Cunningham 2003). In response to critics of dress reform who likened some of the proposed clothing options to a “potato sack,” Japanese robes offered women a means of remaining comfortable while also looking beautiful (“Dress Reform” 1908). Australian newspapers referred repeatedly to Japanese robes in relation to dress reform. Brisbane’s The Telegraph reported on a dress reform demonstration in Birmingham, England, that showed women how to dress “comfortably, hygienically and beautifully”. It noted that “the mistake made by the average dress reformer is the utter sacrifice of beauty” and pointed out “how exquisitely Turkish women garb themselves, and how charmingly the Japanese, and how easy and comfortable are their garments” (“Fighting the Fashions” 1901). When addressing the “general craving for reform in feminine attire” in 1903, a writer for The Queenslander compared the soft lines and full low hanging sleeves in designs by the Belgian clothing reformer Henry Van de Velde to “the careless grace of a Japanese costume” (“A Dress Reform” 1903).

Dress reform must be understood in the context of other important changes in early twentieth century Australia, including the emergence of the ‘new woman’ and women’s suffrage, which was granted to women gradually in federal and all state elections between 1895 and 1911. Several historians have addressed the close links between women’s suffrage and fashion (Tickner 1987, Parkins 1995, 2002, Tanner 2010). Gail Reekie argues that “what was at stake” for women in debates about fashion was “the new woman’s struggle to win credibility and political effectiveness while maintaining the pleasures of womanhood” (1993, 68). Australian critics of suffragettes branded their appearance manly and unattractive in an attempt to dismiss their cause:

I really cannot accustom myself to the advanced woman. This peculiar specimen of the human genus, loudly labeled 'she male,' is very active in
Sydney since the Woman's Franchise was accomplished: The more active the lady the less beautiful she really is. ("The New Woman" 1903)

While some commentators sought to discredit the ‘new woman’ as a wearer of masculine clothes, neglectful mother and excessive drinker and gambler, others argued that it was critical for women to express their femininity in their dress as they aspired for greater independence and freedom ("The New Woman" 1905; “The New Woman” 1903; Corelli 1903). Suffragettes from the Australian state of Victoria were conscious of remaining fashionable during their campaign in an effort to garner support for their cause (Tanner 2010). In this climate, Japanese inspired costume – with its symbolic links to the values of good wife and wise mother – allowed middle-class Anglo-Australian women to temporarily step out of their regular attire without risk of being subject to harsh gender criticism.

The irony that many Japanese women were adopting “Occidental frivolities” like corsets and high-heeled shoes at this time was not lost on at least one Australian commentator:

In view of the growing convention among thoughtful women of the Occident that the national feminine costume of Japan is about as artistic and as hygienic as a costume can be, it is not a little amusing to discover that the Japanese women of the ‘advanced’ set are all eagerness to discard their own exquisite draperies for the more modern dress of the European and American. (“The New Woman of Japan” 1903)

Although the Australian press offered high praise for the Meiji-era embrace of modern technologies, modernity’s connection to changes in Japanese women’s dress was lamented. A reporter for the Sydney Morning Herald warned that tourists who wish to see “the costumes of Japan in all their native gorgeousness and beauty must make haste to visit the
Cherry Blossom Kingdom, or they may find them gone. A passion for reform in women’s
dress has sprung up” (“All Over the World” 1906). As the kimono-clad woman signified
the quintessential Japan to many travellers, theatregoers and consumers of Japanese goods,
its potential loss was seen as a corruption. In his travel memoirs, Geo H. Rittner
speculated: “Formerly every man, woman, and child in that country was a born artist, but
through the change it has undergone, much of the artistic feeling has been destroyed”
(1904, 138–9). Such impressions of Japan as fundamentally traditional and artistic allowed
for both positive and negative conceptions; Japan could be cast on the one hand in terms of
high art and cultural achievement, and on the other as incapable of being fully modern and
remaining fixed in the past.

Some Australian newspapers linked Japanese dress reform to an increase in
women’s freedom in Japan, implicitly associating their supposed oppression with
The contradictory inscription of the kimono as liberating for modern white women yet a
sign of Japanese women’s subordination underscores some of the problematic aspects of
the Anglo-Australian appropriation of Japanese dress. While reserving cultural values of
liberation, freedom and modernity for Anglo-European culture, this discourse positioned
traditional Japanese culture as essentially oppressive. Moreover, whether underpinned by
stereotypes of the alluring butterfly-like geisha or the good wife and mother, these patterns
of cross-cultural dressing promoted a mode of engagement with cultural difference that
lacked an understanding of the complexities of Japanese culture and a sense of social,
political or economic obligation. The very act of appropriating another cultural identity as
an object of consumption is also underpinned by a sense of symbolic proprietorship over
that culture, and a disavowal of the specificities of cultural identities.
Cross-cultural masquerade may well be a reflection of the white subject’s own self, but it would be a gross simplification to view the mode of performative photography examined here as just a staging of racial alterity, a reassertion of assumptions about white racial superiority, and an affirmation of the normativity of whiteness. Photographs of Australian women and girls in Japanese dress in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are compelling because they enact a complex negotiation of gender identities and ideals using a range of material practices. Many Australian women were deeply interested in their “Japanese sisters,” and used the materials available to them to learn more. They were enthralled by costumed women in plays and musical theatre, enjoyed souvenir photographs of Japanese women in kimonos, collected Japanese goods, embraced Japanese inspired fashions, and read and wrote about Japanese wives and mothers in magazines, newspapers and travel books. The emphasis upon women’s bodies, dress and performances in these cultural forms laid the groundwork for an embodied response as women incorporated these images and objects into their own gendered material practices. Operating at the nexus between the public and the private, photographs of Anglo-Australian women in Japanese dress can also be seen in terms of their place in the Asia Pacific region, south of their neighbor Japan and on the edge of the British Empire. Through their clothing, use of Japanese goods, entertaining and poses for the camera, Anglo-Australian women demonstrated their identification with elements of Japanese material culture and ideals of ryōsai kenbo, as well as middle-class Anglo-European values of beauty and femininity, in ways that asserted their creative agency and challenged the simplicity of racial and gender stereotypes.
References


“At the Children’s Hospital Ball.” *The Queenslander*. August 15, 1903: 23.


“Prize-winning Costumes at the Civil Ambulance Juvenile Fancy Ball, Sydney Town Hall.” *The Sydney Mail*. October 12, 1901: 929.


**Figure captions**

Figure 1. Pusterla Studios, *Untitled (Girls in Geisha Costumes)*, 1904. Black and white photograph. State Library of New South Wales, BCP 00781.

Figure 2. Anon., *Untitled (Two Young Women Dressed as Geisha Girls)*, c. 1895. Black and white photograph, 20 x 15.5 cm. State Library of South Australia, B 62444.

Figure 3. “Japanese Ladies at Their Toilet.” Wood engraving published in *The Illustrated Australian News for Home Readers* (Melbourne), March 27, 1871: 69.


Figure 5. “Sketches from the Mikado.” Print published in *The Australasian Sketcher with Pen and Pencil*, 10 March 1886: 33.


Figure 9. *Untitled (Afternoon Tea in the Garden)*, c. 1895. Black and white photograph, 20 x 15.5 cm. State Library of South Australia, B 62442.