

New Transportation and Its Impact on Clothing Styles of the 1920s to the 1930s

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Abstract

It is a familiar story that women's clothing in Japan changed over time, influenced by the changes in aesthetics, by social upheavals, and by designers and the fashion industry. Against this backdrop, my paper argues that it was transportation technology, such as buses and elevators, that changed the way working women dressed. The purpose of this paper is to show how the uniforms of working women were like in 1920s and how they were considered. The 1920s saw the birth of new careers for women: bus girls and elevator girls. In the wake of the Great Kanto Earthquake, buses became the main form of ground transportation. They wore uniforms that included collared shirts, jackets, and skirts. They wore hats on their heads and purses at their waists, which became an icon of highly paid bus girls. Elevator girls in department stores wore uniforms that included not only black pumps but also pleated skirts and sweaters, which allowed easy movement as they had to operate the handle. Photographs from the period show that they did not wear jackets, unlike bus girls. Still, their relatively casual uniforms were regarded as modern. Based on archival materials such as drawings, photographs, and songs, this paper examines the complex relationship between transportation technology and women's fashion and shows how uniforms for working women informed the symbol of modern girls. In 1920s, women and children began to wear western clothes. This paper shows working women's Western style uniforms had the impact on the image of Moga.

Keywords: bus girls, elevator girls, Moga

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Introduction

In Japan, new transportation was introduced with the steam locomotive. The 1871 picture *Tokyo Yatsuyamashita Kaigan Jōkisha Tetsudo no Zu* (*Tokyo, Yatsuyama-Shita (Below) Seashore Car Railroad Picture*) depicts a steam locomotive and people around it. In the picture, a foreign woman is wearing a Western-style dress. Another picture, *Tokyo Ginza Renga Ishizukuri Hanei no Zu* (*Tokyo Ginza Brick House Prosperity, Picture*) from 1873, shows people in the city. In this image, women are wearing kimonos, but many men are wearing black military uniforms or trousers inside the train. As with the military uniform, modernization changed clothing styles, but new transportation such as steam locomotives also influenced clothing. In the picture *Yokohama Kaigan Tetsudo Jōkisha Zu* (*Yokohama Seashore Steam Locomotive Picture*), men wear jackets and trousers, and a woman is shown wearing a Western-style dress. These images illustrate the transition from traditional kimono to Western clothing during modernization.

Men began wearing Western clothing in the early Meiji period. In Meiji period, the government was keen to adopt Western style clothing, because the traditional Japanese attire is regarded very ethnic, and to catch up the Western countries, they thought they need to adopt Western style Clothes. At first, it was worn mainly by military personnel and government officials. Western clothing was for official duties, while Japanese clothing was used at home. It gradually spread among Japanese men. Suits became standard for office workers and eventually became very common. Modernization also influenced steam locomotive conductors, and they adopted the Western style uniform. The conductors of steam locomotives also needed new workwear. Their clothing had to be strong and easy to wash because coal dust stained garments easily. For this reason, they wore uniforms which is durable for the work. In these pictures, people wear modern clothing. Especially men are shown wearing Western-style clothes. Women wear either kimono or dresses, so the transition in women's fashion was slower than that of men.

The Bus Girl: Popular but Demanding Job

Next, we will look at another example of transportation uniforms. In 1920, the first female bus conductors appeared, totaling 34 people. Their salary was 35 yen, which was considered very high at the time. Three years later, the Great Kanto Earthquake occurred. Because of the damage, the tram railroads were destroyed, and buses became the substitute form of transportation. As a result, female conductors became more common. In 1934, there were about 2,700 bus girls in Tokyo. Their uniforms had several styles. According to the song "Bus Girl in Tokyo," which sings, "Wearing a navy uniform, I am a bus girl in Tokyo," the uniform had a navy color, and other colors also existed according to articles of the time. During the Showa period, bus conductors were called "red-collar girls" or "white-collar girls" depending on their uniforms. Their uniforms included collared shirts, jackets, skirts, and hats. They also carried a large purse around their waist. In the 1920s, this outfit looked extremely modern to the people of that time.

The bus girls' work starts from the cleaning in the bus. And after that, they prepare for the ride. They wear bags, hats, and armband. And they prepare other things like tickets and money. In the interview of a book, the bus girls said the work was hard. They had to announce the bus stop, sell the tickets, and take care of the passengers. They had to remember the routes that bus drive. In some region, new factory or company is built in 3 months or 6 months, so they had to know the exact place, because passengers ask the places. Although the job was very hard, the job was extremely popular at the time.

The Work of Elevator Girls and Their Uniform

In 1929, the first “elevator girls” began working at the Matsuzakaya Ueno department store. Their job was to operate the elevators according to customers’ instructions. In the book of *For women Aspiring to become working women* in 1932, it tells about the elevator girls. It says,

The elevator girl is extremely new profession for working women, but in the city, there must be hundreds of elevator girls around the country. As the ordinary people, we think the job is very dangerous. However, actually it is not, and the fact is, the job needs to go back and forth at 25 to 26 times in an hour in the building that is several tens of feet tall. It repeats around 5 hours, so it must be hard before getting used to the work. The salary and the other condition is almost the same as the department store employee.

The recruitment requirements were women aged 14 to 30 who had graduated from an ordinary elementary school or a higher elementary school. They were also required to have at least two guardians living in the city. Their salary was 80 sen per day for women who graduated from higher elementary school, and 1 yen 5 sen for women who graduated from girls’ school.

In the book of Kawabata Yasunari’s *Asakusa Kurenaidan (The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa)* the elevator in those days was like Makie of gold nashiji. And the book also tells the capacity of the elevator was 13 people. The elevator moved by using a handle operated by the elevator girl. If she turned the handle to the right, the elevator went up; if she turned it to the left, it went down. When the handle returned to the center, the elevator stopped. There was also a button near the foot, which she pressed when the elevator became full to notify customers. They will be able to handle the elevator about one week. Former workers said that the hardest part of the job was memorizing the floor numbers. Since they went up and down many times a day, they often forgot the numbers. Operating the elevator smoothly was also important for customer comfort; if they stopped too abruptly, the elevator would shake. Therefore, they needed skill to operate the elevator properly. Elevator girls remained employed until 2007, when the department store underwent a major renovation and the role was abolished.

The elevator girl’s outfit was new and fresh for the people of that time. While most women normally wore kimono, elevator girls wore Western-style clothing. They wore skirts, shirts, sweaters, and black pumps. The uniform was considered sophisticated. Because the job was glamorous, department stores hired attractive women, making the job even more popular.

Their uniforms were relatively casual compared to other formal uniforms. Photographs from the period show that they did not wear jackets, likely because they worked indoors. Today we consider uniforms as formal clothing, but elevator girls wore comparatively casual attire. The work required easy movement, so they had to wear simple, easy-to-move clothing.

New Uniforms Related to New Transportation

New forms of transportation led to the creation of new uniforms. The conductors of steam locomotives, bus girls, and elevator girls all had their own uniforms designed specifically for their work. Because their jobs required freedom of movement, their uniforms were not traditional Japanese clothing like kimono. Instead, they wore Western-style clothing. We can see the influence of modernization in these uniforms. Valerie Steele said,

In Taisho period(1912–1926) and the first ten years of Showa period (1926–1936), the modern Western style clothes became strongly connected to women, consumerism, and vacation. Individual, especially young people and working women in cities(bus guide, elevator girl, typist) gradually adopted Western style clothes, but it's not only for the uniform of the instructions of the profession, but the sign of the modernity and sophistication.

Men began wearing Western clothing in the early Meiji period, but women still wore kimono at that time. The modernization of women's fashion began around the 1920s. In the 1920s, modern women began to work outside home, which was a fresh and new phenomenon. These modern women were called "modern girls," or Moga in Japanese. The bus girl and the elevator girl were symbols of the Moga. Their Western-style uniforms were also new and exciting to people at the time. Their uniforms demonstrated how glamorous these jobs were.

The Spread of the Dressmaking Education

In 1904, the Singer Sewing Machine Company established the Singer Sewing Machine Girls' School. The company also began offering sewing machines on monthly installment plans, and the schools spread throughout the country. However, sewing machines did not become widespread immediately because Japanese women still wore kimono at that time. Nevertheless, the principal of the Singer Sewing Machine Girls' School, Rinko Hata, wrote in 1924 that recently more women and children had begun to wear Western clothing, and that the number was increasing. By the 1920s, dressmaking schools were being established widely.

The Two Symbols of Modern Girls: Bus Girls and Elevator Girls

The modern girls' uniforms were created during this period. The spread of dressmaking education relates directly to the Western-style clothing worn by modern girls. Their Western-style uniforms emerged in a period when more women and children were adopting Western dress, making the uniforms symbols of modernization and a new era. The modern girls, or Moga, worked in many different professions, and two of the most popular and modern occupations were the elevator girl and the bus girl. Their work required the symbol of official duties, so kimono was unsuitable. Therefore, uniforms were designed with shirts and skirts.

Bus girls' uniform was relatively close to suit. Their work was very demanding, and they worked from early morning until late at night. Their outfit became a symbol of the modern girl. New working women in urban areas needed modern uniforms, so uniforms were created specifically for bus girls. Elevator girls were also considered modern at the time. The Western style uniform is new and fresh, so the Moga style added the job's glamorous image. Their duties included operating the elevator and announce the floor's features, so their clothing needed to allow free movement and place minimal burden on the wearer.

And working women's uniform also had the role to distinguish customer and worker. Actually, in Ginza city in 1925, 33% men wear Japanese clothes, but about women, 99% women wear Japanese clothes. So, the uniform is a sign of working woman. For these reasons, they wore Western-style uniforms rather than kimono.

Modern Girls and the Typical Gender Role

In those days, women were expected to be a good mother, and respectable. In the magazine like *Fujin kurabu* (*Women's Club*), we can see the articles about beauty hacks as well as home chores. And in the magazine, the article about pregnancy often appeared. It seems to say women needs to be beautiful, do home chores, and raise children. On the contrary, Moga was perceived as a deviation of a typical gender role. Moga was criticized because they are frivolous and just chasing the new fashion. Moreover, romantic scandal and sexual deviation are written in an exaggerate way. Because of these factors, their image of the sexual delinquency became stronger. Moga became the most sensational image in consumerism. On the other hand, they are partly accepted as a new worker and the progress of women who start to work.

Moga was the opposite to the articles like *Fujin kurabu* (*Women's Club*) which recommend women to be a good wife and a wise mother. The bus girl and the elevator girl regarded as sexual symbols which are called as “girl.” In the city, the sexual aspect of Moga was exaggerate to attract customers. In the interview of the elevator girls, they said that the most dislike thing about their work is customers' bad behaviors. The elevator girl and the bus girl were both glamorous jobs, but they were caught in the middle of the pressure of a typical gender role and their image as sexual symbols.

Conclusion: New Uniforms as the Symbol of Sophistication

The steam locomotive conductor, the bus girl, and the elevator girl were all new occupations created by new forms of transportation. Their uniforms suited the needs of their respective jobs. These outfits were modern, sophisticated, and innovative for the period, and they were specially designed for each occupation. In the early Meiji period, men wore jackets and trousers for official occasions. By the 1920s, women and children gradually began wearing Western clothing as well. The bus girls and elevator girls adopted their uniforms during this time. Their uniforms symbolized modernization and it regarded sophisticated for these new occupations. Although the bus girl and the elevator girl were regarded sexual symbols, their uniform had the sign of workers in the period which women usually wear kimono. They were struggling with the misunderstanding of customers, but their new occupation related to new transportation created the uniform which made their jobs popular and glamorous. And Valerie Steele said, “Still now in Japan, from students and construction worker to office worker and office lady, everyone wears a uniform or something like a uniform, and it can be said Japan continued to be the ‘society of uniform.’” So, she said there is a “society of uniform” in Japan. The culture of uniform is everywhere in daily life here until now, so the suits for the official duties and Modern girls' uniforms were the start of this situation in the present.

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