

36 Made in Japan

A New Generation of Fashion Designers

Hiroshi Narumi

Introduction

Since the 1990s, Japanese fashion has experienced a dramatic upheaval as the globalization of fashion retail and production and the recession of Japanese economy have threatened its very existence. Fast fashion, cheaper Chinese production, and international (usually European) luxury brands have overwhelmed the domestic market; albeit targeting different consumer brackets, and the number of Japanese apparel companies and factories has significantly declined (Yamazaki 2011). For example, Tokyo's high-end Ginza neighborhood is lined with both expensive boutique shops of international luxury brands like the American Tiffany & Co. and the French Hermes, and large fast-fashion outlets like Sweden's H&M and Japan's own Uniqlo (short for "Unique Clothing"). With foreign brands dominating the high-end of the market and many consumers desiring the cheap but acceptable quality of fast fashion, Japanese mid-price clothing has become increasingly unpopular. The mid-range Japanese brands that used to fill department stores and shopping plazas have attracted fewer customers, and the department store itself, as a symbol of middle-class fashion aspiration, has experienced a decline.

In this chapter, I discuss Japanese fashion designers' creative, conceptual, and industrial responses to this existential threat. They have led to a redefinition of the concept of "Made in Japan" in the age of globalized fashion by basing their philosophies on Japanese culture and traditions, instead of following the latest trends from Paris, Milan, and New York, as fast fashion does with increasing speed and efficiency. For instance, the fashion brand matohu¹ developed a new type of clothing—*nagagi*. *Nagagi*, literally "long coat," is a flat form inspired by kimono patterns (see Figure 36.1). However, the fabric design has been modernized to suit T-shirts, jeans, and other common clothing. While matohu has offered a new series of *nagagi* each season, the shape has not changed. They hope the *nagagi* will be a timeless form that can be created in different fabrics and worn for years without going out of style.

Other designers share matohu's concept of "timelessness." Some fashion brands prefer to start from materials. For example, minä perhonen is known for its sophisticated fabrics and poetic textile designs. The designer Minagawa

Figure 36.1 *Nagagi*, a long coat.
Source: Courtesy of matohu.

Akira has drawn almost all the patterns, including dyeing, printing, and so on. "basics," clothes that are simple and expensive due to the quality of the materials and the craftsmanship of the customers. Another trend is to follow the trends of the global fashion, but to develop independent Japanese clothes by developing a unique style. They have rediscovered the value of traditional Japanese clothes.

I have interviewed several designers. In addition, I helped organize the exhibition *of Tokyo Fashion* (Kawase 2010), focusing on the works of Japanese designers. The exhibition focused on the domination of three designers: Issey Miyake (founded by Rei Kawakubo), Yohji Yamamoto, and Kenzo Takada. This chapter is considered to be the first book on Japanese fashion in the 2000s: minä perhonen, founded by Minagawa and keisuke kanda, launched in 1995 by Minagawa and Yagi Nao in 2000.



Figure 36.1 *Nagagi*, a long coat from matohu's 2005 collection.
Source: Courtesy of matohu.

Akira has drawn almost every sketch and has discussed the processes of weaving, dying, printing, and embroidering with artisans. He aspires to create new “basics,” clothes that can be worn on a daily basis. Although their clothes are expensive due to their craftsmanship, *minä perhonen* is supported by ardent customers. Another point I will make is that, while keeping a distance from the trends of the global fashion system and producing original clothes, some independent Japanese designers have sought an alternative way of making clothes by developing networks with customers. It is possible to say that they have rediscovered their own sense of “locality.”

I have interviewed Japanese designers in Tokyo and Kyoto for several years. In addition, I helped curate the 2011 exhibition *Feel and Think: A New Era of Tokyo Fashion (Kanjiru fuku kangaeru fuku: Tokyo fasshon no genzaikai)*, focusing on the works of ten fashion brands that stood out in the 2000s.² This exhibition focused on the emergence of a new generation after the long domination of three distinguished brands in the Japanese market and public imagination—Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto, and Comme des Garçons (founded by Rei Kawakubo)—and showcased their new strategies and creative forms. This chapter extends that research and examines six brands considered to be the forerunners of a new generation of fashion designers in the 2000s: *minä perhonen*, *mintdesigns*, *matohu*, *SOU•SOU*, *h.NAOTO*, and *keisuke kanda*. *minä perhonen*, literally “my butterfly” in Finnish, was launched in 1995 by Minagawa Akira, who claims an affinity with Scandinavian culture and design. *mintdesigns* was founded by Katsui Hokuto and Yagi Nao in 2001 to create clothing that can be worn for a long time,

regardless of the latest trends. *matohu*, with a double meaning of “to wear” and “to wait,” was established in 2005 by a pair of designers, who trained at *Comme des Garçons* and Yohji Yamamoto, to show respect for the thoughtfulness of the design process. *SOU•SOU*, “yes, yes” in Japanese, was formed in 2002 by three designers who hoped to create a “new Japanese culture.” Hirooka Naoto launched *h.NAOTO* in 2000 to remix various subcultural elements from punk and goth to Lolita, attracting Visual-kei musical performers who have been known to dress flamboyantly and to overturn gender binaries in fashion. Kanda Keisuke established his eponymous brand in 2005 and has offered *kawaii* (cute) styles for young women with whom he has established a network of support.

I will first survey the situation facing Japanese fashion in the early twenty-first century. Second, I will explore how these six brands have re-inventing traditions and established networking with customers. Through this analysis, I will show how Japanese clothing designers have negotiated the tensions between the global and the local. Although these fashion brands are not necessarily popular among the general public in terms of sales, their creativity has been highly appreciated by journalists, buyers for shops, and fashion-conscious customers such that they occupy a large place in the Japanese fashion system via their influence. Whether ordinary consumers realize it or not, their clothing, and the images of clothing around them in popular culture, has been inspired by these brands.

Japanese Fashion in Transition

Especially since the 1990s, many international luxury brands, some under the ownership of the French LVMH conglomerate (*Moët Hennessy–Louis Vuitton S.A.*, founded in 1987), have opened flagship stores in major Japanese cities. These boutiques are housed in eye-catching buildings by well-known architects, as exemplified by *Louis Vuitton Omotesando*, designed by Aoki Jun and opened in 2002. These luxury brands extended their market from Europe and the United States to Asia while making their products more appealing to Asian consumers via small cultural localizations. For instance, acknowledging their huge Japanese clientele, *Louis Vuitton* collaborated with Murakami Takashi to produce an original line of handbags in 2003 (see Chapter 38). This line netted over US\$350 million for *Louis Vuitton*, and high-profile international celebrities like Madonna and Gwyneth Paltrow were seen proudly carrying the bags (Betts 2003).

Concurrently, inexpensive fast fashion became widely available to Japanese consumers. *Uniqlo*, the most successful Japanese fast-fashion brand, has a ubiquitous presence, with more than 800 stores found everywhere nationwide, from affluent fashion districts like Tokyo's Ginza to local train stations.³ There are also around 140 stores in more than fourteen different countries, especially in Asia (*Uniquely Positioned* 2010). *Uniqlo* is especially remarkable in its innovation of pragmatic, high-tech materials, such as “heat-tech”

(thermal undershirts) and design in a range of colors and artists, and featured in Japan, from Moomins brands, including H&M, as in other parts of Asia. (*kurōzu*) because of its aff

The fast-fashion business in terms of production, financial risk as well as production planning, rave of their “real clothes” to Southeast Asian countries. ing production also means as short as two weeks. is always something new weekly. Many local Japanese tailors, and even department such overwhelming into gone bankrupt.

From the late 1990s, the subcultures, such as those play), and “decorative” erations worldwide, Japanese and less about high-profile *Garçons* (Keet 2007; Ste

In this socioeconomic in the conspicuous consumption era have faced financial Commerce became the which was then reorganized declared goals included the world, as well as nation Week Tokyo). However to JFW; therefore, it failed the Department of Commerce Mercedes-Benz took over shows.⁴ In contrast to the aimed at teenaged girls, sometimes abbreviated general public. Most people follow the latest trends ing the process inspired by their target market, ment over commercial

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(thermal undershirts) and synthetic fleece. Uniqlo offers clothing of the same design in a range of colors, has ties with Japanese and international designers and artists, and features global popular culture phenomena well known in Japan, from Moomins to Barbie. Furthermore, international fast-fashion brands, including H&M and Zara, have opened stores all over Japan as well as in other parts of Asia. This clothing has been called “real clothes” (*rearu kurōzu*) because of its affordability and wearability.

The fast-fashion business model reflects the current age of globalization in terms of production, distribution, and consumption. In order to reduce financial risk as well as production costs, these fashion labels outsource the production planning, raw material production, and manufacturing processes of their “real clothes” to cheap labor in China, Vietnam, and other East and Southeast Asian countries. Vertical integration of the different stages of clothing production also means that the time needed from design to retail can be as short as two weeks. The arrival of retail stock is designed so that there is always something new for customers to see, even if they visit the shop weekly. Many local Japanese manufacturers—dyeing and weaving factories, tailors, and even department stores—have not been able to compete with such overwhelming integration and resultant price competition and have gone bankrupt.

From the late 1990s, the international media started to notice Tokyo street subcultures, such as those intertwined with anime, manga, cosplay (costume play), and “decorative” (*decora*) popular culture. Especially to younger generations worldwide, Japanese fashion has become more about street fashion and less about high-profile designers such as Issey Miyake and Comme des Garçons (Keet 2007; Steele et al. 2010).

In this socioeconomic climate, the Japanese designers who were successful in the conspicuous consumption that characterized the 1980s bubble economy era have faced financial difficulties. In 2006, the Japanese Department of Commerce became the primary financial sponsor for Tokyo Fashion Week, which was then reorganized to become Japan Fashion Week Tokyo (JFW). Its declared goals included making Japanese designers better known to the rest of the world, as well as nurturing young Japanese talent (Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week Tokyo). However, few international buyers and journalists came to JFW; therefore, it failed to produce many business opportunities. In 2010, the Department of Commerce terminated its financial support for the event. Mercedes-Benz took over sponsorship starting from the spring/summer 2011 shows.⁴ In contrast to the declining influence of JFW, a new fashion event aimed at teenaged girls, “Tokyo Girls Collection” (Tokyo Gāruzu Korekushon, sometimes abbreviated as TGC), was launched in 2005 and was open to the general public. Most participating brands have been apparel companies that follow the latest trends and provide inexpensive “real clothes” by adopting the process inspired by fast fashion. TGC has been widely welcomed by their target market, but fashion designers who value creative achievement over commercial success have lost potential customers and a showcase

platform. In reaction, the brands discussed below have rejected the premise of cheap, rapidly changing fashion and, in the process, have redefined Japanese fashion and its role within popular culture.

Timeless Clothing and Textile Making: minä perhonen and mintdesigns

In the fashion climate of the early 2000s described above, the goals of opening boutiques in Japan or entering fashion shows in Paris, New York, or Milan became less obtainable for young designers. A significant number of designers staged collection shows in the late 1980s. While profitable for some, it was, at that time, seen as a necessary step in internationalizing a brand. Forgoing this dream of internationalization and responding to the threat of fast fashion, some designers have made long-lasting and innovative clothes using Japanese materials and have primarily targeted a Japanese market. minä perhonen and mintdesigns have exemplified this strategy by making their own original textiles covered with their own graphics in local factories.

In other words, these brands have emphasized the creative process of producing clothes. In the current fashion system, brands tend to buy materials from textile companies rather than making them themselves. Despite their limited financial resources, minä perhonen and mintdesigns have created original fabrics by dyeing, weaving, and making lace and embroidery in collaboration with local artisans. These designers claim that ready-made textiles make clothes seem ordinary; with original textiles, they can produce something special (Takagi et al. eds. 2012: 116).

While a design student, founder Minagawa Akira traveled to Scandinavia, where he felt a creative affinity with cultures and lifestyles. His brand aims to produce exceptional, enduring daily-use clothing (minä perhonen 2011: 12). From the start, Minagawa has collaborated with local Japanese manufacturers to create textiles based on his original graphic designs: hand-drawn sketches that are woven, dyed, or embroidered. In an interview, Minagawa claims that the historically close relationship between designers and craftspeople distinguishes Japanese fashions from those produced in North America, Europe, and Australia:

I think the borders between Japan and the rest of the world do not exist anymore. Having said this, I know about Japanese artisans and their excellent manufacturing environment. In the West, designers use pre-manufactured fabrics for their work. In Japan, designers are in a position to order specific kinds of fabrics for their creations. This close relation with their clients is something unique to Japanese fabric manufacturers.
(Takagi et al. eds. 2012: 96)

Minagawa thinks it important to make clothes with artisans in accord with local manufacturers to maintain originality and to support Japanese traditional

industries. He stockpiles some in new designs, and his rationale:

I would like to make years, instead of cheap fashion cycle. Because I have re-used the same period of time. It is a season's collection, my designs will look

After graduating from London, Katsui Hokuto products that transcend of the wearer's life. The printed patterns, character yet distinctive shapes and in their signature deco scissors or original but making original textile

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industries. He stockpiles the textiles used in past collections and even reuses some in new designs, a practice rare for fashion brands. Minagawa explains his rationale:

I would like to make soulful clothes that the wearer can cherish for many years, instead of changing every season under the unspoken rules of the fashion cycle. Because I have created the original designs for our textiles, I have re-used the same designs in various collections over an extended period of time. It is normal to treat a design as outdated after it is used for a season's collection. I would like to challenge this notion to see if any of my designs will look outdated.

(Takagi et al. eds. 2012: 95)

After graduating from Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design in London, Katsui Hokuto and Yagi Nao established mintdesigns to create products that transcend short fashion cycles and become a long-term part of the wearer's life. They have manufactured their own original fabrics and printed patterns, characterized by colorful palettes, bold patterns, and simple yet distinctive shapes and forms. Their playful approach to design is reflected in their signature decorative motifs, such as a little girl holding a pair of scissors or original buttons made of paper. Yagi explains the importance of making original textiles:

We didn't have to make our own fabrics. But an item of clothing will always look cheap if it's made of an inexpensive, mass-produced fabric. Even if the cutting of the garment is well done, it will still look like something we've seen somewhere else. It is wonderful to see a garment with the perfect harmony of great patternmaking, design, and graphics.

(Takagi et al. eds. 2012: 113–116)

mintdesigns creates a variety of other goods, including bags, wallets, pencil cases, and chairs. Their philosophy is to design clothes as products. They have been inspired by Fukuzawa Naoto, the leading product designer for Muji, a Japanese brand known for its modern and timeless products.⁵

Thus by deliberately ignoring global trends, minä perhonen and mintdesigns have created their own styles from fabric to clothes. According to Yagi:

In the apparel-making industry, it's usually very difficult to develop a new material from scratch unless you have a sufficient budget. But in our case, we carefully study how we can produce our own materials within the means at our disposal. We work closely with manufacturers and give them various suggestions so that they can produce our material in a small batch.

(Takagi et al. eds. 2012: 113)

Some local factories are willing to work with young designers regardless of low profits. While many craftspeople at these factories are now quite old, designers hope to continue their traditions and make them alternatives to mainstream global fashions.

Reinventing Japanese Aesthetics: *matohu* and *SOU•SOU*

Some Japanese designers have tried to rediscover the aesthetic possibilities of kimono, a garment often viewed as premodern, outdated, and no longer everyday clothing. To them, wearing kimono liberates the body from Western-style clothing. However, it is difficult to combine kimono with other global fashions, as their constructions have derived from different cultures. Although there have been many fashions worldwide that have attempted to modernize kimono, most have been superficial mimics lacking deep understanding of Japanese aesthetics. Two fashion brands, *matohu* and *SOU•SOU*, have attained this remarkable achievement by shedding new



Figure 36.2 Keii, the *SOU•SOU* men's line, 2015.
Source: Courtesy of *SOU•SOU*.

light on Japanese traditions. *chi Makiko*, the founders of *matohu*, have a double meaning of "*matohu*" in their own aesthetics thus requiring

matohu's brand identity. Hori-hata and Sekiguchi decided the next five years would be brands to decide their themes according to seasonal themes according to *matohu* designers believed the arts like tea ceremony, ceremony of Japanese culture. Hori-hata the past or intend to emphasize Hori-hata explains their philosophy

Some people misunderstand Japanese decorative motifs and patterns that are contemporary yet timeless Japanese sensibility.

SOU•SOU (Figure 36.2), was designed by Wakabayashi Takeshi and designer Tsujimura Hisano. He moved to the United States for about two decades before returning to Japan. Together, they designed clothing, shoes, textiles, and furniture (Tsujimura, 2013). As Wakabayashi stated, "When Uniqlo approached *SOU•SOU* for designs for their products, the products were mass-produced and he agreed to the founding principles, he agreed to the attention of a large market. He designed and brands, including Uniqlo, are usually limited in one style. He demonstrated *SOU•SOU*'s philosophy."

SOU•SOU's brand philosophy is to create contemporary lifestyles (Wakabayashi, 2013) by a combination of modern and traditional costumes. Their designs include traditional work shoes, with a focus on carpenters and construction workers. *SOU•SOU* revived traditional textile patterns, as shown in Figure 36.2.

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light on Japanese traditions. For example, Horihata Hiroyuki and Sekiguchi Makiko, the founders of matohu, have researched Japanese history. The double meaning of “*matohu*” reflects their desire to spend time fostering their own aesthetics thus requiring customers “to wait.”

matohu’s brand identity lies in reinventing Japanese aesthetics. In 2005, Horihata and Sekiguchi decided that the main theme of their collection of the next five years would be the “Beauty of Keichō.” It is unusual for fashion brands to decide their themes this far in advance; instead they commonly decide seasonal themes according to current trends and the market. The matohu designers believed the Keichō period (1596–1615), when many classical arts like tea ceremony, ceramics, and painting developed, to be the golden age of Japanese culture. However, matohu did not transmit any nostalgia for the past or intend to emphasize Orientalist aesthetics for the Western market. Horihata explains their philosophy:

Some people misunderstand our brand, thinking it is based on traditional Japanese decorative motifs. Our designs do not include any decorative motifs and patterns that you see on kimono. Instead, we want to create contemporary yet timeless pieces of clothing that can only be made by Japanese sensibility.

(Takagi et al. eds. 2012: 85)

SOU•SOU (Figure 36.2), was jointly established in 2002 in Kyoto by fashion designer Wakabayashi Takeshi, textile designer Wakisaka Katsuji, and interior designer Tsujimura Hisanobu. Wakisaka worked in Finland and the United States for about two decades, and he received recognition abroad before returning to Japan. Together, they have made various goods, including clothing, shoes, textiles, and furniture and have had a tie-in with Uniqlo (starting in 2013). As Wakabayashi stated in a personal interview, the fast-fashion giant Uniqlo approached SOU•SOU to ask permission to use its existing textile designs for their products. Wakabayashi said that, although the tie-in products were mass-produced and made in China and thus against SOU•SOU’s founding principles, he agreed because this was a valuable opportunity to get the attention of a large market. Uniqlo has often collaborated with promising designers and brands, including mintdesigns. Although such collaborations are usually limited in one season, the tie-in project has continued for years, demonstrating SOU•SOU’s lasting presence in the mass market.

SOU•SOU’s brand philosophy is to revive Japanese tradition within contemporary lifestyles (Wakabayashi 2013). Their clothes are characterized by a combination of modern-style textiles and the flat-form construction of traditional costumes. Their most popular product is *tabi* shoes. *Tabi* are traditional work shoes, with a separate big toe, used by such manual workers as carpenters and construction workers; they have also been worn in local festivals. SOU•SOU revived *tabi* as whimsical sneakers with contemporary textile patterns, as shown in Figure 36.2. SOU•SOU works with local

factories and craftspeople who would have otherwise faced financial difficulties in the globalizing economy. They claim that their task is to protect these factories from bankruptcy.⁶

Both matohu and SOU•SOU have reassessed the aesthetics of historical Japanese clothing. Unlike designers in the previous generation, such as Mori Hanae in the 1960s and Yamamoto Kansai in the 1970s, they do not deliberately “orientalize” their culture in order to get attention from European and American journalists. Rather, as Horihata of matohu stated:

We decided to create a brand that existed outside of the Western historical context but which was not an “avant-garde” philosophy. We wanted to pursue new forms of expression using non-Western apparel making techniques. We wanted to create clothes that would allow wearers to feel connected with the past while satisfying their desire for something contemporary and timeless.

(Takagi et al. eds. 2012: 80)

Forming Affective Communities of Designers and Customers: h.NAOTO and keisuke kanda

Various Japanese youth subcultures, such as Lolita, cosplay, and Visual-kei, have been famous for their spectacular looks; shared clothing tastes unites their members. In other words, these groups’ appearances are their identity as well as the symbol of their bonds. According to Kawamura Yuniya (2012), fashion brands have played a crucial role in the rise of the subcultures in Japan. This effort has been supported by business practices that help form emotional bonds among designers and their customers. h.NAOTO and keisuke kanda have forged affective networks with customers through activities related to their fashions. These relationships between the brands and their fans are so intense that they feel an intimate fellowship, which is different from a commercial relationship between brands and consumers.

Designer h.NAOTO’s (real name Hirooka Naoto) hybridized subcultural style that combined Goth, Lolita, and punk and peaked in popularity in the early 2000s. His customers, mainly teenage girls, made pilgrimages to his boutiques, where parties, fashion shows, and concerts were held. As Hirooka explained, “In fact, girls don’t have a lot of places where they can wear h.NAOTO, except when they go to Harajuku or to the concerts and special events. When girls from small towns outside of Tokyo come to our events, they change their clothes in the bathrooms of train station and slip into their h.NAOTO’s outfits. They are so sincere, and that makes me happy” (Takagi et al. eds. 2012: 50).

h.NAOTO’s rise to prominence coincided with the emergence of Visual-kei and Gothic Lolita subcultures. Immediately following its 2000 launch, the label caught the eye of such Visual-kei musicians as Luna Sea and L’arc

en Ciel and their fans. The of “punk Gothic-Lolita.” Since thirty different brands in response of these “sub-brands” caters to cosplay, otaku, and anime, he fashion.

Hirooka made the styles of these teenagers, crafting a decade. “First and foremost, my philosophy. As a designer, my job is not for the consumer. Rather, I would exchange inspirations with the full domestic brand has also thanks to the export of many its first step toward global expansion October 2011, which closed.

Designer Kanda Keisuke’s for its “cute girl” style. His clothing school uniforms, and mini teenaged girls. He has often clothes are love letters to his the beginning, Kanda has tried while enjoying conversation network with its fans as center.

In 2005, Kanda established clothes during his college days then, his unique business opportunities. While keisuke kanda clothing, the designer continued. The number of his couture thanks to word-of-mouth marketing.

Kanda thinks it more important Japan than to succeed abroad taste of fans:

In my case, I do not have engaging myself with a girl I liked.... I still do not know for sure is that I like to cherish... I am searching women’s clothes, I often understand what I’m making am not interested in expressing seeking approval from girls.

wise faced financial difficulties, their task is to protect these

the aesthetics of historical Japanese generation, such as Mori in the 1970s, they do not deliberately distance themselves from European and American influences. As Hirooka stated:

Outside of the Western historical "mod" philosophy. We wanted to create a new Western apparel making that would allow wearers to express their desire for something

(Takagi et al. eds. 2012: 80)

Designers and

Ita, cosplay, and Visual-kei, shared clothing tastes unites their appearances are their identity. As Kawamura Yuniya (2012), the rise of the subcultures in Japan are practices that help form their identities. h.NAOTO and kei-culture connect customers through activities between the brands and their fanbase, which is different from traditional fashion and consumers.

h.NAOTO hybridized subcultural fashion peaked in popularity in the 1990s, made pilgrimages to his hometown where they can wear their clothes to the concerts and special events. In Tokyo come to our events, in station and slip into their clothes it makes me happy" (Takagi

With the emergence of Visual-kei following its 2000 launch, designers as Luna Sea and L'Arc

en Ciel and their fans. The brand is credited with inventing the new style of "punk Gothic-Lolita." Since then, h.NAOTO has grown to encompass thirty different brands in response to the demands of its young clientele. Each of these "sub-brands" caters to a specific style inspired by looks like goth, cosplay, otaku, and anime, helping to unify members of a subculture through fashion.

Hirooka made the styles of various subcultures widely accessible to Japanese teenagers, crafting a decadently pop and kitsch universe. He commented, "First and foremost, my policy is to provide what my customers are looking for. As a designer, my job is not about transmitting or imposing my vision on the consumer. Rather, I would like to form a bond with my customers and exchange inspirations with them" (Takagi et al. eds. 2012: 50). This successful domestic brand has also gained popularity in the United States and Asia thanks to the export of manga, anime, and Lolita fashions. h.NAOTO took its first step toward global expansion by opening a store in San Francisco in October 2011, which closed in March 2013.

Designer Kanda Keisuke's eponymous brand (using lowercase k)⁷ is famous for its "cute girl" style. His clothes have been inspired by Lolita fashion, high-school uniforms, and mini dresses, along with other styles popular among teenaged girls. He has often made his clothes by hand and claims that his clothes are love letters to his customers (Takagi et al. eds. 2012: 62). From the beginning, Kanda has traveled all over Japan for exhibits and pre-orders, while enjoying conversations with customers. The brand views building a network with its fans as central to its business model and brand philosophy.

In 2005, Kanda established the Candyrock Company. He started to make clothes during his college days at the prestigious Waseda University, and, even then, his unique business operation sets his label apart from his contemporaries. While Keisuke Kanda has expanded to produce factory-manufactured clothing, the designer continues to make customized and hand-sewn items. The number of his couture clients has grown to more than one thousand thanks to word-of-mouth marketing (Takagi et al. eds. 2012: 62).

Kanda thinks it more important to cultivate close ties to his customers in Japan than to succeed abroad. He confesses that his clothes depend on the taste of fans:

In my case, I do not have that kind of concern toward the West. I started engaging myself with fashion because I wanted to make a dress for the girl I liked.... I still do not know what *kawaii* stands for. One thing I do know for sure is that I love girls, and *kawaii* is a feeling that all girls tend to cherish... I am searching for this intangible quality. When I create women's clothes, I often ask girls for their opinions. 'Look, I don't really understand what I'm making. Do you think these are *kawaii*?' Actually, I am not interested in expressing my own aesthetics at all. All I'm doing is seeking approval from girls.

(Takagi et al. eds. 2012: 64–65)

h.NAOTO and keisuke kanda seem more concerned with their specific local contexts than with the norms of the global fashion system. Designers are often charismatic figures, telling their consumers what to wear and providing a top-down understanding of fashion. Yet both these brands are premised more on horizontal interpersonal relationships rather than on vertical hierarchies of power. Theirs could be a more useful strategy to attract customers than mass-produced, fast-fashion brands that garner no lasting loyalty.

Conclusion

The brands I discuss differ in terms of designs, goals, business scales, customers, and philosophies. However, the new wave of Japanese designers of the early 2000s has three main points in common: first, they have been inspired by various aspects of Japanese traditional and contemporary culture, including textiles, craftsmanship, aesthetics, kimono, and subcultures. Previous designers, for example, Mori Hanae and Yamamoto Kansai, also adopted Japanese traditional arts and decorative motives, but, arguably, they did so to attract Euro-American journalists and buyers. Born and raised in an era of economic prosperity, the new wave of designers neither feels nostalgia toward the past nor an inferiority complex toward the West for not having established their careers by garnering international attention. Instead, they have incorporated aspects of Japanese culture and tradition to stand out in the domestic market. (After the closure of h.NAOTO's San Francisco shop in 2013, SOU•SOU is currently the only one of the brands discussed to operate an overseas store.)

Second, designers in the 2000s are incongruous with the existing fashion system that constantly fabricates the latest trends and discards products every six months. On one hand, fashion concentrates on the present. On the other hand, the designers of minä perhonen and matohu claim to make timeless pieces. minä perhonen has reused textiles in their stock, and matohu has produced a regular long coat of the same shape every season. The designers of h.NAOTO and keisuke kanda have been inspired by their customers' particular desires. Neither has participated in Paris, New York, or Milan collections, and thus they do not use the means by which information about fashion has historically spread. It can be said that these designers more or less share an "anti-fashion ethos" in that they consider the significance of their clothes in terms of a longer timescale.

Third, they have sought their own ways to produce clothes. Many of the above designers have collaborated with Japanese artisans, who, in turn, have worked to realize what young creators want to make, thereby updating their artistic traditions. Apparel companies outsource their work abroad to cut production costs; however, these designers prefer to work with Japanese factories. While supporting the domestic economy, they have shown respect for craftsmanship and have helped its continuance. In addition, these brands have used strategies to form relationships directly with their customers, rather than merely resorting to commercial outlets to promote their work. As opposed to

the conventional one-way exhibitions, and lectures may become a more integral part of their businesses.

As these six brands are categorized, some are in the fashion category. While some are not. Some are hard to buy them. Others are easy to buy. Other fashion-conscious adults are creative in the market with logos. It is not easy to get such harsh commercial likes of Miyake, Yama reasonable profits in the mobilization of the Japanese and their current social develop specific identity Japanese fashion. It is ultimately set the direction in Japan.

Notes

- 1 Many Japanese brands use capital letters.
- 2 The exhibition *Feel* at Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery, stalled in the Kobe National Art School. It derives from my research (2012). I would like to thank Hori Motoaki, Ito and Ishida Chihiro.
- 3 Uniqlo opened its first store not Tokyo. The brand is not Tokyo.
- 4 When Mercedes-Benz was changed to Mercedes, Japan was removed.
- 5 Muji, or "Mujirushi Seiyu," one of the clothing design mass-produced goods houses. Although it is an apparel company.
- 6 According to my interview, Uniqlo does not appear to use the English style letters as a means to
- 7 Like many other Japanese brands, they use the English style letters as a means to

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system. Designers are of-
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the conventional one-way relationship to consumers, they have held parties, exhibitions, and lectures to promote communication. Affective community may become a more important means for independent brands to establish their businesses.

As these six brands are diverse, it is impossible to label them under a single category. While some designers are concerned with traditional aesthetics, others are not. Some brands are reasonably priced so that teenagers can afford to buy them. Others are expensive enough to be only for sophisticated fashion-conscious adults. However, most brands are struggling to pursue creativity in the market dominated by cheap clothes and expensive bags with logos. It is not easy for independent creative designers to survive in such harsh commercial competition. They have not followed the paths of the likes of Miyake, Yamamoto, and Kawakubo, and instead have had to find reasonable profits in the shrinking economy of the domestic market. Their mobilization of the Japanese local resources, shaped by both artistic legacies and their current socioeconomic and creative context, has enabled them to develop specific identities and to have a lasting impact on the definition of Japanese fashion. It is these brands, their designs, and their ideas that will ultimately set the direction of popular fashion and its place in popular culture in Japan.

Notes

- 1 Many Japanese brand names use lowercase letters reflecting how Japanese language uses capital letters for emphasis in ways different from English.
- 2 The exhibition *Feel and Think: A New Era of Tokyo Fashion* was held at the Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery (October 18–December 25, 2011). It was then installed in the Kobe Fashion Museum (January 14–April 1, 2012), followed by the National Art School Gallery, Sydney, (June 20–August 17, 2013). This chapter derives from my research for the exhibition and the catalogue (see Takagi et al. 2012). I would like to thank the other curators: Takagi Yoko, Nishitani Mariko, and Hori Motoaki. I am also grateful to translators: Tamura Yuki, Tamura Maki, and Ishida Chihiro.
- 3 Uniqlo opened its first Unique Clothing Warehouse store in 1984 in Hiroshima, not Tokyo. The brand is now under the Japanese parent company Fast Retailing.
- 4 When Mercedes-Benz became the main sponsor, the title of Japan Fashion Week was changed to Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week Tokyo (MBFWT). The word Japan was removed.
- 5 Muji, or “Mujirushi ryōhin” (“No brand” or generic) was established in 1980 as part of Seiyu, one of Japan’s biggest supermarket chains. Muji is a larger firm than the clothing designers discussed in this chapter and has made a wide range of mass-produced goods from stationery and clothing to furniture and prefabricated houses. Although its clothing line is popular, Muji is not thought of primarily as an apparel company.
- 6 According to my interview with Wakabayashi of SOU•SOU, the tie-in with Uniqlo does not apply to this case.
- 7 Like many other Japanese fashion designers, h.NAOTO and keisuke kanda follow the English style of writing first names before surnames. They use English letters as a means to express their imagined self-image.

Introducing Japanese Popular Culture

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