

Why Is Cross-Dressing Perceived as a Fray in the Social Fabric? A Case Study from Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Japan

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Abstract:

Between the 1730s and 1840s, in Edo (modern-day Tokyo), Osaka, and Kyoto groups of women who belonged to different social classes, including prostitutes, commoners, warriors, and high-ranking women, donned the *haori* jacket, a garment usually worn by men. In the 1740s and 1840s, legislators enacted specific sumptuary laws to forbid this practice as it encouraged the mixing of women from dissimilar social backgrounds. However, in the legal texts the lawmakers did not specify the complex social, political, and cultural reasons why such mixing brought about by urban women's (mis)use of the *haori* was considered problematic. To fully understand this aspect of the phenomenon, it is therefore crucial to study supplementary sources which offer a more comprehensive overview of the issues linked with the practice. Examining “miscellanies” (*zuihitsu*, literally “following the brush”) written by intellectuals of the time, this paper suggests that urban women's donning of the *haori* destabilised the very foundations of contemporary society: Early modern Japan and particularly its major cities were in fact structured as a garrison state wherein each individual occupied a precise “status” (*mibun*), which was visually signaled by his or her clothes. Furthermore, attire also optically denoted a person's gender. By serving as visible indicators of one's status and gender, dresses functioned as what Herman Ooms has termed “social tattoos.” This paper argues that by wearing the *haori* urban women altered their markers of status and gender, thus shaking the social, political, and cultural organisation of the state at its core.



One sheet from an unidentified diptych or triptych
Utagawa Kunisada (1786-1864)
1854 (Date seal of Sixth Month and *aratame*)
Signature: *Toyokuni ga* (in *toshidama* cartouche)
Publisher: Tsutaya Kichizō (Kōeidō)
Carver: Chō Take
Vertical *ōban nishiki-e*, 34.7 x 23.3 cm

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for those coming in person from outside the KU community is greatly appreciated. If you are coming from off campus, **please also register as a Guest at the Information counter** near the entrance before coming up to the room

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Durante, Preregistration