



Sailor Uniform Fetish

A Historical Look

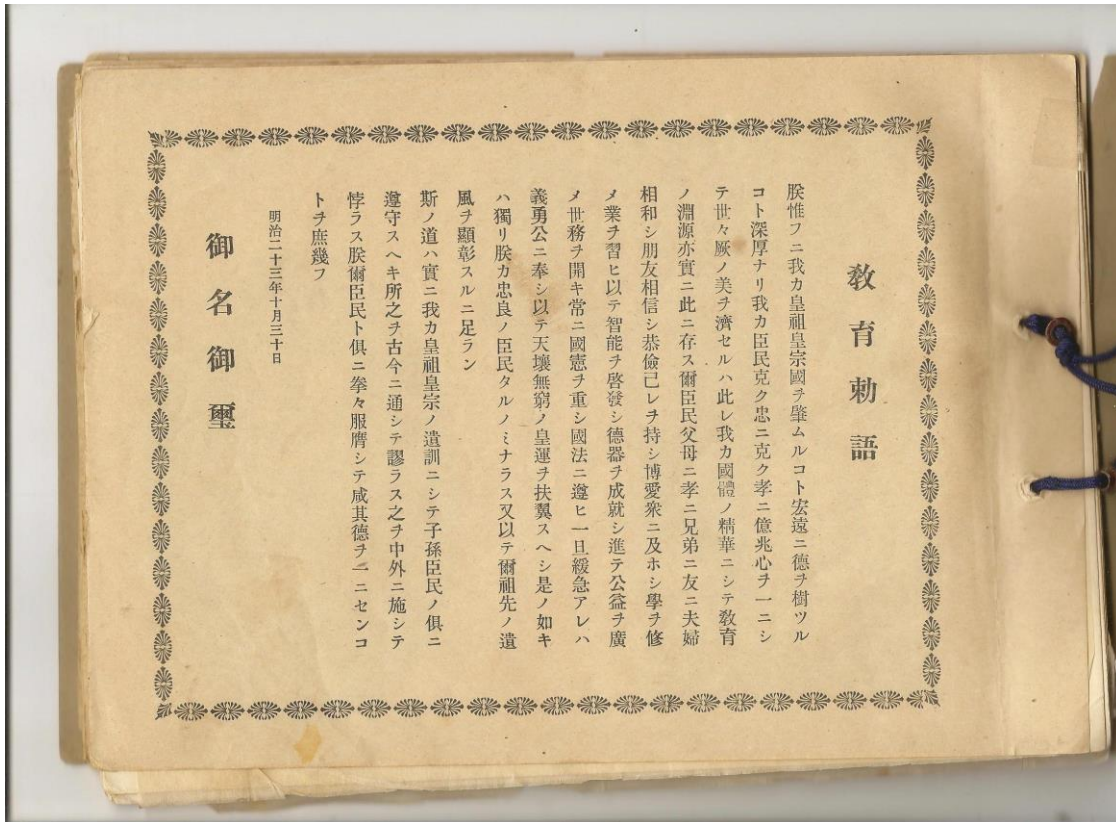
I do not think it would be very surprising to say that school uniform is sexualized In Japanese media. Be it anime, manga, movies etc, the school uniform dominates the desired dress for the high school girl. This raises an important question, why? Why specifically does the uniform draw such attention in Japanese society? The argument I will put forth depends heavily on interpreting and generalizing historical and contemporary Japanese thought. The popularity of the school uniform in Japan highlights a long history of Japanese nationalism and effects of gender stratification.

The Meiji Restoration

The fall of the Tokugawa Shogunate and subsequent creation of the Meiji government presented serious issues. Western imperial powers (Britain, Dutch, France, etc.) had long been exercising control over “uncivilized” areas (such as China and India). Japan, at this time, was considered among the uncivilized. Since the “opening” by Matthew Perry in 1853, the negotiations between the United States and Japan ended with an agreement that benefitted the Imperial nations much more than Japan itself (I use the phrase “opening” because, although most imperial powers could not trade with Japan, the Dutch could). Japan had no tariff autonomy and America, among others, were exercising extraterritoriality over Japanese soil. Simply put, western nations were able to control areas of land within the country and Japan could had little control over international trade. In order to gain control in the international arena, the architects of the Meiji government knew they had to lose their status as one of the uncivilized nations. Losing that status comes from modernizing. Modernizing meant westernizing. This meant reforms in the family, education, industry, agriculture, military, and government. Sharon Kinsella argues that the new Meiji government’s modernization was aimed at, “Citizen-making, universal elementary education, and military training...”¹ The two main documents that defined the Meiji “citizen-making” process were the *Rescript of Soldiers and Sailors* (1885) and the *Imperial Rescript of Education* (1891). The *Imperial Rescript of Education* defined the “structure of the modern Japanese state and the obligations of its citizens, and simultaneously an educational material taught by rote in Japanese schools for the next four decades.”²

¹¹ Kinsella, Sharon. 2002. What's Behind the Fetishism of Japanese School Uniforms?. *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture*. 6, no. 2: 216.

² Ibid., 217.



A page from the Imperial Rescript of Education

Nationalism: The Creation of the Modern Japanese Identity

The Japanese citizen, as we know it today, had not been established yet in the late 19th century. During the Tokugawa Era, the shogun possessed control over the many Daimyo. However, as an example, it's not likely that the Japanese living in the south thought of themselves as the same Japanese in the north. There was no one distinct "Japanese" identity at that time. In contrast, many of the European nations had a distinct national identity attached to their citizens. Why does the national identity matter? If Japan wanted to "catch up with the west", they needed to use their resources to their full advantage. By arbitrarily creating a distinct "Japanese" identity they could instill a strong nationalist view that could unify a population under one goal. This would propel their modernizing industries into the global market. Simply telling someone in Japan during the late 19th century that they are now "Japanese" does not mean they accepted it instantly. How did the new identity become so accepted? An article published in *Taiyo* in 1897 stated, "...just being born and raised in this country is not enough for the masses to be considered citizens (kokumin). The prerequisite of citizenship is a sound sense of nation (kokkateki kannen)..."³ One of most effective ways to create a "Japanese" identity was through youth education and the comprehensive educational reforms enacted by the Meiji government reinforced the new national identity (as was stated above with the *Imperial Rescript of*

³ Gluck, Carol. 1985. *Japan's Modern Myths: Ideology in the late Meiji Period*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 25.

Education). The modernizing of Japan in the Meiji restoration called for a unified effort. Connecting the individual with the nation creates a sense of loyalty to a greater purpose. In much the same way an American in 1900's Nebraska feels about America compared to California during the same period. The sense of national identity influences how you feel about government and needs of self-sacrifice for the betterment of all. In *Comments on the 1891 Imperial Rescript of Education (Chokugo Engi)*, commissioned by the Ministry of Education, Inoue Tetsujiro talked about the needs of modernization in connection with civic duties.

Although we should always endeavour to conduct friendly relations with the powers, foreign enemies are watching for any lapse on our part, and then we can rely only on our forty million fellow countrymen. Thus any true Japanese must have a sense of public duty, by which he values his life as lightly as dust, advances spiritedly, and is ready to sacrifice himself for the sake of the nation.⁴

Late 19th Century: The Military Uniform

As was already stated above, the new national Japanese identity was used to move the country in a more unified effort in order to compete in the international arena. The clothing chosen for their students, almost all male at the time, was a military inspired uniform. The Japanese army uniforms were inspired by French and Prussian military uniforms of the 1860's and 70's.⁵ Subsequently, the Japanese male student uniform was a junior version of the Japanese army uniform.⁶

⁴ Ibid., 130.

⁵ Kitamura, Tsunenobu. 1996. *Taigai Gunpukuso Soshu Zuten*. Tokyo: Kankôkai.

⁶ Fukusô. 1969. *Fukusô Daihyaku Ryô Jiten* (Encyclopaedia of Clothing). 127.



Prussian Uniform on top and Japanese equivalent on bottom

The first boys' school uniform was worn in 1879.⁷ The use of the uniform symbolized the strong connection between the people, nation, and the military in an effort to foster a more collective vision of self. What better way to enforce social stratification, and respect for authority, than use the military style. The point I'm trying to drive home here is the nationalist symbolism connected to the school uniform, boy or girl, becomes even more important in post-war Japan.

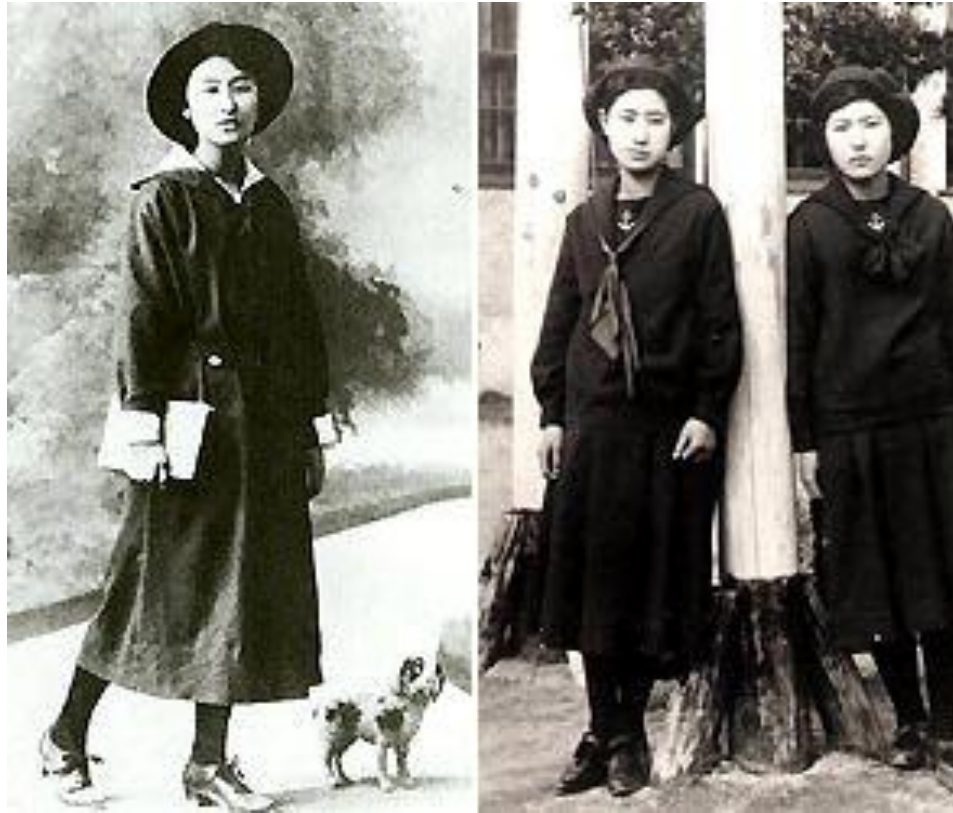
The 1920's: The Sailor Uniform (セーラー服)

The background presented thus far is to provide a historical setting and significance for the emergence of the female sailor uniform. The very first female school sailor uniform for girls debuted in either Heian Jogakuin or Fukuoka Jogakuin in 1920 or 1921 respectively.⁸ Appearing in the 1920's, the girls' uniform was designed in a complementary fashion to the boys' uniform,

⁷ Ibid., 127.

⁸ Kapur, Nick. "井の中の蛙." Controversy over the Origins of the Japanese Schoolgirl Sailor Uniform – Frog in a Well Japan. October 7, 2007. Accessed March 1, 2015. <http://www.froginawell.net/japan/2007/10/controversy-over-the-origins-of-the-japanese-schoolgirl-sailor-uniform/>.

as a junior equivalent of the Japanese Navy uniform.⁹ The Japanese Navy uniform was inspired by the British naval uniform.¹⁰



On the left is a 1920 sailor uniform from Heian Jogakuin and on the right is a 1921 Fukuoka Jogakuin sailor uniform.

The “modern girl” fashion and lifestyle trend of the 1920’s saw many Japanese girls dressing in western styles and engaging in “questionable” relations with “modern boys.” The subsequent moral panic induced is very important in understanding in the significance of the modern school uniform. The “modern girl” was perceived as a threat to the moral fabric of Japanese society, undermining the “traditional” notions of Japanese female morality. Traditional feminine cloths such as the kimono were impractical. The kimono was too restrictive for use in the modern age. The impracticality of a school uniform based on the traditional kimono helped make the sailor uniform gain widespread popularity.¹¹ By the end of the 1920’s, the Japanese government had institutionalized a “uniform system” (制服制度) in many different areas of Japanese life including department stores and middle schools.¹² Sharon Kinsella states that, “By the 1930s

⁹ Kinsella, Sharon. 2002. What's Behind the Fetishism of Japanese School Uniforms?. *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture*. 6, no. 2: 217.

¹⁰ Ibid., 218.

¹¹ Nakata, Seiichi. 1973. “Joshi Gakusei no Seifuku no Hensen.” *Hifuku Bunka*, Vol. 77, p. 67.

¹² Skov, Lise and Brian Moeran. 1995. “Hiding in the Light.” In L. Skov and B. Moeran, *Women, Media and Consumption in Japan*. London: Curzon Press. 16.

most schoolgirls were wearing the 'sailor suit' to and from school."¹³ The implementation of the sailor uniform satisfied the needs of the government by providing a dress that was practical and, at the same time, still instilling their Japanese feminine identity.



A 1925 picture of the so-called "modern girls"

Post-War Japan: The Symbolism of the School Uniform

Japan's loss in WWII, and subsequent U.S. occupation, came with the loss of many of the social institutions that dominated the pre-war period. The rapid disbanding of the Japanese Imperial Army and Navy came with the loss of a principle institution of social regulation. State schools stepped in to become the dominate institution of social regulation, turning Japan from an imperial "family state" (国体) into an "educationalist society" (学歴社会).¹⁴ The uniform for the schoolchildren remained relatively the same, keeping all of its military roots. The schoolchildren, in turn, became visual reminders of a militaristic pre-war Japan. As a prime means of social regulation, the girl in the school sailor uniform was a symbol of the government's ideal citizen. The idealistic qualities given to these girls becomes what people chose to exploit. Scholars have argued that, "The presence within post-war pornography of the same wholesome and innocent schoolgirls in sailor suits is almost certainly related to their officially chaste character. Uniformed schoolgirls have appeared in novels, erotic *manga*,

¹³ Kinsella, Sharon. 2002. What's Behind the Fetishism of Japanese School Uniforms?. *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture*. 6, no. 2: 218.

¹⁴ Ibid.

illustrations, photo magazines, and videos, and on internet sites.”¹⁵ Going from this, the center on the schoolgirl is now representing contemporary norms. The girl in the sailor suit is the perfect citizen. She is chaste, and follows traditional female gender roles. It’s no surprise that manga artists would use this “official status” and contradict it. “The girl in the sailor suit is chaste” into “the girl having loose sexual relations many men.” “The subjective female” into “the overly rambunctious, heroic, passionate character.”

Anime: Contradictions of the Sailor Uniform



Ryuko Matoi from Kill La Kill

Let’s take a look at how notions of female subjectivity and sexuality actually function in modern Anime. Let’s examine Ryuko Matoi from Kill La Kill and connect it to the historical symbolism established thus far. As funny as the show is, it shows what the schoolgirl outfit is doing in a contemporary sense. For the sake of this article, I will focus on discussing her character on two levels. The first being her normal school girl outfit and the second her battle outfit. The contrast between her passionate and arrogant personality is in direct contrast to her schoolgirl outfit. She becomes more interesting because she disregards the social regulations and symbolism attached to the uniform (as I have argued above). Take a look at episode 1 of Kill la Kill.

¹⁵ Kinsella, Sharon. 2002. What's Behind the Fetishism of Japanese School Uniforms?. *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture*. 6, no. 2: 219.

Everyone else wearing the uniforms adhere to the social standards set forth by the government, in this case the student body. Even attempting to gain a different type of uniform not sanctioned by the government is considered rebellious. Therefore, the creators set forth a conflict between “the uniform” and actions of those in it. The second level is a little more interesting. The transformation of Ryuko’s school uniform into an erotic display combines two contradictions of social norms. If I may make a generalization, when artists depict “erotic” schoolgirls in sailor uniforms we are given one contradiction of a social norm which is sexual normality in females. But, the notion of female subjectivity is not contested. The erotic depiction shows her as weak and still subjected under some rule. In a way, still enforcing the social norms of female subjectivity. Sharon Kinsella states that, “Images of pristine schoolchildren in a state of surreal sexual and behavioral disarray have been used to express cynical attitudes towards post-war morality.”¹⁶



Ryuko Matoi from Kill La Kill

The erotic depiction of the Ryuko’s battle uniform displays non-traditional aspects of sexuality but still maintains Ryuko’s rambunctious attitude which provides a double contradiction. What I’m trying to get to here is the erotic depiction of Ryuko does not undermine her personality. At the same time, her personality does not undermine the eroticism of her outfit. What we are seeing here is Ryuko contradicting both the traditional notions of sexuality and feminine subjectivity.

Conclusion:

The early history of school uniform for Japanese schoolchildren focused on creation of nationalistic values in the new generation. The introduction of the sailor uniform in the 1920’s

¹⁶ Ibid., 222.

represented much of the same values attached to the original ones created in the late 19th century. The moral symbolism attached to the sailor uniform became the center point from which artists began to exploit. The chaste nature of the girl in the uniform was eroticized and, at other times, she is displayed as a strong feminine character that disregards notions of subjectivity. Post-war artistic depictions of the schoolgirl focused on either exploiting the notion of female subjectivity or sexuality. In turn, creating either a strong female character in uniform or a highly sexualized one in uniform. The recent shift in modern anime can be seen in Kill La Kill where the main character can be interpreted to be both highly sexualized in uniform and strong. The sailor uniform has long history loaded with symbolism coming from post-war attitudes, feminine ideals and the specific way they have been sexualized in pop-culture.

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