

Original Paper

The Rise of Japanese Designer Brands in the Late 20s(2)

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Received: November 28, 2024 Accepted: December 21, 2024 Online Published: January 01, 2025
doi:10.22158/wjeh.v6n6p77 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/wjeh.v6n6p77>

1. Literature Review

The twentieth century marks an unprecedented era in the history of Western fashion, profoundly influenced by technological progress, economic development, and social advancements. New concepts emerging during this period altered the lifestyle and attire of subsequent generations. Women's liberation, and environmentalism, Western fashion and clothing underwent unprecedented changes. From the elegance and modernity of the early 1900s, through the radicalism and pluralism of the mid-century, to the rebellion and freedom of the later period, fashion became increasingly diverse. Particularly in the late twentieth century (1970s-1990s), after a century of development and integration, being avant-garde and pioneering have become the most distinctive features of this period, offering tremendous potential and space for development for various types of design brands. However, research during this period has largely focused on European and American fashion designer brands, with scant discussion of representative Japanese designer brands such as Yohji Yamamoto, Comme des Garçons, and ISSEY MIYAKE. These Japanese designer brands brought unprecedented subversion and innovation to clothing, proposing deconstructionism and advocating philosophical contemplation of the human body and clothing, transforming commercially oriented clothing into "artworks" with greater aesthetic and artistic value.

Therefore, this article, set against the backdrop of the late twentieth century, will discuss the reasons for the emergence of Japanese design brands led by Comme des Garçons and their profound impact on fashion design styles and brand formation. Considering the current issue of homogenization in Chinese designer brands, this article is expected to offer some suggestions and references in this regard.

2. The Rise and Introduction of Japanese Designer Brands

The rise of Japanese fashion design in the late twentieth century coincided with the Western deconstructionist movement, during which Japanese fashion designers also integrated Eastern

cultural design thinking, becoming a distinctive presence of that era. This paper will introduce the reasons for the emergence of these designer brands and their overall style.

The birth of Japanese designer brands, as previously mentioned, is inseparable from the era's backdrop and Japan's developmental trends. After World War II, amid global economic recovery, industrial technological advancement, and the emergence of cultural trends, Japan entered a new phase of unprecedented development. With the support of the United States, Japan's focus shifted back to national economic construction, leading to rapid economic development and becoming the world's second-largest economic power after the United States. Western cultures flooded in, and popular culture tended to merge with high culture. By the 1970s, Japan's bank-centric financial system faced unprecedented operational obstacles, leading to a financial crisis. In the late 1980s, Japan's bubble economy reached its peak, but due to the lack of support from the industry for the rise in asset prices, the bubble economy began to decline. The economic downturn led to widespread anxiety and confusion among the people, prompting designers to reflect and make adjustments and changes in this context.

Among these emerging Japanese designer brands, Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto, and Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons are highly representative figures. They not only possess an extremely high level of design and craftsmanship but also made significant innovations in material selection, silhouette, color, and even design concepts and brand positioning. Their individual philosophies are unique and even conflicting, yet they share common Eastern characteristics.

Issey Miyake adheres to the design philosophy of "emptiness," starting fashion design from a new perspective. His most famous PLEATS PLEASE series aims to show that clothing can exist independently of the human body but can also freely expand and contract with the range of body movement. He chooses to make his own fabrics, pressing regular pleats into polyester fabric with machines, resulting in clothes that are extremely light and resistant to compression, easy to wash, and iron-free. The fabric, after special treatment, exhibits a unique pleated form, occupying a very small space when not worn, yet providing a great deal of movement space for the body when worn. His designs neither wrap around nor drape over the human body, nor do they highlight or conceal the body; they focus solely on the fabric itself.

Yohji Yamamoto is a designer who deeply cherishes freedom and embodies the spirit of a craftsman. The spirit of freedom enables him to boldly break through norms, his own and those of others, grounding his work in his individual personality and never seeking the approval of everyone or even many. In 1982, Yamamoto's fashion show in Paris featured garments predominantly in black, with holes randomly opened in various places, loosely enveloping the body, simple in style, and solemn in color. This approach diverges from the Western tradition of harmonious beauty, leading to highly polarized critical reception. However, he believes that destruction is a form of creation, and the process of creation is also one of destruction. Harmony and perfection are ugly because they are filled with restrictive regulations, devoid of freedom and rebellious spirit. His craftsmanship is fully

reflected in his attitude towards fabrics. Unlike many designers who first sketch their designs and then seek fabrics, he advocates for finding inspiration from the fabric itself, as it “speaks”. Only by feeling its weight, drape, or fluidity can one design a three-dimensional and vibrant garment.

Rei Kawakubo, not a designer with a conventional background in fashion, studied aesthetics in her early years, which easily allows her to break many conventional thinking patterns in fashion design. She often collaborates with architects and graphic designers, emphasizing the two-dimensional and spatial composition of the clothing itself and integrating the architectural thinking of creating interior and exterior spaces into her designs. She pays great attention to the relationship between the human body and clothing, aiming to redefine the visual space of clothing. In 1997, Kawakubo launched the "Body Meets Dress" spring/summer collection, with the concept that "form shapes clothing, and clothing changes form." Compared to her work in the 1970s, she more consciously explores the possibilities that arise from the fusion of clothing and the body. For example, the iconic "Lumps and Bumps" series alters the natural form of women's bodies through wrapping, enclosing, or placing padding inside the garments. On the runway, models' waists, buttocks, and backs swell with large protrusions, resembling strange alien creatures, capturing the viewer's gaze as it fluctuates between the contours of the human body and the silhouette of the clothing, creating a visually dynamic tension.

These three renowned Japanese designers each have their unique style and philosophy: some choose to shape the human form through clothing, while others hide the body's shape beneath the garments; some create their own fabrics, while others seek inspiration directly from the fabrics themselves. However, their common trait is that, despite being Japanese designers, they have not fallen into the trap of nationalism or been assimilated by Western trends. Instead, they greatly value individuality and self-innovation, passionately exploring the relationship between "people and clothing" and expressing their philosophical thoughts through their designs, which is extremely valuable. Since their debut at Paris Fashion Week in 1982, Japanese designer brands have garnered global attention, laying a significant foundation for their gradual internationalization and influence on Western fashion. Because of the pioneering and innovative brand design concepts of these Japanese designer brands, this article will take Rei Kawakubo as an example to discuss her groundbreaking creations and their impact on subsequent generations, as well as the inspiration they provide to contemporary Chinese designer brands in detail.

3.

3.1 *Rei Kawakubo*

Rei Kawakubo was born in Tokyo in 1942. As one of the Japanese designers who, along with Yohji Yamamoto, Issey Miyake, and Hiroshi Mori, advanced into Paris in the 1970s-1980s, Kawakubo's work fully embodies the combination of localization and internationalization and has been active on the world fashion stage ever since. Unlike other designers, she is not a graduate of a fashion design

program; instead, she studied aesthetics at the prestigious private university Keio University in Japan, majoring in art and literature, which allowed her to escape the constraints of traditional fashion design thinking. During her university years, she developed a keen interest in fine arts. After graduating in 1967, she worked at a fabric company and officially became a fashion designer in 1969. In 1973, with exceptional courage, she decided to open her own company, naming it *Comme des Garçons*, which means "like boys", shortened to *Comme*. The name, according to Kawakubo, was chosen simply because she found the three French words sonorously appealing. In 1975, at the age of 33, Kawakubo held her first women's wear show in Tokyo. The men's line, *HOMME*, was born in 1978.

Her rise to fame began with her participation in Paris Fashion Week in 1981, marking the first time a Japanese designer brand appeared on the international stage. Since then, *Comme des Garçons* has garnered global attention. Her designs, referred to as "rag clothes," are characterized by their three-dimensionality, sense of decay, asymmetry, and holes, which starkly contrast with the Western tradition of harmonious beauty. The inspiration for this show came from the Japanese aesthetic of irregularity and imperfection. She combined traditional Japanese elements of tranquil elegance, three-dimensional geometric patterns, asymmetrical overlapping innovative tailoring, and crisp lines to present an ideological beauty. This show subverted mainstream aesthetic preferences, shocking the Western fashion world, garnering widespread attention, and polarized reviews: some praised highly, while others, using the term "Hiroshima fashion," alluded to the entire show's black square suits, palely made-up models, and the atmosphere of mourning music, akin to the devastated Hiroshima after the atomic bombing. Suzy Menkes, a renowned fashion journalist from the *International Herald Tribune*, later recalled the 1982 show of *Comme des Garçons*, saying, "The clothes were all destroyed, with some pullovers full of large holes. We privately called it 'Swiss cheese.' But at that time, the show was really shocking." After many years, Kawakubo has become a master and has further influenced subsequent designers.

Kawakubo is very low-key in person, different from the trend of Western designer stardom; she prefers to let her work speak for itself and rarely accepts media interviews or exposure. She is also magnanimous and willing to support newcomers, such as the designer Junya Watanabe from her company, who was originally a pattern maker and later appreciated by Kawakubo for his excellent skills and design ideas.

3.2 Unique Brand Style

Comme des Garçons is not a mass-market brand that is often in the public eye because its unique brand style can only be classified as niche. Literally, niche means non-mass-market, characterized by non-mainstream, forging one's own path, and highlighting personal taste and aesthetics. The reason for being "small" is firstly that it is not easily understood, that is, highbrow and few; secondly, it transcends some existing social customs and the aesthetic categories that the public is accustomed to, often belonging to the counter-mainstream fashion subculture, with exploratory nature, that is,

avant-garde and alternative. The term "style" was originally used to describe the language of writing, but later its connotation gradually expanded, gradually referring to things of a certain genre. For fashion brands, brand style is mainly reflected in design style, which includes not only the aesthetic and value orientation of the social environment but also often carries the designer's strong personal preferences and biases. The brand style discussed in this section is mainly divided into four parts: modeling, color matching, materials, and matching.

3.2.1 Modeling

The key to shaping the modeling of clothing is how to handle the relationship between clothing and the human body. There is a big difference in modeling concepts between the East and the West. Traditional Western clothing pursues the perfection of the human body, focusing on modifying and improving the lines of the human body, such as using corsets to tighten the waist, pushing up the female chest, and adding padding to the buttocks to show the graceful and sexy curves of women, with a smaller space between the clothing and the human body. Eastern traditional clothing is mostly straight-cut, loose in shape, diluting the body's own curves, with a larger space between the clothing and the human body. Kawakubo changes the modeling of the human body through wrapping, wrapping, splicing, and filling, with clothing being like architecture, focusing on the construction of the internal space. The modeling of her clothing is extremely exaggerated and just the opposite of the construction of the human body, known as "anti-human body." For example, the padding on the waist and back weakens the curves of the chest and buttocks, making the clothing look very grotesque, and the modeling is usually pigeon-chested and hunched. This is a new idea for expressing the form of the human body, providing more possibilities for the modeling of clothing. At the same time, this abstract and strange modeling characteristic reflects the full Oriental characteristics, with the fragmentation on the surface, coinciding with the uncertain, unbalanced aesthetic tendency of imperfection in traditional Japanese culture. "The form shapes the clothing, and the clothing changes the form" is a famous saying of Kawakubo, who reorganizes the structure twice into a seemingly strange clothing model, and in the detail processing, rearranges and reorganizes each clothing element in an unexpected way. The clothes she designs are not in the normal proportion, so there are additional instructions on how to wear them when selling.

3.2.2 Color Matching

Color is an important element of clothing, with great visual appeal and impact. As a unique language, different colors reflect people's aesthetic taste and preferences, and also affect people's judgment of the quality and price of clothing. In color science, black and white are both called "colorless colors." As a special color, black is more suitable for those who want to stay away from the public and have unique values, such as rock singers, punk bands, artists, etc.

Black is not only loved by Kawakubo, but also loved by many designers, but everyone uses it differently. Kawakubo's black is very characteristic of the brand and full of strong emotions. Her black is quiet, implicit, and quiet, with a rich sense of hierarchy. Different textures of black are

collaged, broken, and reorganized under her hands, showing the delicacy of black incisively and vividly. A large amount of black makes people think of keywords such as death, disease, depression, and depression, conveying a sense of repression and melancholy. She not only designs most of her works in mysterious and quiet black but also often wears black in public. However, Kawakubo is not only good at using black, but also uses a lot of white, gray, and some bright colors in her later clothing works. These colors, after her artistic processing and combination, originally represent the sun, soft colors, and will magically show a sense of melancholy, with a strong impact, and all colors are branded with the unique personality label of "Kawakubo".

3.2.3 Materials

In the early and middle of the 20th century, the public pursued harmonious, gorgeous, and exquisite clothing fabrics as a symbol of their identity, reflecting their taste and status. However, the "beggar's clothing" created by Kawakubo in 1982 greatly collided with people's inherent concepts. This is first reflected in the selection of clothing materials. She chose a large number of ragged and full of holes, and even made the seams of the clothing on the outside of the body. Unformed clothing pieces were used to display the specific production process of the clothing, showing an overall dirty, broken, and messy effect. In her design, clothing is not a bright and beautiful skin, but a medium to convey her philosophical thinking on the relationship between materials, the human body, and clothing. This is a brand-new way of fabric treatment.

3.2.4 Matching

In the early and middle of the 20th century, the public pursued harmonious, gorgeous, and exquisite clothing fabrics as a symbol of their identity, reflecting their taste and status. Contradiction and conflict are themes that are often expressed in Kawakubo's works. The complex reorganization of various design elements seems to map the same complex real world. They originally seem to have no connection, but after deconstruction, they are reorganized to form a new thing. Her design elements break through various restrictions such as region, gender, age, and social background, and are mixed together, looking abstract and obscure, and difficult to understand. Her design style has a strong personal trait, often expressing new themes through a variety of familiar elements, giving the wearer a new identity.

3.3 Kawakubo's "Anti-Fashion" Clothing Philosophy

Clothing design, like any design, has practical material significance and is also a spiritual expression of the designer. Like the well-known designer Yamamoto of the same era, Kawakubo pays more attention to the deep thinking of fashion. She thinks that "adherence to conventions" is the most boring fashion. The development process of Comme des Garçons is also the thinking and exploration process of the designer himself, which is the fundamental source of the sustainable development of the clothing brand.

3.3.1 Different Western Design Thinking

The Western world has always had the main say in the field of clothing design. The long history, diverse culture, and developed economy have laid a solid foundation for the development of fashion in the West. Milan, Paris, New York, and London, known as the “world's four major fashion capitals”, are all European and American cities. Therefore, the West has always been the vane of fashion trends. However, since the late 20th century, Kawakubo's alternative “anti-fashion” design concept entered the Western field of vision, causing huge controversy and attracting enough attention. Over the years, she has continuously expanded and deepened her own design thinking, conquering the Western fashion industry and bringing far-reaching influence.

Kawakubo once said, “I have only one standard to judge whether a series is excellent: whether people are afraid of it. If so, this series will be loved by everyone 10 years later.” Although the design often causes controversy among fashion critics, now, Kawakubo, who has successfully subverted the public's aesthetic, has become a spiritual idol for many young designers.

Fashion is a cycle, and clothing is a heritage. But the important thing is how this heritage is carried out. Kawakubo's heritage is full of critical spirit, respecting old traditions, but at the same time, it can bring forth the new, combining old elements into a brand-new face. Some people call Kawakubo an Eastern challenger wielding a samurai sword; others call her a pioneer comparable to the British Westwood (Vivienne Westwood) who is anti-idolatry. In any case, Kawakubo has shocked the mainstream Western fashion industry and set an example for a large number of young designers with their own unique ideas.

3.3.2 Opposing Narrow Nationalism

Kawakubo did not follow the style of Western fashion masters. She chose a niche and literary difficult exploration path, shouldering the responsibility of promoting national culture, which was not popular at the time. However, there are no directly taken Eastern elements in her works. She has used a lot of Western clothing language and reinterpreted it from the perspective of Easterners. In her 2005 autumn and winter series, the white Western women's wedding dress is the main image of the entire show, mixed with elements such as ruffles and lace in Western clothing, adopting Kawakubo's signature asymmetrical “tattered” technique, creating a “zombie bride” image with a tragic and oppressive Japanese cultural characteristic. The brides are all pale faces, using black at the time when black should not be used, which makes people unable to distinguish between weddings and funerals. This grand and solemn scene is an experimental performance that challenges the sacred rituals of the West. In such a show, the free collision and re-integration of Eastern and Western elements show her opposition to narrow nationalism.

3.3.3 Opposing Traditional Aesthetics

Before Kawakubo, Western fashion designers were committed to creating the perfect female image. Even if the styles were different, they would not avoid the element of “sex”, which was actually a catering to consumers. However, Kawakubo refuses all gender expressions. There will be no display

of the graceful and sexy female form in her works, no “sex” color, and even ignoring gender. All her series are worn with flat shoes, and the huge, strange, and unsexy clothes are worn on women, presenting a strange and unfamiliar novelty. She does not think that the traditional sense of sexy beauty is the standard of beauty. “Now, fashion has become quite rotten”, Kawakubo said. “Some people like to reminisce and revive the styles of the 1960s and 1970s, and some people insist on a very traditional classical style, which is what we call 'real clothes,' very simple and easy to wear. I want to create something that does not belong to any of these categories and continue to develop it. When I consider how to convey this intention, I realize that a new way of thinking is 'the body becomes clothing and then becomes the body again.'" This is also the essence of the COMME DES GARÇONS brand.

3.3.4 Creating the "Poorism" Dressing Concept

Kawakubo's models are also very different. They are painted with strange and hasty makeup, wearing dirty plus, and wearing plain fabrics. They do not wear any jewelry or accessories and do not expose their bodies or show off. Some clothes seem to be randomly crumpled paper balls. She is also a representative of environmentalism. The "beggar's clothing" she launched caused a lot of sensation and was finally collected by the Victoria and Albert Museum in the UK. This series of clothing has a gloomy and dark color, a loose structure, uneven clothing, uneven sleeves, and the outer clothes are full of holes like insect bites, and the lining is also exposed, showing a poor and messy feeling. It is the opposite of the noble and sexy style of Western women's shows, and there is no refinement and luxury that traditional clothing pursues, which is the embodiment of her "poorism" clothing spirit.

3.4 Brand Business Road: Smart "Artist Merchant"

Although Kawakubo insists on a niche style, this has not become an obstacle to the commercialization of the brand, but has promoted her to enter a broader business field, creating many innovative business models such as art crossover, technology crossover, and "guerrilla stores," attracting the most attention with the smallest investment. She believes that "creativity and business are indistinguishable," and "various business models are necessary to adapt to various tastes and needs." When it comes to Kawakubo, the most familiar to the public is the sub-brand PLAY, which is a casual trend brand and is very popular with young people, and is a successful model of clothing brand operation.

She is "extremely talented" in clothing retail and has created the "guerrilla store" (also known as a pop-up store) that has been popular for more than a decade. At the same time, she pays great attention to cross-border cooperation. In 1998, she invited the architectural firm Future System to cooperate with the brand to design the Comme des Garçons store in New York, which was three years earlier than Prada's cooperation with the architect Rem Koolhaas. In 2009, she cooperated with Apple to launch a joint bag series with the theme of the Beatles; then she cooperated with the singer Pharrell Williams to launch a joint perfume.

In terms of brand management, her approach is also very creative. During the financial tsunami in 2008, Kawakubo adopted the strategy of creating the sub-line Comme des Garçons Black, remaking the best-selling styles and selling them in a cheaper way, which is a typical business move. In an economic environment that is weak and consumer purchasing power is not good, providing consumers with more affordable options, even if there is no money, loyal fans can also buy genuine Comme des Garçons. This can be said to be a perfect balance between the brand and business. From the original Comme des Garçons, to Comme des Garçons Black, to the PLAY Comme des Garçons casual series, and fragrance wallets, providing a wide range of choices for the vast number of consumers.

She regards business as a part of creation. What she designs is not just a clothing brand, but a fashion company. The biggest creativity is the establishment of the fashion buyer's shop Dover Street Markets, which is both a retail shop and a clothing exhibition hall, and also a gathering place for trendy designs. According to Kawakubo, her original intention in design was "I try to build a bridge between high-end fashion and street retail, presenting in an atmosphere that can stimulate creativity." There are a total of 5 stores worldwide, collecting more than 100 international first-line designer brands such as Balenciaga, Céline, Gucci, J.W.Anderson, LOEWE, becoming the world's top-scale fashion buyer's shop and a holy land for global trend people. The business model of DSM is also very unique, limited edition fashion is its magic weapon, it may be an anniversary celebration, it may be a collection, or it may be a mix and match series. At the same time, it adopts a multi-brand selected retail sales model, among hundreds of franchised brands, if consumers do not want to choose first-line luxury brands, there are also various styles of niche brands to choose from. DSM is most famous for its irregular small art exhibitions, which blur the boundary between retail stores and exhibitions, where business and creativity present a perfect balance. The store's display settings also reflect a strong architectural aesthetic and clever design everywhere.

Today, Kawakubo is very successful in business, and it is commendable that she has continued her niche brand style, becoming the most successful model and benchmark for niche clothing brands.

4. The Impact and Enlightenment of Kawakubo's Brand Innovation

In the early stage of her career, Kawakubo's works were considered "terrible clothes" by the West, but she insisted on unprecedented exploration and rebellious innovative spirit against the prejudice of public opinion, thus influencing the mainstream aesthetics and even profoundly affecting Western fashion. Unlike other designer brands, this brand's subversion and innovation are not only reflected in the brand's design style but also in the brand's business operations. To this day, Kawakubo remains one of the most successful "female businessmen" in the fashion industry.

In terms of shaping the brand's design style, Kawakubo is a spiritual icon who insists on herself. Her unique design method has injected fresh blood into the European fashion industry in the late 20th century, and her "alternative supremacy" design philosophy coincides with the post-modern society's

pursuit of personalized and diversified clothing needs. Her innovation in clothing modeling, color, materials, and matching has great reference value for the development of Chinese original clothing that has just started. In today's China, where clothing brands are generally designed to be homogenized, her pioneering and rebellious spirit in design, her objective stance on national tradition, her profound exploration of the relationship between clothing and the human body, her "civilian" dressing style, and her wise business operation model all remind us that only original innovation is the key to the long-term survival of a designer brand.

This innovation first comes from the designer's own internal exploration and innovation, not sticking to traditional professional painting and tailoring training. Secondly, it should also start from a historical height, critically looking at the cultural traditions of one's own country and Western culture. Chinese original clothing is far more than just the simple stacking of traditional elements such as cheongsams, disk buttons, dragon patterns, and auspicious clouds. Only by drawing on the strengths of many, based on individual experience and thinking, and deeply analyzing and organically combining the essence of one's own culture and Western culture can a recognizable clothing brand be created. At the same time, designers should not be limited to design itself. Clothing is a highly commercialized product. Kawakubo's practice tells us that niche designer brands and business success are not contradictory. Only by understanding business operations can a designer brand truly achieve long-term success.

5. Summary

Fashion is a social product, and the establishment of designer brands is inseparable from the times. This article, through an introduction to the social environment background of the late 20th century, the domestic situation in Japan, and well-known Japanese designer brands, and a detailed analysis of Kawakubo's brand design style and business operations, concludes that the reason why Japanese designer brands led by Kawakubo emerged in the second half of the 20th century and were highly subversive is because the recovery of the world economy, the development of industrial technology, and the continuous emergence of cultural trends after World War II promoted Japan into an unprecedented new stage of development, and the domestic economy and culture continued to prosper.

The subversion and innovation of this group of Japanese designer brands, taking Kawakubo as an example, are on the one hand, the innovation of the overall modeling, color matching, material selection, and matching methods of clothing, and on the other hand, the innovation against the traditional Western design thinking. Such innovation has injected fresh blood into the fashion industry, which has always been centered on the West, and has successfully influenced the development of Western fashion.

From this, we can draw the lesson that only innovation is the source of the continuous survival of a designer brand. Such innovation comes from the stimulation of the background of the times on the

one hand, and from the personality and accumulation of the designer himself on the other hand. For contemporary Chinese designer brands, the first thing is not to stick to the traditional clothing history design thinking, to jump out of the narrow nationalist perspective, to have the height of history and culture, as well as the breadth of business and technology, to view the East and the West, tradition and modernity, art and business from an innovative perspective, and to focus on creating a unique brand style. At the same time, starting from the commercial nature of clothing, combine high and new technology to continuously strengthen the design style, and correspondingly innovate the business model, creating its own unique designer brand culture and business promotion model. Artistic creativity and business are not contradictory in themselves, and grasping the balance is the way to success for designer brands.

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