

WEEK 3

Kimono like never before

By JAE LEE

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In 1974, Hideko Kariya represented Japan in the Miss Internationals finals, a beauty pageant that started in California in 1960 and moved to Japan in 1968. She placed fifth. Then, in 1981, she married into a family that ran an ever-expanding empire of more than 100 kimono stores across Japan. But as the economy boomed, and with it the family business, Kariya humbly remained at home, Cinderella-like, raising two sons.

In the early 1990s, though, Japan's economic bubble burst and consumers across the nation suddenly tightened their collective obi. The Kansai area - based family kimono corporation Kariya had married into was hit hard from the start of that drastic downturn and began to crumble before eventually collapsing.

After that, Kariya and her husband opened a new kimono shop, in the Jimbocho district of central Tokyo, in 2005, and she suddenly found herself in the position of being an *okami* (female shop owner), with a steep learning curve ahead of her.



Sitting pretty: Hideko Kariya in her Hideya store in central Tokyo surrounded by some of the many beautiful garments she sells, both of the traditional variety and others using Velcro fastenings to significantly speed up the long business of getting attired. YOSHIAKI MIURA PHOTOS

However, she learned fast, and after three years she recalls how she had developed a fascination for kimono as couture garments — though she couldn't stand the constant collisions that occurred between her feelings and the traditional ways her husband had been born into and couldn't see beyond.

But as Kariya had learned by then, the kimono business — in origin and to this day — is a very masculine one. "It started with Bushido (the samurai code of chivalry) and their *kamon* (family insignia)," Kariya explains. "Its origin was very closely tied in with political power."

In contrast to Kariya's passion for kimono as couture, she tells how her husband regarded them more as trophy items he liked more the higher their price.

Back in the days, the family company owned a rather luxurious hotel in Kyoto where they exhibited their range of kimono and invited costumers to stay — which Kariya learned was a common sales approach adopted by traditional kimono companies.

However, she soon saw through the refined veneer.

"It was not only a traditional way of selling kimono by pampering the costumers," she explains, "because the aim was to make costumers compete among themselves and see who was wearing what and who was buying which one. I once saw a costumer buy a ¥30-million kimono on the spot."

Finally, in 2009, the strains got too much and Kariya separated from her husband and opened a store of her own, named Hideya in the Denenchofu area of Oota Ward in Tokyo.

She says of that step out on her own: "I wanted to approach the costumers in a more friendly way, like a local grocery vendor would." And now, free of any obligation to tradition, she happily describes herself as "the new kid on the block" — free to approach kimono in the way she wants: as a genre of couture.



On show: Hideko Kariya poses in street chic beside a beautiful length of kimono material on display in her Tokyo shop.

"A kimono can be very expensive, but I'm not critical of their prices or trying to change that image. Sometimes it may take a kimono-maker about a month to weave just 20 cm of an obi belt, and about a year to finish it. Obviously, time like that is quite big money."

Equally, Kariya is aware that the popularity of formal silk kimono — as opposed to the light, cotton *yukata* that have been all the rage these last few summers — is on the wane, and she's keen to do all she can to keep the tradition alive. However, she doesn't believe that preaching about tradition or harking back to the unbending mores of times gone by will do anything to help kimono and the new rising generations get along.

"A kimono is expensive and difficult to wear, but if that's killing the popularity, why not get rid of some parts of it to better fit the times?" Kariya inquires.

Among the "rebel" designs Kariya has created, one of them in particular confronts the mystique of kimono-wearing head on. With her Velcro kimono, rather than wearers needing to attend classes, as many do — and then even still require assistance — to simply dress themselves in the many layers of gowns and underskirts, the whole operation is cut down to a matter of minutes.

And — surprise, surprise — the idea for the Velcro kimono range that Kariya sells at Hideya came from a regular customer who is a member of the Imperial family. That customer, who is often in the media spotlight, explained that she liked to wear kimono on public occasions but simply didn't have the 40 minutes to an hour it normally takes to get dressed in one.

As a result, Kariya first made that customer a black kimono for funerals — with hidden Velcro tapes. Delighted, her upper-crust customer told her how, though it is acceptable nowadays to wear a Western-style black dress on official Imperial occasions, she personally far preferred a traditional kimono and this new-style garment was a dream come true.

Now, thanks to the magic of the hidden Velcro tapes, that busy Imperial family customer — or anyone else — only needs to take 10 minutes to dress perfectly in Japan's gorgeous, signature garment for women.

For Kariya, that's a huge, happy step on the way to realizing her dream of helping to fuel a kimono revival no matter how busy — or Imperial — the wearer may be.

For more information on Hideya, visit www.hideya.co.jp/ (Japanese only).

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