Kimono like never before

By JAE LEE

Staff writer

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 than 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 three kids.

In the early 1980s, though, Japan’s economic bubble burst and consumers across the nation suddenly tightened their collective belt. The Kansai area-based family kimono corporation Kariya had married into was hit hard from the start of that drastic downturn and was forced to crumble before eventually collapsing.

After that, Kariya and her husband opened a new kimono shop, in the Jimbocho district of central Tokyo, in 2003, and she suddenly found herself in the position of being an oshari (female shop owner), with a steep learning curve ahead of her.

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),” Kamiya explains. “The 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 than the higher price.

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

However, she soon saw through the refined veneer.

“Customers,” she explains, “because the aim was to make customers compete among themselves and see who was wearing what and who was more fashionable. It was not only a traditional way of selling kimono by pampering the costumers, I’m not critical of their prices or trying to change that image. Sometimes, it may take a kimono-maker about a month to sew 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 previous generations had the same duty to dress kimonos and the new rising generations get by with just a T-shirt and jeans.

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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 she was capable nowadays to escape the implacable code of black dress in official Imperial occasions, she personally far preferred a traditional kimono and the traditional ways her husband had been born into and couldn’t see beyond.

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Now, thanks to the magic of the hidden Velcro tapes, that busy Imperial customer — or anyone else — only needs to take 10 minutes to dress perfectly. Kariya’s kimono range, she says, is “the new kid on the block” — free to approach kimono in the way she wants: as a genre of couture.

For Kariya, that’s a huge, happy step on the way to realizing her dream of making Kimono like never before. — Jae Lee