

# Sukajan: crossing cultures

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Another example of a garment that has crossed the borders delineating cultures, blurring such imaginary lines, and travelling across the globe is the *sukajan* from Japan [fig. 1]. This is a short jacket open down the front (with either zips or buttons), long sleeves, and a low, upright collar. These jackets are often lined in the same or a contrasting material. The main feature of the *sukajan* jacket is the embroidery that decorates the front, back, and sleeves of the garment. Yet, the shape of such jackets is not originally from Japan. Instead, it is an adaptation of American military and sportswear.

## American bomber and letterman jackets

There are two comparable American garments that have influenced the *sukajan* jacket. The first is the bomber jacket worn by US aircrews. These were originally made from leather lined with wool fleece, which was intended to keep the wearers warm when flying at high altitudes. There was also another version of the bomber jacket, lighter and cooler since it was produced without the fleece lining. In both cases the jacket and the sleeves were of the same material and colour.

The second American garment is the so-called letterman jacket, which has been popular with university athletes since the 1860s. These garments usually have a large letter on them, which indicated the school, college, or university with which the wearer was affiliated. The letterman jackets are characterised by having sleeves in either a different colour from the main body of the garment, or sometimes in a different material, but in the same colour as the main garment. Another form developed from the letterman jacket, namely the baseball jacket, which is very similar, but lacks the big letter.

Neither the bomber jacket nor the letterman jacket, apart from the large letter, normally has any decoration on it. In contrast, the Japanese *sukajan* jacket has social, political, military, as well as fashion statements literally stitched onto them. The embroidery may take the form of hand- or machine-worked patterns, or indeed a combination of the two.

## Development of the *sukajan* jacket

The origins of the *sukajan* jacket can be pinpointed to the years immediately following the end of World War II (1939-1945) in Japan, and more specifically to the military base of Yokosuka (a city in the Kanagawa Prefecture, in the proximity of Tokyo), then under the control of the American Navy. In fact, the term *sukajan* is derived from *Suka* (from *Yokosuka*) and *jan*, short for the Japanese term *janpaa* (mutated from the English word *jumper*), to indicate the place where this type of garment originated.

The personnel on the Yokosuka base would have worn both the military bomber jacket when on duty and the letterman-style jackets when off-duty. *Sukajan* jackets developed as a result of US navy personnel starting to have their (off-duty) jackets customised and decorated by local Japanese tailors, using machine embroidery and elements initially associated with Japan. As a result, *sukajan* jackets started to represent a type of garment shared by the American military community stationed in the country, and at the same time they became a symbol of the Japanese who embroidered and wore them.

Since people first started wearing a feather or a bead, dress and identity have played an important role. Sometimes ideas and designs were swapped and exchanged (the global *buteh*/paisley motif is a good example of this), while on other occasions it is the garment itself that has travelled from one culture to another. The pyjamas of India became sleepwear in the West, and the kimono from Japan became an indoor garment for elite men in The Netherlands from the 18th century. Even that global fashion statement – namely the pair of jeans (USA in origin), made from denim (originally from France) – was originally workmen's clothing and is now worn by men, women, and children across the world in every social group. Or how about the suit worn by many men (with or without a tie) and some women to stress their social status, place, and knowledge of the business or professional world? All of these, and many more garments, have travelled, been adopted and adapted to the needs of other people and cultures.

More and more American servicemen started wearing *sukajan* jackets when off-duty, but with decoration on it that reflected their military affiliations [fig. 2]. In this way, they provided inspiration for a new Japanese fashion line that has continued to the present day.

Furthermore, the wearing of *sukajan* jackets quickly expanded to other countries where US soldiers were stationed. In this way, the community wearing this type of jacket became bigger, including soldiers stationed in other military bases in East Asia, such as those in Korea or Vietnam [fig. 3].

From the 1950s onwards, this type of garment crossed the borders of the US military bases and started being used by various Japanese groups. It is notable, however, that at this time it was mostly worn by and associated with *yakuza* (criminal gangs) members. This development was at the beginning of a shift in the association of *sukajan* jackets, from American soldiers to Japanese 'bad boys.'

The embroidered subjects on 'Japanese' *sukajan* jackets may vary considerably, but there are some general trends that can be identified. Some, for example, represent elements usually associated with Japan, such as animals indicating power and leadership (e.g., dragons, tigers)[fig. 4]. Such elements would then strengthen the association between the group wearing it and the qualities usually attributed to such animals, mostly strength, thus highlighting the 'bad boys' narrative. These animals are also very common in Japanese traditional tattoos, *irezumi*, another practice very common amongst *yakuza* members.

Other nature-inspired forms included birds, butterflies, and floral motifs, such as cherry trees and wisteria, as well as Japanese icons

such as Mount Fuji. Overall, these motifs and embroidered subjects already appeared in traditional garments, including the kimono, possibly the source that gave the original inspiration for the selection of such elements. Yet, kimono decorations are often seasonal, meaning that the elements embroidered should match with the season when they were worn, whereas the same could probably not be said for *sukajan*. Matching with the season was not the point of wearing these jackets; more so, such garments aimed to look as 'Japanese' as possible. They would appear as 'inherently' Japanese to the American military. Natural symbols do, however, appear also elsewhere in East Asian embroidery or art in general, such as in Korea or in Vietnam, making these not exclusively Japanese. Thus, although *sukajan* jackets were initially born in Japan, they merge elements which were common in all of East Asia, making them 'Asian-style jackets' rather than simply Japanese jackets.

Other examples of *sukajan* jackets would appear to highlight the 'souvenir' nature of this type of jacket, with embroideries that do not highlight any sense of belonging to a particular group. Instead, they were keepsakes of a place with memories highlighted through the embroidered elements [fig. 5].

From the 1990s onwards, certain Western brands (such as Diesel and H&M) started to actively promote *sukajan* jackets in their own collections. One result of this is that more and more Japanese girls and women have started to wear *sukajan* jackets. Another result is that a cheaper line of *sukajan* has appeared, namely those with printed designs. This form is often associated with Chinese-produced garments.



Fig. 1: A black *sukajan* jacket by tailor TOYO, in the bomber jacket style (early 1950s-style; early 21st century, see Fig. 4; courtesy of the Textile Research Centre, Leiden, TRC 2021.0625).

Fig. 2: A *sukajan* (bomber) jacket by Schott, belonging to the 13th Airborne troops, stationed in Yokosuka (21st century, courtesy of the Textile Research Centre, Leiden, TRC 2021.0629).

Fig. 3: A *sukajan* (bomber) jacket from the 1960s with a relevant map of Vietnam embroidered on the back - Phu Hoa Binh Duong is the name of a district north of Ho Chi Minh City (courtesy of the Textile Research Centre, Leiden, TRC 2021.0628).

Today, *sukajan* jackets are spread all over the world and are becoming more and more popular. Furthermore, although the origins of these garments had a strong connection with the community where they were created – namely the US military in Japan, or later among *yakuza* members – nowadays they have lost any specific military or *yakuza* connotations. Instead, their meaning and identity have been renegotiated. They have become garments whose 'Asian-like' features are still recognised, but they cannot be classed as distinctly or even typically American or Asian. Instead, they have become global objects.

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Fig. 4: A *sukajan* (baseball) jacket with a dragon and tiger fighting each other (1980s; courtesy of the Textile Research Centre, Leiden, TRC 2021.0624).



Fig. 5: A reversible *sukajan* (baseball) jacket with Hawaiian elements embroidered on the back (1950s; courtesy of the Textile Research Centre, Leiden, TRC 2021.0626).