

Discourses on Japanese lifestyle in early modern design: A turning point from Westernization to modern design

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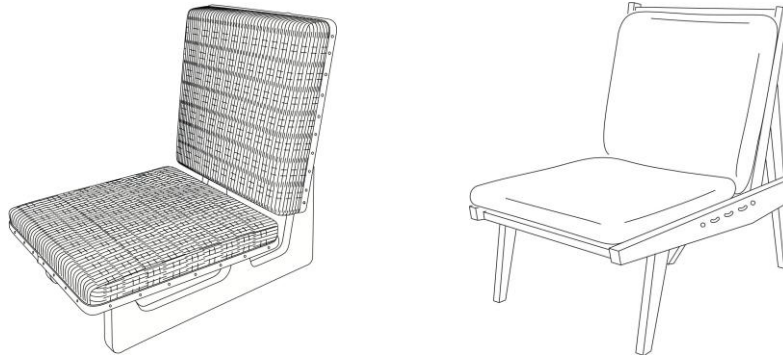
Abstract

Low-seated chairs for *tatami* mats that are characteristic of Japanese-style interior appeared after late 1940s. This article focuses on the ambivalence between Western lifestyles and Japanese lifestyles by tracing the comments of designers, critics, magazines, and so forth to clarify a background of them. The introduction of chairs in Japan was actually involved, by definition, in a dichotomy between sitting on the floor and in chairs, which therefore was far from the domestic practicality of lifestyles among the public. Then we have to observe the two points for the introduction of chairs to break through this rigid situation: (1) how did the public establish definition of chairs outside the Westernization? This article grasps the fact that the artisans and early designers accumulated their experience of producing chairs from scratch, through trial and error. (2) How did the relation between sitting on the floor and in chairs break out of the dichotomy, through ambivalence? This article focuses on the fact that the public enjoyed the physical relaxation offered by the mix of sitting on the floor and in chairs. This constituted the domestic practicality of chairs for the Japanese. Therefore, such experiences of making and using chairs can be summarized as the awakening of a universe in the distance between the floor and the seat-height of Western chairs. It was a new frontier for Japanese designers, and low-seated chairs were born in this space. This article concludes that it marked the transition from Westernization to Japanese modern design.

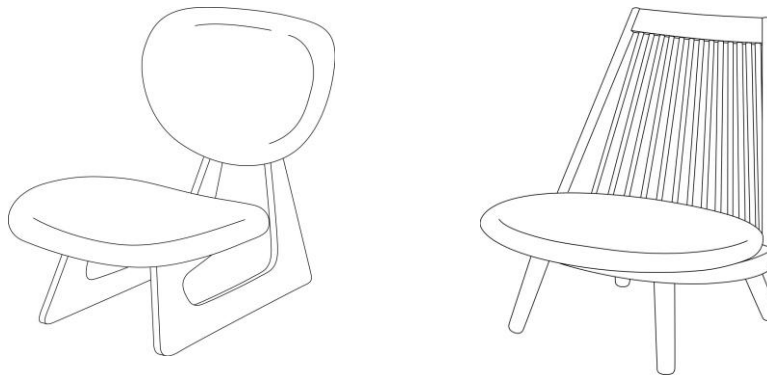
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Introduction

One might notice a few and rare feature of the modern design of chairs of Japan: the extreme low seat. It was realised through a seat height ranging from 230 to 320 cm. Chairs became popular with the Westernization of lifestyle that had been encouraged by government policy since the late nineteenth century. However the chairs with distinct low seat indicates the salient development as in the process of Westernization.



(Left) Figure 1: *Takesei-isu* / (Right) Figure 2: *Himo-isu*



(Left) Figure 3: *Teiza-isu* / (Right) Figure 4: *Spoke chair*

What did these chairs offer as the value of product? *Takesei-isu* (Figure 1, Shiodome, 2010) that was designed by Junzo Sakakura (architect, 1901-1969) had no legs. Boards structure supported the back and seat like the blades of ice skates. The most distinct feature is the low seat, which is only 230 mm high. The eye level of someone sitting on *Takesei-isu* was almost as low as a person sitting on the floor. Although Sakakura did not write any commentary on *Takesei-isu*, Katsuhei Toyoguchi (product designer, 1905-1991) praised domestic practicality of *Takesei-isu* in his essay *Sakakura-shi dezain no takekagu* (The Bamboo Furniture Designed by Mr. Sakakura, 1949): ‘Square weaving, like a traditional rice-washing sieve or fruit basket, is fixed on the wooden frame of the seat. It effectively gives spring of bamboo to the seat.... if accepting such domestic feeling, we can regard it is stronger and more durable than Chikuko-sha products.’ (Industrial Arts Institute, Ministry of International Trade and Industry, 1949) Chikuko-sha Co. Ltd was a manufacturing company specializing in bamboo. It was famous for Bamboo Chair (1937, Ubunji Kidokoro) inspired from Western modern design such as Aalto’s Paimio Chair. Toyoguchi regarded *Takesei-isu* as a domestic design, like “a traditional rice-washing sieve or fruit basket,” hereby pointing out the fact that it was characteristic of modern design. Riki Watanabe (product designer, 1912-2013) designed *Himo-isu* (Figure 2) in 1952. The seat and back were made up of ropes; a Japanese *zabuton* cushion was put on it before sitting. The cushion had traditionally been put on the floor. Watanabe expounded his philosophy of modern design in his essay *Kagu to Shitsunai* (Furniture and Interior, 1956): ‘Japanese-style furniture had been designed to be placed in a room where we sit on *tatami* floor mats; therefore, it had a style clearly showing a tradition...If the designer who lives a

modern life designs furniture with clear consciousness of Japanese-style rooms, it will be adequate for the Japanese atmosphere and useful. It will be true modern Japanese-style furniture' (Katsumi, 1956). He was also aware of domestic design in Himo-isu, expecting "a room where we sit on *tatami* floor." Daisaku Cho (product designer, 1921-2014), who worked in Sakakura's office, designed *Teiza-isu* (Figure 3). The seat was 240 mm high. He wrote, "I designed *Teiza-isu* to stand in Japanese style room of Koshiro Matsumoto (a *kabuki* actor)'s house. It was inspired from Mr. Sakakura's *Takesei-isu*." As mentioned above, Sakakura did not write any commentary on *Takesei-isu*. However his staff, Cho, succeeded his idea with *Teiza-isu*. *Spoke chair* (Figure 4), designed by above Toyoguchi, had a simple Windsor back. It had a low (320mm high) and wide seat, allowing one to sit on it with folded legs. He wrote, "my idea regarding living room as a liberal place of recreation and relaxation where we can sit both on the floor and in chairs freely was basically successful." Toyoguchi seemed to expect the coexistence of both sitting postures.

We can regard the above low-seated chairs as product designs for *tatami*. However it is difficult to explain their background because of the dichotomy past studies have maintained between sitting on the floor and in chairs.

1. Literature Review: the dichotomy between sitting on the floor and in chairs.

Although chairs were first introduced in the late nineteenth century in Japanese-style rooms along with the *tatami* in fully Japanese-style houses, the lifestyles of sitting on the floor and in chairs were separate, with each in different rooms. Chairs were found only in a Western living room among Japanese style rooms with *tatami* in a semi-Western style house. The semi-Western style houses led to the construction of the public-managed condominium called 51C type, which appeared in 1951. It comprised a dining and kitchen in Western style with chairs, and two living rooms in Japanese style with *tatami* (Sawada, 1995). These were further developed into the LDK type with Western-style living rooms. Thereby, the Japanese style rooms with *tatami* relatively shrunk against the extension of Western style rooms.

The introduction of chairs has mainly been illustrated as above with the development of houses. However, the relation between sitting on the floor and in chairs is often expressed as a dichotomy. For example, Uzo Nishiyama clarified the dichotomy as three types of lifestyle in *Korekara no sumai* (Houses of the future, 1947): (1) full Western style with sitting only in chairs, (2) semi-Western style comprising a Japanese-style room with *tatami* and a Western style room with chairs, and a (3) neutral lifestyle harmoniously including sitting on the floor and in chairs within a room. In a chapter *Isu to tatami no kikko* (The antagonism between chairs and *tatami*) (Koizumi, 1979) in her book *Kagu to shitsunai-isho no bunka-shi* (Cultural history of furniture and interior design, 1979), Kazuko Koizumi pointed out that the introduction of chairs in Japan was an ideological competition between Westernization and Japanese tradition. She agreed to point (3) of Nishiyama's perspective of chairs placed only in the hall and entrance outside rooms of narrow public houses. Tomoko Sawada described the historical sequence in which public lifestyle developed alternatively with sitting on the floor and in chairs from the 1900s to the 1950s in her book *Yuka-za, isu-za* (Sitting on the floor and in chairs, 1995). In her article *Sho- shigen, sho-enerugi-teki-shiten niyoru "yuka-za" no saihyoka* (A reevaluation of "sitting on the floor" from the viewpoint of resource-saving and energy-saving, 2010), Sayoko Matsubara clarified that the lifestyle of sitting on the floor

developed with a growing public awareness of heating efficiency. Kiyoshi Hirai wrote about the 51C type condominium in his book *Nihonjin no sumai to sumai-kata* (Japanese houses and their lifestyle, 2013): “When defining the room-plan based on whether it comprised sitting on the floor or in chairs, it (51C type) had two rooms with *tatami*, and a dining and kitchen with chairs. Therefore, this was an extension of the previous type of house (semi-Western style)” (Hirai, 2013).

2. Research Method

As mentioned above, we have regarded the introduction of chairs into Japanese lifestyle as dynamic and rational combinations of Western- and Japanese-style rooms in the house plan. However, this perspective was based on a dichotomy between sitting postures. Such a perspective cannot easily lead to the background of low-seated chairs, which were neutral between sitting both on the floor and in chairs. Therefore, we should set aside the definition of this dichotomy to review the introduction of chairs from a public and ordinary point of view.

3. Chairs as ideology

We first focus on how chairs on *tatami* were discussed as background of low seated-chairs. In reviewing social developments of Westernization in Japan, we realize the fact that chairs were ideological products mainly resulting from the Japanese government's policies. The new government that was launched in 1868 promoted a policy called *Bunmei Kaika* (Civilization and Enlightenment). The enlightenment in Japan was, in contrast to the Western philosophy of the eighteenth century, etc., a uniform Westernization of politics, industry, the army, and the public's general lifestyle, including food, clothes, and housing. It is true that the Westernization overwhelmingly prevailed in Japan as later mentioned. It encouraged them to cut off their topknots (1871) and stop wearing swords (1876). The new government implemented telegraph (1870) and postal services (1871), started constructing railway (1872), and adopted the Gregorian calendar (1873) (Jansen, 1996).

3.1. Chairs and *tatami* in Westernization

Yukichi Fukuzawa (1835-1901), author and teacher, introduced Western lifestyle. He introduced Western lifestyle in his book *Seiyo Isyokujyu* (Western Ways of Living: Food, Clothes, and Houses, 1867) as follows:

The Western house has no *tatami*. They put rush mats on the wooden floor in the case of simple rooms, or put beautiful carpets down in the case of fashionable homes. Chairs are put out. (Fukuzawa, 1969).

The illustration of the chair in the text has curved legs and back. Slats at the back are boards cut with arcs. This chair is strange, but frankly shows a lack of information on the foreign product. Although Fukuzawa introduced the Western lifestyle with chairs to enlighten society, the public influenced by this enlightenment was often radical. Shuto Yokokawa, a follower of the enlightenment and a doctor who studied modern medical science, rejected *tatami* in his book *Kaika no Iriguchi* (Entrance of Enlightenment, 1874): ‘We lay down where we walk, arrange

dishes and change baby's nappy. That's nonsense' (Yokokawa, 1993). Eating and sleeping had always taken place on *tatami* mats using movable furniture and a set of Japanese mattresses and quilts; however, this Japanese lifestyle was denied. Chairs did not only emphasize the superiority of the Western lifestyle over the Japanese one, but they also indicate the fragility of their traditional ethic, which was branded as "nonsense."

Rokumeikan (1883-1940, Tokyo), designed by English architect Josiah Conder, a foreign advisor hired by the Japanese government, was a Renaissance-style two-story brick residence used to hold parties for foreigners as part of diplomatic courtesy. It featured Western-style chairs that were designed by Japanese artisans. A chair had curved legs and a Gothic-style back with arches and vertical turnings, but the seat was rustic caning (Kuwana, 2012). There were also foreign architects who privately came to Japan to construct Western-style houses in main harbours and cities since the 1880s. Foreign traders, diplomats, and the Japanese upper classes mainly ordered their houses from them. For example, Alexander Nelson Hansell designed Gothic Revival style houses in Kobe, thereby changing the atmosphere of the town (Kamiki, 1993). Japanese architects who were trained by foreign architects could later design full Western-style residences. However, Japanese architects who learned Western design by watching them also designed residences for the Japanese upper middle classes. They were often semi-Western in style. For example, when Teizo Yanagisawa, a business executive of Nagano prefecture, ordered semi-Western houses from a local unknown architect, he let the architect travel to Tokyo to study Western-style building. The house that was completed in 1888 applied a Western-like carriage- porch entrance and balcony with arched eaves but had a traditional Japanese roof style with gray tile and rooms with *tatami* mats and *fusuma* sliding doors (Fujimori & Masuda, 2002). The chairs often stand on the carpets that were put on *tatami* mats in semi-Western residences.

3.2. Perplexities and Wariness toward the Western Lifestyle

The introduction of chairs were often confronted with Japanese conventional ethics and morality. This contact awakened the public to discreet positions about the both of them, as will be further discussed later.

Some books and newspapers conveyed wariness of the Western lifestyle. The magazine *Kaika no Hanashi* (Tales of Enlightenment, 1872) criticized the materialistic aspect of Japanese Westernism. The character Fumiaki, who was Westernist influenced by the enlightenment, spitefully says to Ishibe, a samurai: 'Welcome, Mr. Ishibe. Anyway, please sit down on the chair. You have formal clothing and a bulky sword, so you seem unenlightened'. The samurai says to him with a wry smile: 'I have heard of your enlightenment for a long time. But first, enlightenment is not easy. Imitating the looks of a foreigner with Western clothing and a hat, having a beard and making your interior white are not regarded as enlightened' (Tsuji, 1993). The chairs they sat in seem to be of semi-Western style with turned legs and a lattice back. The immature and strange looks of chairs indicate surface aspects of the Westernization. Here the samurai is not soldier but philosopher. His comment frankly shows the public criticism and wisdom. However, we can find different implications in this satire. One person questions: "you always have the sword. What is the purpose of it?" With this question, the sword turns from a symbol of conventional pride and ethics to just a bold front. The satire does not only

sneer at Western-oriented Fumiaki, but also gives the samurai Ishibe a warning. It reveals that Westernization and tradition are equivalent in the context of authority. This balance formed the ambivalence between the Western style and the traditional one. The public would not expect domestic practicality as public lifestyles in the two styles, both drawn into the dichotomy.

3.3. Chairs outside of domestic practicality

Therefore, it is a matter of course for Western style furniture to have amusement as an additional purpose. *Tokyo fuzoku-shi* (Review of Popular Life in Tokyo, 1900) contained illustrations of pubs where guests seemed to enjoy Western drinks in a casual atmosphere, sitting on Western peasant-style chairs that was a Western vernacular chair from local areas in England before the nineteenth century. It had an elaborate carved back and simple legs and seat (Hirade, 1900). The public was led to enjoy relaxation, recreation, and pastimes. The public regarded the Western style as exotic. The Japanese was hardly able to use chairs with domestic practicality. Moreover a semi-Western style also applied Japanese decorations to souvenirs for foreigners. A furniture merchant Sada Kimura retrospectively noted that chairs were ‘decorated with carvings such as dragons, phoenixes, chrysanthemums and cherry blossoms...It was strange at a glance but satisfied foreign curiosity and was actively exported to various countries for a while’ (Tawara, 1966). Exaggerated Japanese decorations were produced on chairs in Japan for export since the 1880s. It was exported to England, South America, Germany, Russia, and Sweden, etc., mainly from Yokohama and Kobe, and was thereby related to Western Orientalism (Yokohamashi Kinro Fukushi Zaidan, 1988). It is true that financially Japanese merchants benefited from the semi- Western style furniture, but aesthetically they rejected it.

4. Chairs as direct experience

Then how did the public plan their domestic practicality life with chairs? As mentioned above, the public would not expect domestic practicality as public lifestyles in the two styles, both drawn into the dichotomy. Therefore we must first observe how the public established the definition of chairs outside of Westernization; and then we should focus on how the relation between sitting on the floor and in chairs broke out of the dichotomy through ambivalence, as mentioned above.

4.1. The direct experience of chairs by artisans

Unknown artisans independently introduced the chairs into their lifestyle by try and error. For example, *Nihon-kagu-zuan to seisakuho* (Drawings of Japanese Furniture and Its Manufacturing Method, 1911) described the fact that artisans should set legs on Japanese furniture to make Japanese furniture higher in order to fit Western-style rooms with chairs. It cautioned artisans about disharmony between a Japanese cabinet and Western one — ‘disharmony like a joint made of wood and bamboo’ (Komuro & Miyamoto, 1911). Edward Sylvester Morse (1838-1925), an American zoologist invited to Japan by the University of Tokyo, also observed disharmony between the chair and table in his book *Japan, Day by Day* (1917). He stayed at an inn in Yokohama near Tokyo, where he described: ‘the chair has been

modelled from a tourist's folding chair, only made rigid. The table is a foot higher than ordinary tables, and the chair is too low, so that my head comes to a convenient level with my plate' (Morse, 1917). It seems to have been made by an unknown artisan. Would it be difficult for the artisans of the time who had never lived a Western lifestyle to adjust to the height of furniture? As mentioned previously, Yokohama was a well-known area for Western-style furniture manufacturing with a harbour. In its construction, the chair in the figure seems to be based on the traditional folding chair that had been used on *tatami*. We should regard the above instances as direct experiences of chairs for artisans, gained through trial and error. Chikatada Kurata (product designer, 1895 - 1966) designed chairs as early modern design since 1927. Dining chairs designed by him from 1931 to 1934 had a simple structure: a straight back post, seat frame and back leg jointed as a triangle. It also had a distinct rail at the top of the legs so as not to damage the soft surface of *tatami*. The woodwork was suited to the Japanese-style interior and seems inspired from above traditional Japanese chair put on *tatami*. Kurata frankly later stated his ambivalence at an informal gathering in 1946: 'Although I actually like *tatami*, we have to stop using *tatami* to make the room rational, or else we will have to unwillingly accept a dual-style of furniture' (Kitamura, 1946).

However, this concept of 'dual-style of furniture' might actually lead to the background of later low-seated chairs on *tatami*. Kurata designed compact chair with a rail at the top of the legs and then Joichi Kogure (product designer, a member of the *Seikatsu kaizen domei* - Association for Life Improvement, 1881-1943) insisted on a rational system of chairs that seems inspired from the Kurata's compact chair. Cubic stools that could turn into side chairs with a back, armchairs with an armrest, settles or easy chairs due to their combinations. They also had a rail at the top of the legs for *tatami*. He wrote, 'If we have such a chair, we don't need a large settle, easy chair or divan, we can efficiently use a few chairs' (Kogure, 1930). Kogure realistically offered the compact design to introduce chairs into the little Japanese style room.

4.2. The direct experience of chairs by the public

The public also independently accumulated direct experiences of sitting in chairs. The architect Uzo Nishiyama pointed out that the public middle class was accepting of diversity, sitting both on the floor and in chairs, in his book *Korekara no sumai* (House of the Future, 1947): 'I hope for the creation of a neutral and new lifestyle with sitting both on the floor and in chairs...It is suited to our natural features and living conditions'. The illustration 'Type of new lifestyle (living room)' clearly showed the liberal sitting style of the public, with various furniture such as Western stools, sofas, carpets and Japanese *zabuton* (floor cushions) being used (Nishiyama, 1943). In the illustration, eight people relax in a Japanese-style room with *tatami*. Four of the eight sit around a low table, three sit on the floor, and one sits in a chair. Others lie on the floor, sit facing each other in chairs or stand on the floor. They seem to enjoy the physical relaxation.

We can also see the contemporary relaxation chairs offered to the Japanese in the films of Yasujiro Ozu (1903-63). Ozu's films show the real life of the public, with people sitting both on the floor and in chairs. There is also the scene where an older sister, wearing a traditional kimono and sitting on the floor with a *zabuton*, talks with her younger sister who wears

Western clothes and sits in the chair. Their sitting level is different at all, but the film shows consecutive shots that look directly at the faces. This vertical eye contact is also a direct experience of chairs among the public.

4.3. Historical status of low seated chairs

The above experiences of making and using chairs can be summarized as the awakening of a universe in the distance between the floor and the seat-height of Western chairs. That might be the first discovery of Japanese modern design, or a turning point from Westernization to Japanese modern design. I believe contemporary popular cultures will develop this point beyond Ozu's cinema. Low-seated chairs since the appearance of *Takesei-isu* were born on the frontier. The comments of designers, which seemed to address traditional Japanese style interiors, strictly speaking, looked to the frontier of Japanese modern design on *tatami*.

5. Conclusion: The turning point from Westernization to Japanese modern design

The public independently established a definition of chairs through direct experiences of making and using chairs. The first achievement may be summarized as the discovery of a universe in the distance between the *tatami* mat and the seat height of chairs. Low-seated chairs were born in this frontier space. Because they emphasize historical development from traditional Japanese chairs to modern design on *tatami*, they raise an objection to the stereotypical understanding of the shift from Westernization to modern Japanese design. Moreover, this article unveils the fact that the Japanese public actively sought to develop their own lifestyle, distinct from the trend towards Westernization and beyond the limits of government policy.

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Ishikawa studied the history of design at Musashino Art University in Tokyo, with support from the Japan Science Society's Sasagawa Scientific Research Grant, and earned his Ph.D. there in 2005. His research into the rhetorical function of products in human lifestyle, with a focus on Shaker furniture and their texts, led to his doctoral dissertation, in which he presented a unique diagram outline of Shaker concepts. He used furniture archives and three-dimensional computer graphics to analyse product design, and subsequently expanded the perspective to include main movements such as Orientalism, the Arts and Crafts Movement, the Vienna Secession, and Mingei. The results transcended traditional dichotomies such as East/West, crafts/designs, beauty/practicality, tradition/modernity, and use of machines/work by hand. This research has been shared in international conferences, such as the International Association of Societies of Design Research(IASDR, 1st, 4th, 5th) and the International Conferences on Design History and Studies(ICDHS, 8th), and He won the 'Encouraging Prize of Study about Art from the Kao Foundation for Arts and Sciences' in 2013.