

Japanese Denim

By: Connor Nakamura 2018

Before traveling to Osaka last summer, there was something I was really excited to finally see in person: raw denim jeans manufactured in Japan. Earlier in 2018, I was shopping and came across a pair of jeans that branded itself as “Japanese Denim”. At first, I thought it was just a marketing tactic capitalizing on “Orientalism”. But I performed some research to understand what distinguished these jeans from a normal pair and learned about a completely different type of denim technology.

As it turns out, “Japanese Denim” is not originally Japanese at all. This style of denim actually began here in San Francisco with the Levi’s blue jeans which were the garment of choice for miners during the gold rush. The fabric of this type of denim has never touched water, and you were not supposed to wash them frequently so they gained character based on the wearer’s everyday habits. For instance, if someone put a wallet in their pocket every day, the dye around it would fade and change color. However, as time passed, denim clothes slowly moved away from its workwear roots and became more of a fashion item of distressed and faded jeans. Today in the United States, the old-fashioned style of jeans are no longer produced domestically.

Throughout the 20th century, jeans cemented itself as a staple in the wardrobe of any ordinary person in the western world. And following its rapid popularization, young Japanese people became obsessed with American jeans due to Western influence following World War II. But as America began manufacturing clothing overseas with cheaper materials, Japan wanted to recreate the high-quality American jeans of the early 20th century.

My research continued while I was in Osaka. I found that 5 companies known as the “Osaka 5” sprang up in the late 1970s to mid-1990s, and were all on the forefront of the new era for Japanese denim production. The first company, Studio D’Artisan, was established in 1979 and sought to create replicas of early 20th century American jeans. The other 4 companies followed suit, and by the late 1990s, Japan was the number one raw denim producer in the world, both in textile creation and construction. These operations were primarily in Kojima, Okayama, a city famous for its long history of indigo dyeing and fabric creation.

While I was in Osaka, I had the chance to visit 4 out of the 5 original Osaka stores, along with many newer companies originating from all around the country. Most of the stores I visited were near Shinsaibashi, or Namba: the primary stopping districts in Osaka. What struck me the most was how their advertisement and store set-ups seemed to be a romanticized version of Americana with green military uniforms, leather jackets, and combat boots alongside the jeans. Another thing I noticed was that many of the products were improved or added a Japanese flair to the American design. I had the chance to visit the “Momotaro” store, which takes its name from the Japanese folktale where a boy floats in a giant peach, and they incorporate the “Peach boy” icon into the leather patch on the back of the jeans. Another store I

visited carried the Sugar Cane brand jeans and the employees at the store explained that these jeans were made from American templates but the difference is that the fabric is made from 50% Okinawan sugar cane fibers, creating a distinctly Japanese feel. Some designs are so overtly Japanese, they only marginally resemble their American counterparts. For instance, many brands have incorporated traditional Japanese fabric production into American designs. The brand Kapital used Sashiko, a form of embroidery dating back to the Edo era, to create a very unique juxtaposition of time periods and culture. The employee at Kapital told me it is one of their most popular products, among both Japanese people who want to express their culture and fans of classic workwear. In fact, all the store owners and employees were really passionate about their products, and even though we had a communication barrier as I do not speak Japanese, they were able to convey their enthusiasm for their product and I was deeply impressed by their knowledge and care.

Inadvertently, over the course of the year, I discovered an interesting facet of culture that linked San Francisco and Osaka. This adds to another example of ties and connections between the United States and Japan.