

## Our Special Guides for Foreign Dignitaries Delve a Little Deeper into Japan's Attractions!

### Fashion Begins on the Feet with Showy Tabi!

---A visit to Onoya Sohonten, a long-established tabi store---

Recently more and more young people can be seen strolling around such sightseeing spots as Asakusa and Kamakura in kimono. Apparently rental kimono businesses are doing well too. Among young Japanese, there seems to be a growing awareness that Japanese attire is trendy.

When dressing in Japanese costumes, people wear not socks but *tabi* on their feet. With socks, only the ankle part is visible when shoes are put on. But tabi can be seen almost entirely all the time, even when *zori* (traditional Japanese sandals) are worn. Hence the importance of tabi in the overall coordination of Japanese wear.



In such traditional Japanese performing arts as Noh, Kyogen, Kabuki, and Japanese dance, the actors usually do not wear shoes on stage. Instead they perform in tabi. This culture, which is unique to Japan, comes from the Japanese custom of taking off your footwear before stepping onto the floor or tatami. So these actors must be constantly aware that their tabi are going to be on show.



I paid a visit to the long-established Onoya Sohonten store, which has continued to painstakingly make these visible tabi by hand ever since its founding. Situated by the roadside in Shintomi-cho in Tokyo's Chuo-ku district, the elegant store is a striking wooden structure built nearly a century ago. Onoya was founded in Mita in the 1770s as a tailor supplying the costumes of the Satsuma clan. In 1849, toward the end of the Edo period (1603–1868), it moved to its current location and became a store specializing in the manufacture and sale of tabi. I spoke with the store's seventh-generation owner, Mr. Shigeo Fukushima, who himself spends his days on the store's second floor making tabi.



The tabi that Mr. Fukushima showed me on the first floor of the store were really varied in their color and design, and their beauty made me gasp. These days tabi are made from such materials as cotton, silk, and hemp, but way back in the Heian period (794–1185) they were usually made of deer skin and used for protecting the feet and keeping out the cold. Furthermore, at that time the nobility wore not *zori* but footwear like the present-day *pokkuri* sandals or slippers, so the tabi were not split between the



big toe and the other four toes. This tradition continues, and even today the tabi worn at shrine ceremonies, *gagaku* court music performances, and so on are not split-toed but rounded at the tips of the feet. They use a top-class silk called *habutae*, which is a soft, light, and shimmering material. The ancient style of tying the ankle part with string is still used as well.

The tabi worn by actors in such performing arts as Kabuki, Noh, Kyogen, and Japanese dance all have refined colors, patterns, and designs. Tabi that especially attract attention with their vivid colors and original styles are those worn by the Kabuki hero Sukeroku and chivalrous characters called “Yakko” who “help the weak and overthrow the strong.” One of their special features is the shallow and wide hollowing of the ankle part. When the actor sits, the shape of his feet appears large and long, so it has the effect



**Sukeroku's tabi**

of portraying a strong character. The yellow, so-called egg-colored, tabi are fitting for the dandy Sukeroku. They are quite dapper!



**Tabi of a “Yakko” chivalrous character**

In Kabuki period pieces, actors playing the role of strong samurai wear green dragonfly-patterned tabi. Since a dragonfly only moves forward, these tabi are a symbol of the samurai's strength and determination not to back down. And since the dragonfly is also known in Japanese as "winning bug," it is a good-luck motif for fighting samurai. The green color apparently comes from the fact that at the time when tabi were made of deer skin, this was the color produced when the skin was processed to soften it.



Another technique for softening deer skin was to tightly wrap thread around it. If you have seen a performance of Kyogen, you maybe will recognize these faintly yellow tabi. While Noh tabi are white, Kyogen tabi are yellow. On closer look, however, you will notice that it is actually white fabric with a pattern of thin yellow stripes. This is because the

wrap-around thread marks made at the time when deer skin was used have been reproduced on the cotton fabric. The brown tabi is used in Kabuki.

The most common fabric for tabi is cotton. Sometimes flannel lining is added to retain heat in winter, but usually tabi are made of cotton only. Kyogen tabi, though, use lining throughout the year. There is a lot of shuffling in Kyogen, and the flannel lining has the effect of boosting softness and also revealing the plumpness of the actors' feet. The choice of material is an important point in making visible tabi too.



### **Tabi structure:**

Basically, inelastic tabi have a completely different structure to that of socks. They are made by three-dimensionally sewing together fabric cut on the three stencils for big-toe side, outer-toe side, and sole. The fabric is made by aligning the outer and inner material, and the sole is made by pasting on Unsai-ori material, which is stronger than the outer material, and sewing the surroundings.





### ***Kohaze:***

The metal fasteners on the ankle part of the tabi are called *kohaze*. These fasteners, which do not exist in Western-style socks and are unique to tabi, are hooked onto looped threads to fix the ankle part. In the past, when there were no *kohaze*, the ankle part was fixed by string. Nowadays there are usually four fasteners, but the number can be changed to the user's liking. For example, the tabi of the chivalrous characters mentioned above have two fasteners to make their feet look bigger. Among Kyoto geisha, the six-fastener style is popular. With this style, the ankle part is about 4 cm longer than with the basic four-fastener style, so it has the effect of making the feet look smaller and beautifying the geisha's demeanor. The *kohaze* is an important factor in choreographing tabi feet.



### **Key to looking attractive in tabi:**

Onoya Sohonten, which makes custom-order tabi to suit the preferences of individual customers, preserves a huge number of paper stencils, many of them for famous people who are household names. Fashionable folk seem to have an obsession with tabi, and many customers have multiple stencils just for themselves. If you are going to be seated for a long time, you want looser tabi. If you are going to be dancing for 15 minutes, the most important thing is to look beautiful, so you want a tight, close fit. And so on. Tabi stencils are differentiated according to use and occasion. The balance between comfort and show is important too. Onoya Sohonten has an original Shintomi Style in which the sole part is narrow and the tabi embraces the foot above the sole. This tabi is very popular among fashionable customers, because it is clearly visible when you stand up.

When I asked Mr. Fukushima about the key to looking attractive when wearing tabi, he replied that the toe part must fit snugly. When looking at a person from the front, the toes are the most striking feature, because they protrude from under the kimono. Even for artisans, sewing the toe part is difficult and requires a high level of expertise.

Furthermore, at Onoya Sohonten the tabi are made from 100% natural material, mainly cotton. The reason is that with chemical fiber, such as polyester, when you wear tabi, it sparks static electricity, which could soil the kimono hem. One of the important roles of tabi is to protect the beauty of the main kimono costume.



**Video: Mr. Fukushima showed me how the fabric is cut.**  
<https://youtu.be/TZr8HkbTcfk>

Mr. Fukushima also let me see the workshop on the second floor of the store where tabi are made and, right before my eyes, showed me how the fabric is cut. Sitting in front of a cutting machine, he placed a stencil on fabric matching the inner and outer sides and began cutting along the fine curves. A pair of tabi was produced in no time. The next step was to attach the fasteners and then employ a sewing machine for the sewing process.

It was then that I heard a tapping noise from the back of the workshop. It was the sound of tabi being pounded. Until sewing, all the work on the tabi has been conducted in an inside-out condition. Now they are reversed and placed over a wooden foot model, and the seams are hammered with a wooden mallet and spatula to flatten them. This is an important task influencing the comfort of the tabi, because hard seams can hurt if they rub against the skin. After that, the process of making tabi finishes with ironing. Every process is done by hand. The five artisans in this workshop apparently finish about 70 pairs of tabi a day.



### **Changing shape of feet:**

Recently Mr. Fukushima, who has made tabi to fit the feet of various people over the years, has noticed a change in the shape of young people's feet. Compared with the past, he explained, the number of people with narrow and long feet is on the rise. Perhaps this is a result of changes in lifestyle.

Also, when making tabi for a world-famous ballet dancer, Mr. Fukushima was amazed by the unique shape of his feet. He had large big toes, and the arches of his feet were deeply hollowed. They really did have the shape of ballet shoes, Mr. Fukushima remarked. No doubt this change also was the result of a life devoted to dancing for many years.

Sometimes Mr. Fukushima visits actors backstage to make slight adjustments to their tabi before a performance. Foot flesh changes due to ups and downs in body weight, so, just as costumes need to be adjusted, tabi have to be adjusted too.

Besides custom-made orders, Onoya Sohonten manufactures and sells ready-made tabi as well. Foot sizes come in 5 mm units, and customers can choose the foot style that most suits them from four types. Befitting a long-established store, the list of ready-made products is displayed on a wooden board, and the unit for measuring foot size in the Edo period (*mon*) is used, together with its equivalent in centimeters. Incidentally, in the Edo period a *mon* was the same as the diameter of a one *mon* coin, which was 2.4 cm. So, for example, a foot size of 24 cm is 10 *mon*. The four foot styles on the menu are given separate names: peony, apricot, willow, and slender. This is to prevent customers from feeling embarrassed. For example, instead of saying bluntly to a customer “You have an exceptionally high instep,” the store attendant will say, “Peony for you, I think.” Even today, Onoya Sohonten treats its customers with meticulous consideration.



メートル法に依る足袋文数表	該当文数
28.0cm	12文
27.0cm	11文半
26.0cm	11文
25.5cm	10文7分
25.0cm	10文半
24.5cm	10文3分
24.0cm	10文
23.5cm	9文8分
23.0cm	9文7分
22.5cm	9文半
22.0cm	9文3分
21.5cm	9文
21.0cm	8文7分

It was in the Taisho period (1912–26) that the store began to manufacture ready-made products. At that time Japanese generally wore kimono, so demand for tabi was huge. Until then tabi had been made-to-order, but the introduction of sewing machines made mass production and stockpiling possible. Because they could then be purchased immediately on the spot, sales of tabi soared.

In the past there were many specialty tabi stores both in Tokyo and nationwide, but as the wearing of kimono in daily life has declined, the number has dwindled. Today places like Gyoda in Saitama Prefecture and Tokushima Prefecture are well known for their manufacture of tabi, but there is now only a handful of specialty stores in Tokyo producing and selling tabi.

My visit to the Onoya Sohonten store, however, made me think that precisely now, when the beauty of kimono is spreading across generations and internationally, the attractions of tabi deserve more attention.

For people with no experience of wearing tabi, the Onoya Sohonten store also sells tabi that have rubber on the heel part instead of *kohaze*. They are very colorful and would go well with Western clothing too. I feel sure that if people thought of them as socks, they could easily be incorporated into fashion.

Although it is deemed good manners to wear white tabi at wedding ceremonies and other formal occasions, at other times tabi can be chosen freely. As Mr. Fukushima modestly said, “I wish people would play around with a variety of patterns and colors!”



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**Cooperation:**

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