

The Features of Chirimen

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Chirimen (silk crepe) has been one of Japan's most distinctive textiles since ancient times and has gained a reputation worldwide as the supreme example of Japanese costume. It is because of its distinctive quality and features, transcending the history, location and local customs of the people who wear this form of clothing, that chirimen has continued to be highly valued over a long historical period.

There is a wide range of literature on the subject of chirimen written from the standpoints of introducing the various types of material, discussing its history, and looking at the origins of the textile unions. However, most such writings are little more than fragmentary attempts to describe these matters from an empirical and publicity-oriented position. Very little serious research has ever been published in this area.

In the present study I examine the features of chirimen. I began by directly interviewing kimono wholesalers, kimono stores and Western-style clothing stores on the subject of chirimen in order to establish a clear image of this fabric. I then went on to examine the subject experimentally in terms of the physical properties of the fabric in connection with the features of this image.

In the study of the physical properties of the material, I selected habutae as a silk fabric to offer comparisons with chirimen. Habutae is used frequently together with chirimen in garments such as semi-formal visiting kimono (homongi), kimono in non-color fabric (ironashiji), mourning kimono (mofuku), broad-sleeved kimono (tomesode and furisode), and undergarments such as juban.

Study method

In order to gather how retail stores themselves see the features of chirimen, I began by presenting a series of questions to 30 kimono wholesalers, kimono stores and Western-style clothing stores that handle chirimen fabric and have been in business for at least 30 years. The questions covered the following specific matters:

- 1) Types of chirimen.
- 2) Features of chirimen (strong points and weak points).
- 3) Uses for chirimen.
- 4) Proportional extent of use of chirimen in each store.
- 5) Other matters (e.g. opinions and impression of chirimen).

Results of study of the features of chirimen

The results of the study based on interviews concerning the features of chirimen with kimono wholesalers, kimono stores and Western-style clothing stores can be summarized in the following

nine items:

- 1) The material is robust and durable.
- 2) It is a fabric with a soft and smooth texture.
- 3) Clothing made from chirimen is strong and also warm.
- 4) The presence of natural crimpling gives the fabric a pleasantly relaxing and refined feel.
- 5) Since the material does not easily become creased, it is well suited to use for formal kimono (reiso), semi-formal visiting kimono (homongi), and stylishly designed kimono.
- 6) The fabric tends to lose shape in areas subject to tensile strength such as around the hips.
- 7) The material contracts through absorption of moisture, meaning that care is needed when wearing on a rainy day.
- 8) The fabric takes well to dyeing because of the high yarn density.
- 9) The material has a restrained and subdued luster.

I then conducted various experiments in connection with the results of the interviews on the features of chirimen aimed at studying and clarifying the details on the basis of the physical properties of this fabric.

Thickness of the fabric, yarn density and weight

The values for the thickness and weight of the yarn are both higher in the case of chirimen than in the case of habutae silk, indicating that chirimen is a very strong material. The yarn density of chirimen is greater than that of habutae in the warp direction, although it is less in the weft direction. Seen in terms of the average density in both the warp and weft directions, there is no significant differences between the two materials. However, owing to the natural crimpling of chirimen, values for both the thickness and the weight of the fabric are higher for chirimen than for habutae, indicating that chirimen has the higher fiber density.

Dynamic properties of the fabric

Despite the fact that chirimen is a relatively thick fabric, it bends easily, is soft, and recovers well from deformation through bending. The occurrence of fabric creasing is linked to recovery from deformation of the fabric through bending, meaning that chirimen is a fabric that is not easily subject to creasing.

Since chirimen is a fabric created by degumming relatively thin strongly twisted yarn and then untwining the yarn, the fibers themselves possess winding constriction and gaps are present between the fibers constituting the yarn. This means that there is considerable freedom with respect to movement of the fibers inside the yarn, which are not subject to a significant degree of deformation in respect to deformation of the fabric through bending, and this is likely to be a factor in the fabric's strong recovery capacity. Another factor is that the presence of natural crimpling on the surface of the fabric, which prevents deformation through bending. Since the fabric is not subject to extensive deformation in this manner, this has a beneficial effect on enhancing the capacity of the material to regain its form.

The gaps between the fibers constituting chirimen fabric hold the air in the fabric, meaning that clothing made from such silk crepe material gives a sensation of warmth. Furthermore, it would appear to be the air content of the silk crepe material together with its natural softness that gives rise to the light sensation of the material on the skin.

In comparison with habutae silk, chirimen tends to be less affected by deformation through expansion and contraction in respect to tensile strength, but the warp direction of the fabric is stronger than the weft in respect to extent of deformation and recovery capacity. Since the warp direction of fabric generally tends to be constituted so as to conform with the length direction of clothing, when a person sits in the formal position on their knees wearing a costume made from chirimen, tensile strength works in the warp direction of the clothing around the bottom and the knees. This means that the material easily loses its shape as a consequence of expansion deformation being applied in this direction. However, because of the strong capacity for tensile recovery, or flexibility, in the warp direction in the case of chirimen, loss of shape caused by wearing can be easily lost. Accordingly, adding to Item 3 in the results of the survey concerning the features of chirimen referred to earlier, it may be assumed that "(6) The material is liable to lose shape in the warp direction of the clothing in places subject to the application of tensile strength on the material such as around the hips and the knees, but the original shape is easily regained."

Conclusions

I conducted a survey on the features of chirimen at 30 kimono wholesalers, kimono stores and Western-style clothing stores that handle chirimen fabric.

Independently of this, I measured and compared the basic dynamic properties of chirimen, the luster and constriction caused by the moistness of the material in order to clarify on a physical basis the results obtained in the survey.

As a result, I was able to summarize the features of silk chirimen as follows:

- 1) The material is robust and durable.
- 2) It is a fabric with a soft and smooth texture.
- 3) Clothing made from chirimen is strong and also warm.
- 4) The presence of natural crimpling gives the fabric a pleasantly relaxing and refined feel.
- 5) Since the material does not easily become creased, it is well suited to use for formal kimono (reiso), semi-formal visiting kimono (homongi), and stylishly designed kimono.
- 6) The material is liable to lose shape in the warp direction of the clothing in places subject to the application of tensile strength on the material such as around the hips and the knees, but the original shape is easily regained.
- 7) The material contracts through absorption of moisture, meaning that care is needed when wearing on a rainy day.
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