

WAR AND JAPANESE WOMEN

By KENNOSUKÉ SATO

WAR has brought about a temporary change in the dressing habit of Japanese women. In order to manifest fully the spirit of the times, they are preferring simple dresses in place of the colourful *kimono*—long an object of artistic appeal to the international public. By far, they are showing the most enthusiasm for the *mompei*, which is a kind of loose trousers and is extremely serviceable as an emergency attire. The *mompei* is the product of Japan. It is simple and unpretentious, and is definitely useful for all kinds of indoor and outdoor work. It has become a common sight to see women of various ages going about in the street wearing *mompei*—the home front apparel of the fair sex. In fact, the *mompei* has become a valuable and necessary item in a Japanese woman's wardrobe.



The nation-wide use of *mompei* reflects the general desire of the women of Japan to contribute their best toward the consummation of the national objective. Moreover, it graphically indicates that they have become thoroughly war-minded, for this war has come to the very doorsteps of the housewives. The home front has become just as important in this struggle as the foremost war front, and the women are not lagging behind in proving their mettle. They have instinctively and with due patriotic vigour emerged out of their traditional shell of reticence and passiveness to take up a robust rôle requiring ceaseless activity and tremendous energy. This transformation in their life is exemplified by the relinquishing of the *kimono* for the work-a-day *mompei*.

The charm of Japanese women and their devotion to duty have been recognized by many international writers. Lafcadio Hearn admired them as "peerless, superb creatures of a peculiar mediæval Japanese atmosphere." Very seldom they have been known to reveal

coarseness or flippancy. By nature and tradition, they are docile and home-loving. Indeed, they have always appeared frail and shy—too tender to be capable of accomplishing anything of importance. However, their seemingly delicate and feeble appearance is only superficial. Behind their modest exteriors, they conceal a tremendous enduring power which has withstood generations of struggle against hardships, obstacles and limitations. In the mediæval ages, Japan, as history records, had numerous civil strifes, during which women had to bear the brunt more than anyone else. As daughters, wives and mothers of the *samurai* (warriors), they endured untold sacrifices, misfortunes and sorrows. Yet, caught in the mesh of such social and political upheavals, they showed a remarkable sprightfulness and vitality in the performance of their duties. Above all, they ably protected and maintained their homes and brought up the children according to the *samurai* way.



In addition to social disturbances, they had to withstand and outlive many natural calamities with which Japan's nature has always been peculiarly prolific. An earthquake would deprive them of home and property—even take away their husbands and children; a tidal wave would wash away the very land they tilled and the goods they had so labouriously accumulated; and, moreover, typhoons and storms would destroy their dwelling-houses. In all such adversities, they were always the greatest sufferers. Still on each occasion, as records show, they bravely and heroically faced all afflictions and patiently rebuilt all that had been destroyed. They accepted natural calamities with stoic equanimity and fortitude and overcame them by dint of patient, labourious work. Their modest and gentle appearance did not stand in their way of offering national service. The women of Japan have the natural aptitude of adjusting their life to any kind of emergency.

The present war is an emergency of unprecedented magnitude. For its successful prosecution, both men and women united as one are not only enduring hardships in a selfless manner, but are doing their utmost to maintain the invulnerability of the total war machine. On the home front, the women are engaged in war industries, in secondary enterprises and in the national air defence organization. They are performing these additional emergency tasks without neglecting their household duties, for they are aware that they must fulfil their family

CONTEMPORARY JAPAN

obligations to prevent dislocation in the functioning of the national family system—the source of all national energy.

Home, the backbone of Japan's national structure, has an added significance now: it has become a wartime school of discipline and national solidarity. The woman still reigns as ever before over her home, but now she rules it differently. She knows that she must manage her home to function as a source of bolstering the fighting power of the nation. As wife and mother, she is the pillar of stability and strength. And she is the "precious catalyst" that has transformed the home front into a high-tension battle front. Every household has become an indispensable unit in prosecuting this titanic war, so that the emergence of a greater East Asia co-prosperity sphere would become an accomplished fact.

The dauntless fighting spirit of the Japanese soldiers has been described as "amazing" by some Western observers. The initial source of this amazing fighting spirit is home, where a Japanese boy is trained to be brave and be ready to lay down his life for the cause of the nation long before he is enlisted. From early childhood, under the guidance and leadership of his mother, a *samurai* used to be brought up to dedicate his life to the service of his lord. The Japanese woman of today trains her sons to make them effectives of the State. She takes great pride in bringing up her offsprings as her contributions to the nation. When so much stress is laid at home to make a boy courageous, it is obvious that he would demonstrate his grit when called to military duty. The force of abnormal circumstances has prompted the women of Japan to supplement their home activities with various kinds of war work. They have donned the *mompei* to man the home front structure with strength and determination. Their hands that were trained to arrange flowers artistically and serve tea ceremoniously are now tackling tasks of greater proportion. They are relieving men from many occupations to replenish the fighting services and augment war production. They are serving as nurses to take care of the warwounded and are performing voluntary labour service to increase the output of foodstuffs.

The war activities of Japanese women embrace a wide field. They are working in munition factories, in chemical laboratories, in mining industries, in communication and transportation



WAR AND JAPANESE WOMEN

concerns, in Government offices, banks, post offices and on farms. The early morning trams, busses and electric trains in every city are packed with these women hurrying to their respective places of work attired in the home front apparel—*mompei*. They are happy, cheerful and healthy wartime workers. They are working to win the war, and so they have no lethargy in them. The war-mindedness of the women of Japan illustrates how the total war machine is operating. And the patriotic demonstrations which they stage frequently offer an eloquent commentary on the perfect solidity at home. In the rural districts, they are proving extremely valuable to the raising of increased foodstuffs. And also as Red Cross nurses at the front, they are smilingly and gallantly risking their lives to bring comfort and consolation to the wounded soldiers.

The most powerful air defence is not adequate enough to prevent aerial bombing. A country at war—especially a densely populated country like Japan—cannot but expect a certain amount of destruction in case of air raids. To combat the aerial menace and minimize the devastation by fire, the women of Japan have organized themselves into volunteer anti-air raid corps and fire brigades. Clad in *mompei*, they are undergoing training so intensively that one has to be truly impressed with their zeal and sense of national service. Besides fire-fighting and anti-air raid training, they are learning to administer first-aid treatment. The women have shouldered the important duty of air raid defence, because they are resolved to protect their homes, thereby setting at rest the anxiety of their husbands, brothers and sons who are either serving on the battle front or engaged in wartime duties. Their participation in the home defence organization is their direct contribution to the military efforts of the nation.

The current wartime life of Japanese women is revolving round the axis of the total war machine of the country. In every neighbourhood association unit, the women are looking after all the needs of the households and, garbed in *mompei*, enhancing the fighting spirit of each other. Just as in the past, as mothers, sisters and daughters of the *samurai*, they rose unhesitatingly to the emergency, so in the present, comprehending the full gravity of the military operations, they have risen to do their share in the attainment of the national objective, regardless of hardships, privations and risks. The intuitive will to be of service to the nation at a critical period is guiding them to become the bulwark of the home front. War has not only made them arms-conscious, but warlike, too.