

October 20, 2007

Fearing Crime, Japanese Wear the Hiding Place

By [MARTIN FACKLER](#)

TOKYO, Oct. 19 — On a narrow Tokyo street, near a beef bowl restaurant and a pachinko parlor, Aya Tsukioka demonstrated new clothing designs that she hopes will ease [Japan's](#) growing fears of crime.

Deftly, Ms. Tsukioka, a 29-year-old experimental fashion designer, lifted a flap on her skirt to reveal a large sheet of cloth printed in bright red with a soft drink logo partly visible. By holding the sheet open and stepping to the side of the road, she showed how a woman walking alone could elude pursuers — by disguising herself as a vending machine.

The wearer hides behind the sheet, printed with an actual-size photo of a vending machine. Ms. Tsukioka's clothing is still in development, but she already has several versions, including one that unfolds from a kimono and a deluxe model with four sides for more complete camouflaging.

These elaborate defenses are coming at a time when crime rates are actually declining in Japan. But the Japanese, sensitive to the slightest signs of social fraying, say they feel growing anxiety about safety, fanned by sensationalist news media. Instead of pepper spray, though, they are devising a variety of novel solutions, some high-tech, others quirky, but all reflecting a peculiarly Japanese sensibility.

Take the “manhole bag,” a purse that can hide valuables by unfolding to look like a sewer cover. Lay it on the street with your wallet inside, and unwitting thieves are supposed to walk right by. There is also a line of knife-proof high school uniforms made with the same material as Kevlar, and a book with tips on how to dress even the nerdiest children like “pseudohoodlums” to fend off schoolyard bullies.

There are pastel-colored cellphones for children that parents can track, and a chip for backpacks that signals when children enter and leave school.

The devices' creators admit that some of their ideas may seem far-fetched, especially to crime-hardened Americans. And even some Japanese find some of them a tad naïve, possibly reflecting the nation's relative lack of experience with actual street crime. Despite media attention on a few sensational cases, the rate of violent crime remains just one-seventh of America's.

But the devices' creators also argue that Japan's ideas about crime prevention are a product of

deeper cultural differences. While Americans want to protect themselves from criminals, or even strike back, the creators say many Japanese favor camouflage and deception, reflecting a culture that abhors self-assertion, even in self-defense.

“It is just easier for Japanese to hide,” Ms. Tsukioka said. “Making a scene would be too embarrassing.” She said her vending machine disguise was inspired by a trick used by the ancient ninja, who cloaked themselves in black blankets at night.

To be sure, some of these ideas have yet to become commercially viable. However, the fact that they were greeted here with straight faces, or even appeared at all, underscores another, less appreciated facet of Japanese society: its fondness for oddball ideas and inventions.

Japan’s corporate labs have showered the world with technology, from transistor radios to hybrid cars. But the nation is also home to a prolific subculture of individual inventors, whose ideas range from practical to bizarre. Inventors say a tradition of tinkering and building has made Japan welcoming to experimental ideas, no matter how eccentric.

“Japanese society won’t just laugh, so inventors are not afraid to try new things,” said Takumi Hirai, chairman of Japan’s largest association of individual inventors, the 10,000-member Hatsumeigakkai.

In fact, Japan produces so many unusual inventions that it even has a word for them: *chindogu*, or “queer tools.” The term was popularized by Kenji Kawakami, whose hundreds of intentionally impractical and humorous inventions have won him international attention as Japan’s answer to Rube Goldberg. His creations, which he calls “unuseless,” include a roll of toilet paper attached to the head for easy reach in hay fever season, and tiny mops for a cat’s feet that polish the floor as the cat prowls.

Mr. Kawakami said that while some of Japan’s anticrime devices might not seem practical, they were valuable because they might lead to even better ideas.

“Even useless things can be useful,” he said. “The weird logic of these inventions helps us see the world in fresh ways.”

Even some of the less unusual anticrime devices here reflect a singular logic. A pair of women’s sunglasses has wraparound lenses so dark no one can see where the wearer is looking. These are intended to scare off sexual harassers on Tokyo’s crowded trains, where the groping of women is a constant problem.

The same is true of some of the solutions for schoolyard bullying, a big problem in Japan. Kaori Nakano, a fashion historian, wrote a book with a chapter on how to ward off bullies with the “pseudohoodlum” attire. Her advice includes substituting a white belt for the standard black one in Japanese school uniforms, preferably with metallic studs or tiny mirrors, and buying short socks with flashy patterns.

“Japan is so fashion conscious that just changing the way you dress can make you safer,” Ms. Nakano said. “Culture plays a big role in risk prevention.”

Ms. Tsukioka said she chose the vending-machine motif because the machines are so common on Japan’s streets. For children, she has a backpack that transforms into a Japanese-style fire hydrant, hiding the child. The “manhole bag” was also her idea.

Ms. Tsukioka said her disguises could be a bit impractical, “especially when your hands are shaking.” Still, she said she hoped the designs or some variation of them could be marketed widely. So far, she said, she has sold about 20 vending-machine skirts for about \$800 each, printing and sewing each by hand.

She said she had never heard of a skirt’s actually preventing a crime. But on a recent afternoon in Tokyo, bystanders stared as she unfolded the sheet. But once she stood behind it next to a row of actual vending machines, the image proved persuasive enough camouflage that passers-by did not seem to notice her.

She said that while her ideas might be fanciful, Japan’s willingness to indulge the imagination was one of its cultural strengths.

“These ideas might strike foreigners as far-fetched,” she added, “but in Japan, they can become reality.”

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