

# Those 'prison blues' in Japan have an Oregon stitch to them

**T**OKYO — Oregon's latest export to Japan is too dangerous to be sold in the United States.

No, it's not some mind-altering strain of the *matsutake* mushroom.

Instead it's a type of uniform — one designed to be worn only behind bars.

"Prison blues" are denim clothes made by Oregon inmates and stamped "Inmate" in big orange letters. In Japan, they bear strongly worded labels warning buyers not to wear them in America.

"Otherwise it becomes very dangerous," says Ryuzo Tomoi, president of Leadworks International, which sells the jeans and coveralls in Japan. "If a policeman sees someone wearing them, he may catch them."

So the next suspected fugitive caught at gunpoint in Oregon may not be an escapee at all, but a bewildered Japanese tourist trying to make a fashion statement.

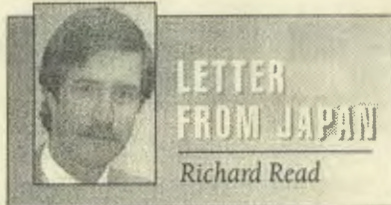
Wouldn't you know it, the Fabulous Frost Boys are behind this criminal enterprise. That's Tom and his brother Griffith of Frost International, who over the years have sent everything from exercise machines to vacuum cleaners from Oregon to Japan.

Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution inmates make the apparel in Pendleton in a garment factory operated by Unigroup, a prison industries organization. Inmates use their pay to defray the cost of room and board, to reimburse victims and to get started once they're released.

Inmate Armando Perez in Salem says he's not sure why the clothing is a hit in Japan. "I think it's just the concept of wearing the same jeans that inmates wear," Perez said.

Tomoi, whose company sold more than 50,000 chunks of the Berlin Wall in Japan, has sold several thousand prison blues. A pair of jeans retails for more than \$70 here.

"Our main business is American



fad items," Tomoi said. "We're always looking for something unique."

## THE AD MAN COMETH

Japanese consumers want more value for their money as the recession worsens here.

People go to discount stores and all-you-can-eat restaurants. Fathers come straight home from work instead of hitting the hostess bars. Homemakers buy supermarket brands and healthy products.

Could it be, God forbid, that Japan is becoming more like America?

You can see the changes in the television spots. In 1989 at the height of Japan's economic boom, Sankyo Co. ran a commercial for its "Regain" energy drink featuring an invigorated Japanese businessman beating his chest and singing at the end of a 14-hour flight. The slogan: "You can work around the clock."

In those days, the image was the message. In a Nissan ad, a man drove down an American country road and called out the car window, "How are you doing, everyone?"

Last Thursday I dropped by Dentsu Inc., the world's biggest advertising company, to watch rushes of current spots.

The latest ads display specific product features. Sanyo Electric shows off a VCR that lets you press fast-forward and still understand voices on the tape. Fuji displays its Quick Snaps camera at work.

"People are going back to their families," said Hidekazu Aizawa, Dentsu creative division manager, "and this is also reflected in our ads."

## INSIDE LINE

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A 30-second Tokyo Gas Co. commercial with a Nat King Cole soundtrack shows men coming home in the evening. One housewife, in the midst of a phone call, practically falls over in astonishment — before running, one presumes, to turn on the gas stove, heater and hot water for hubby's bath.

Instead of a high-strung businessman, Japan Air Lines shows a father buckling his daughter lovingly into an airplane seat. A Mercedes-Benz spot features a pregnant woman and her husband.

"During the 'bubble' economy, people were more individualistic and pursued their own lives," Aizawa said. "But now they're beginning to realize the importance of human relations."

## STRICKEN GIANT

Sony Corp. chairman Akio Morita is hospitalized here after surgery Tuesday for a cerebral hemorrhage. Morita, 72, was playing tennis when he was stricken.

Morita is a giant of Japanese industry. He introduced the world's smallest transistor radio in 1955 and has innovated ever since. When his "pocket-sized" radios didn't quite live up to their billing, he enlarged his salesmen's shirt pockets.

Last time I saw Morita, he immediately asked about former Gov. Vic Atiyeh and recalled that Oregon led the way in banishing the unitary tax. The move ushered in a wave of Japanese investment that has created about 8,000 jobs.

Here's to a speedy and full recovery.

*Richard Read, The Oregonian's Asia bureau chief, is stationed in Tokyo.*