Japanese school uniforms are interesting because they are quite different from the standard school uniform of Western schools. If you have ever watched anime you may have some idea already, but for everyone else this is an interesting look into a part of Japan they may not often get a chance to see.

**Traditional style: gakuran and sailor uniform**

The traditional school uniform is based on military uniforms from old Europe. Both male and female versions are very common in anime, very often worn by the 'bad' kids (yankees), so you may recognise them.

The high-necked standing collar male uniform is called a gakuran and is based on 19th-century Prussian army uniforms. Once upon a time it featured a hat, but nowadays usually only grade schoolers wear the hat. More on that below.
The sailor suit, the female school uniform, is based on the old British navy uniforms. Unlike the gakuran which is pretty consistent from school to school, the sailor suit can be slightly different at each school.

**Modern style: variations on Western school uniforms**

At present many schools are switching to a more Western style. I suppose this could be because of the military associations with the traditional Japanese school uniforms. But I don’t know for sure, nor do any of the school administrators I asked. Go figure.

For guys, the Western version of the school uniform is pretty straightforward. Usually white shirt, slacks, a tie and blazer. And for girls, your basic white blouse, dark skirt and blazer.

**Seasonal changes**

There are two dates everyone in Japan knows. These are 1 June and 1 October. What important event takes place on these days? None other than the seasonal uniform switch!

There are two basic versions of the Japanese school uniforms, one for summer and one for winter. As you might expect, the main difference is the winter version is heavier and warmer. It might also feature a slightly different colour or design for girls, but this varies by school.

**Funny thing ...**

Funny thing about the seasonal switch is they never change despite the actual weather. Many years[^2] it is still pretty warm when 1 October rolls around, but this is when the schedule says we change to winter wear, so by God, we will.

And it’s the same for summer. By the time 1 June gets here, the kids are really suffering in their winter suits and are really happy to change to summer uniforms!

[^2]: Many years
This has also worked its way into the culture and affects peoples’ attitudes. To many Japanese, when the schools change to winter uniform, it’s a sign that winter is right around the bend and signals that it’s time to change out the clothes in their own closets.

**Elementary school**

The above uniforms are what you will find in many middle and high schools. Japanese school uniforms for elementary schools can be a little different. The rules are looser and it varies a lot from school to school.

Most common is probably casual clothes with a bright hat, usually yellow or orange. Normally, it is yellow to and from school, and then white or red while on trips during school. The bright hat is simply so cars can easily see them and so they are easily identified as schoolkids. Oh yeah, in Japan most elementary school kids still walk to school alone.

Other schools may make it more formal and require some kind of standard uniform. These can range from versions of the sailor suit and gakuran to just white shirt, black pants/skirt, although the trend is away from this to a more casual dress.

The backpack he’s wearing there is standard, by the way. There is a red one for girls. Quite a big deal is made out of receiving your first school backpack.
Cuteness
This is more of a girl thing – as far as I know, anyways.

Since the female uniform can vary in design from school to school, many girls pick the school they want to be accepted at solely based on how ‘cute’ the school’s uniform is. Weird, huh?

Rebelling
Watching how the kids try to rebel against the system is kind of interesting.

Girls tend to wear huge baggy socks, called loose socks. This is actually probably the image most people have of schoolgirl Japanese school uniforms. I’m told by my students here in Okazaki that baggy socks are no longer cool, but I still see them all over when I go to Nagoya and even in Tokyo. Maybe it’s a big city thing.

Also common is to sew decals into their regular socks, wear huge very colourful barrettes and they make their skirt as short as possible.

Boys who wear the Western school uniform rebel by wearing as bold a shirt as possible under their white shirt, bold or with crazy pictures or words, all of which obviously show through and are intended to do so. If they wear ties, a current trend is to wear their tie knot as loose as possible and the shirt unbuttoned. Many also roll their slacks up to the knees or farther.

Amazingly, most don’t clean up their appearance when they actually get to school. I’m told that these rebellious ways to wear the uniforms continue in many classes.

Constant wear and final words
One final thing, it is very common for girls to wear their uniform all the time, even when they aren’t in school. It’s cute, remember, and they picked their school solely based on the uniform, so they wear it as much as they can.

And that, my friends, is all you need to know about Japanese school uniforms!

1. gah-ku-rahn
2. All of the years I’ve been in Japan, anyways, and according to my friends most of the years of their childhood, too!