

GENDER/SEXUAL AMBIGUITY IN COSPLAY:

JAPANESE YOUTH CULTURE IN ASIAN COMMUNITY

Lucy Glasspool

Nagoya University of Foreign Studies

One Asia Program

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1. CONTEXTUALIZING COSPLAY

Cosplay:

- Is a complex phenomenon
- Connected intimately with 'fandom'
- Mixes embodied practice with digital text
- Has become a transnational mode of fandom, but has specific features according to region and culture



Japan Daily. (2017). 'World Cosplay Summit – Osu Parade'. Retrieved from <https://japandaily.jp/world-cosplay-summit-osu-parade-4379/>



Cosplayers performing onstage at WCS 2012.

<https://hyperjapanccosplay.wordpress.com/2012/10/25/wcs-day-8-red-carpet-parade-and-world-cosplay-summit-championship/>

- Dressing up as characters from various texts is a worldwide fan activity.
- But the practice known as 'cosplay' recognized by most fans as having a *Japanese* pop culture origin.
- May in fact have had a Western origin – 1970s sci-fi/fantasy.
- Japanese, Asian, and Western cosplay cultures have influenced one another to form today's fandom.

➤ **Cosplay:**

‘Costume’ + ‘Play’

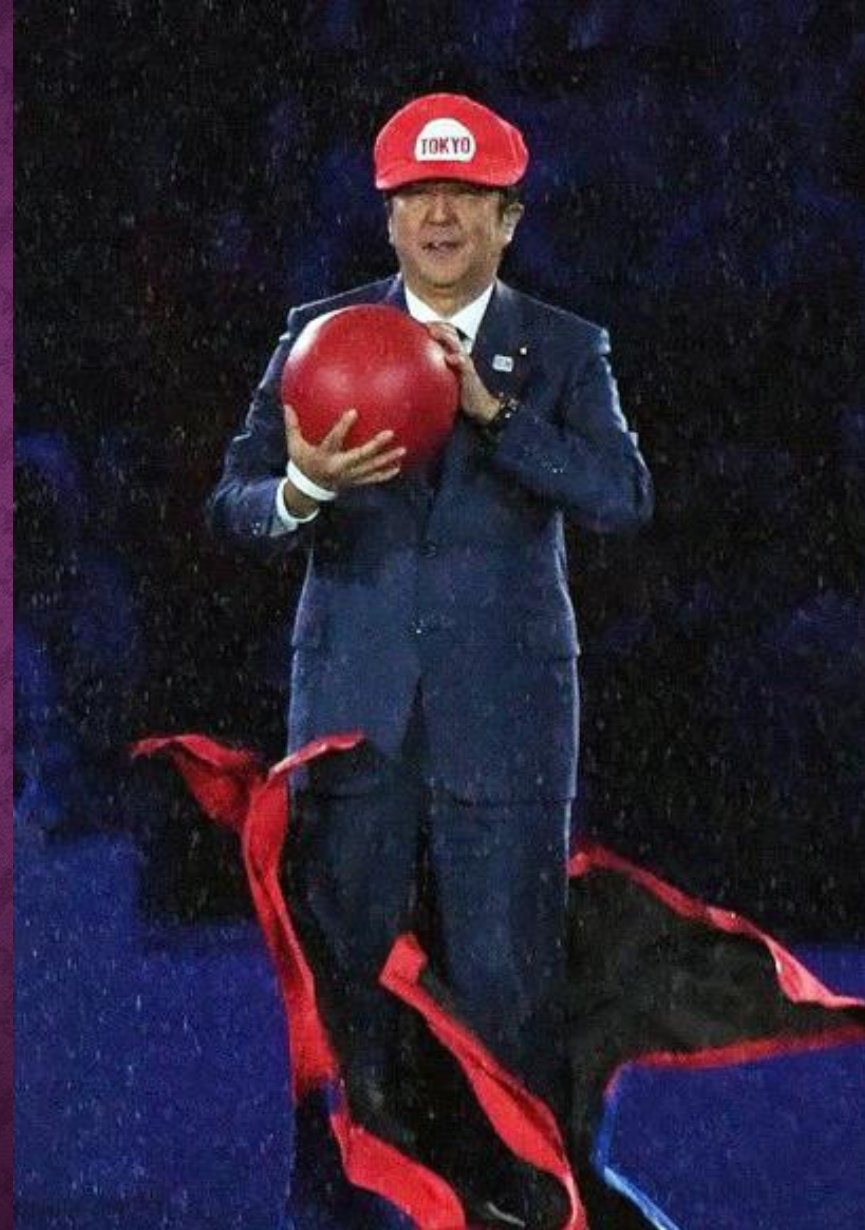
or

‘Costume’ + ‘Role-play’

➤ In Japan began 1970s/80s.

➤ Compared to Western cosplay is somewhat ‘private’ and highly self-regulated.

➤ Still, media and govt promotions have made cosplay a representative example of Japanese pop culture.



Prime Minister Abe cosplaying
Mario in Rio, 2016.

<http://www.yumeki.org/primer-ministro-en-cosplay-de-mario-incendia-las-redes-niponas/>

JAPAN QUALITY COSPLAY COSTUMES

EXC Japan Cosplay Shop is a cosplay costume e-commerce specialty store that has thoroughly considered costume quality, price, and how to respond to customer needs, making it a shop you will want to buy from again.

EXC Japan Cosplay homepage.

<https://japan-cosplay.com/>

Japaneseness has **cultural capital**. For many cosplayers, its ‘main attraction lies in its ‘Japanese-ness’ (Emerald King, 2013).

2. COSPLAY AS FAN PRACTICE:

‘AUTHENTIC’ APPRECIATION OR TRANSFORMATIVE WORK?

- A key value of mainstream cosplay: ‘**authenticity**’
- By contrast, many fan creations are thought of as ‘**transformative**’ – changing or adding to an original
(See *Transformative Works and Cultures* journal)
- Causes tension in cosplay between being transformative/authentic.
- This can affect potential for transgressing gender/sexual norms in cosplay.

Why do people cosplay?

- ◆ To **show love** for a character by mimicking it perfectly
- ◆ To showcase their costume and makeup **skills**
- ◆ To **make friends** with similar interests at events and online
- ◆ To engage in dramatic **performance**
- ◆ To **make money** as a professional cosplayer
- ◆ To **cause arousal** (erotic/pornographic cosplay)
- ◆ To make a statement about or play with **identity**

3. GENDER AMBIGUITY: CROSSPLAY AND 'TRANS' COSPLAY

- High percentage of **female cosplayers** in Japan. A lot of scholarship also focuses on women in cosplay.
- A common cosplay subgenre is known in English as '**crossplay**': Cosplaying as a character of the opposite gender to the one you identify with.
- Crossplay raises various discussions about **gender performance** – let's take a look at some.



FtM crossplay
'Kadaj' by Umibe

<http://umibe.deviantart.com/art/Kadaj-554006235>

FtM cross-dressing = '*dansō*' (男装)

- Entirely normalized in cosplay world (Japan and overseas).
- Contrary to Japanese mainstream media, which is mostly MtF.

Why is *dansō* so common in cosplay?

Are practitioners trying to make a statement about gender norms?

- Cosplayer **demographics**: many popular male characters, more female cosplayers than male = *dansō*.

‘...in many cases, the leaning of cosplayers towards “*dansō*” probably happens unconsciously’ (Tanaka, 2009, 40),

without any conscious wish to perform a “non-normative” role.

- BUT, fascination with ‘ambivalent’ bodies in anime/game world. This is encouraged by and encourages *dansō*.

- Popular *dansō* cosplayers tend to choose ‘beautiful boy’ or ‘**bishōnen**’ characters instead of hyper-masculine characters.



‘Armin’ by Ran.

<https://worldcosplay.net/ja/photo/1925609>



Armin Arlert, *Attack on Titan*
(2013-)

<http://theclipartfairy1.blogspot.com/2013/06/attack-on-titan.html>

➤ This type of male character visual has spread throughout Japanese culture; has a long history but now part of '**kawaii**' culture.

➤ Demonstrates a fluid visual masculinity. But does this mean *dansō* cosplayers are making a comment on gender roles?

➤ Some researchers say no. Instead, it's about authenticity in cosplay,

where '[c]ommitment and adherence to the original character are important' .

(Rahman, Wing-Sun & Hei-man Cheung, 2012, 326)

➤ Female cosplayers are simply well-suited to playing slender, androgynous *bishōnen* boys.



Levi Ackerman, *Attack on Titan*

<http://www.fanpop.com/clubs/attack-on-titan-guys/images/36884885/title/levi-character-design-photo>



“Levi” by Reika

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Reika/315573555144954>

- *Dansō* cosplay does not explicitly comment on *women's* gender performance.
- It does not directly criticize or even recreate images of dominant masculinity in Japanese society.
- Instead, it displays a female-centric **fantasy** of an **idealized masculinity**.
 - Seen in *bishōnen* images in various pop culture genres;
 - And 'cross-dressing' masculinity in cosplay, Takarazuka, etc.



Characters from *Maiden Rose* (Inariya Fusanosuke, 2009-)

http://www.instagub.com/post/1835271839448669893_1395681317

宝塚歌劇 雪組公演

浪漫活劇

るるろに剣心

「風作和月神止るるろに剣心」明治維新浪漫譚！
脚本・演出 小池修一郎

2016 4.1 Fri. ~ 5.8 Sun. 2月28日(日)前売開始
チケットの購入方法には要領をみてください。

公演日	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31
観客数	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	
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観客数	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	11	

観客料金 全席 5,500円 全席 8,800円 全席 5,500円 B席 3,500円
公演時間 19時30分(18時開演) 全席 18時30分(17時開演)
公演場所 東京宝塚劇場

お問い合わせ Tel.03-5251-2001

Rurōni Kenshin, Takarazuka Theater (2016)

<https://blog.goo.ne.jp/suzuka1583/e/6b8507d1e41072c83d11c0a98e298e37>

MtF cross-dressing = '*josō*' (女装)

- Rare in cosplay world (Japan and overseas).
- Is banned at many Japanese cosplay events.
- Even though Japanese TV variety shows often feature MtF.

Why is *josō* uncommon in cosplay?

Is it more closely connected with gender/sexual identity than *dansō*?

Are crossplay trends in Japan changing?

- Lower number of male cosplayers overall.
- Dominant **gender norms** around clothing/makeup assert great influence on *josō* cosplayers.
- False equivalency that ‘cross-dressing’ = ‘gay’ still exists in Japan and many other Asian countries.
- This plus lingering **discrimination against LGBTQ** outside entertainment industry concerns many male cosplayers.
- Until recent years, *josō* was more about comedy than ‘passing’.



Josō 'passing' cosplay

'Hatsune Miku' by Nora912

<http://nora912.hatenablog.com/entry/2015/06/09/220032>



Men's and women's commercial costumes:
Non- 'passing' cosplay

<http://kosupuree1.seesaa.net/article/304441350.html>



OTAKU No Baires

Josō 'passing' cosplay
'Sailor Moon' by Rondole

<https://www.deviantart.com/rondole/art/Sailor-Moon-Male-Cosplay-2-489127151>



LEOBANE
COSPLAY

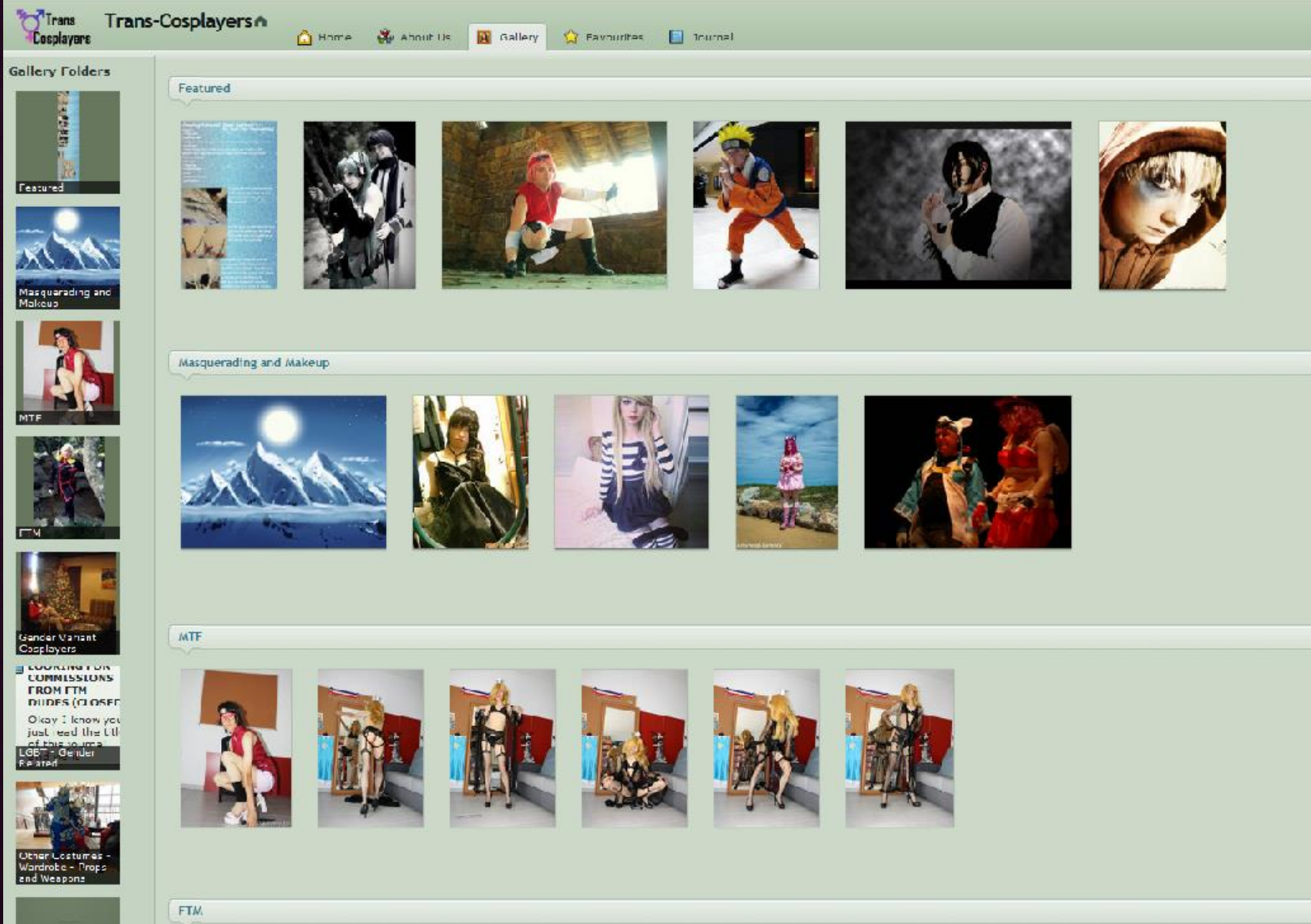
Non- 'passing' *josō*
'Sailor Neptune' by Leobane Cosplay

https://www.reddit.com/r/sailormoon/comments/8de5mp/sailor_neptune_crossplay_by_leobane_cosplay_3/

- Retaining traditionally masculine gender markers makes comedic crossplay extra 'playful'.
- Less concern with authenticity, more with transformation.
- Declines to engage seriously with normative gender/sexual binaries.
- This can highlight constructed or problematic nature of such norms.

‘Trans’ cosplay

- A tiny minority compared to standard crossplay.
- Not very visible in Japanese or overseas communities.
- BUT is deeply important to its practitioners.
- Self-defined as cosplayers who are **transgender**, **transsexual** or another form of ‘**gender variant**’.



“It made me feel ‘natural’”

(Yahoo! Japan News, Feb 1, 2019)

<https://headlines.yahoo.co.jp/hl?a=20190201-00000004-yonnana-soci.view-000>

1-00000004-yonnana-soci.view-000

“Trans-Cosplayers’ Deviantart
community

<https://www.deviantart.com/trans-cosplayers/gallery/>

- Mainstream crossplayers' gender/sexual cosplay performance is fluid and playful – not integral to their identity.
- But trans cosplayers are not 'playing' with gender.
- Cosplay is a space in which they can express their 'true' selves.

TG-Cosplay 🏠 is a haven for transgendered cosplayers, for those of us who want our true, inner gender to be acknowledged based on the gender of the characters we portray with costume. A celebration of transmen and transwomen everywhere!

Please note: If you are not transsexual/transgendered, then your crossplay does not belong in this club. We hold nothing against crossplayers--but this club is specifically for the TG community.

Mission statement of transgender cosplay group 'TG-Cosplay'

<https://www.deviantart.com/tg-cosplay>

- Some trans cosplayers find crossplay problematic: its popularity and playfulness defeats trans cosplayers' serious mission.
- Cosplay can be an act of fannish devotion, but also a gender statement of the utmost personal and political significance.

4. SEXUAL AMBIGUITY: CONNECTIONS WITH OTHER MODES OF FANDOM

- Difficult to study modes of fandom in isolation: they all interconnect.
- Cosplay is influenced by many other media, including transformative works by fans.
- In Japan (and elsewhere), cosplay practitioners are often fans of the '**boys love**' genre of manga, anime, and fan comics.



'Maiden Rose' BL cosplay by
Tian Jiang

<https://worldcosplay.net/photo/4893638>

Bishōnen show gender ambiguity in BL



*Song of the Wind and
Trees* manga (1976-)



Yu Yu Hakusho
fan manga (*dōjinshi*)
(1997)

Cosplaying BL original texts



Cosplay of BL manga *Junjō Romantica* by Choko

https://www.cosp.jp/view_photo.aspx?id=11719801&m=319306



<https://www.kadokawa.co.jp/product/321804000455/>

Transforming 'straight' media



Levi and Erwin,
Attack on Titan anime

Kodansha



BL (yaoi)
Levi and Erwin fan
comic

Unknown author



**‘Levi x Eren’ *Attack on Titan* BL cosplay
by Haru**

https://www.cosp.jp/view_photo.aspx?id=9557975&m=264767&o=1

Cosplay based on fan works



BL *Attack on Titan* cosplay based on BL fan art

“Talk to me Clean”
Ori Cosplay International
<https://www.patreon.com/OriCosplay?ty=h>

Gender of cosplayers impacts sexuality of BL performance



Female x female
cosplayers:

Boys Love?
Female homoeroticism?

Attack on Titan cosplay

Double Tap

<https://twitter.com/orico714/status/556955621178605568>

Male x female
cosplayers:

Boys Love?
Straight?

Kuroko's Basketball
cosplay

Unknown cosplayers

<http://cospch.com/archives/post-19482.html>



Male x male
cosplayers:

Boys Love? (female
fan-oriented)

Male homoeroticism?
(gay man-oriented)

Kuroko's Basketball
cosplay

KumaQi熊祁 & 夕楼76

<https://twitter.com/kumaqiii/status/532829285757620224>





Male x non-gender-specific cosplayers:

Crossplay?
Trans cosplay?

Boys Love?
Straight?
Something else?

Attack on Titan cosplay

“EruRi Week RED #06”

Ori Cosplay International

<http://m.worldcosplay.net/member/Delusor/cosplayer/photos?page=3>

5. CONCLUSION:

TRANSFORMATIVE FAN PRACTICES IN ASIA AND BEYOND

- Japanese pop culture and fandoms have spread within and beyond Asia. Fans in different regions adapt cosplay and BL for their own specific purposes:
- **South Asia, India:** BL/cosplay = a 'safe' space to envisage sexual desire without highly policed female bodies.
- **South Korea:** BL cosplay has close connection with K-pop fandom. Recently fans are engaging more with LGBTQ issues.
- **China:** BL images used not only as commentary on repression of sexuality but also on politics.

5. CONCLUSION:

TRANSFORMATIVE FAN PRACTICES IN ASIA AND BEYOND

European countries have their own cosplay cultures with their own specific features. They also share some key similarities with Japanese fan cultures.

By comparing fan cultures, we can more clearly see gender/sexual issues that are unique to each society, and which pressing problems transcend national borders and concern us all.

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THANK YOU