

CROSS-DRESSING AND CULTURE IN MODERN JAPAN

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In her *Vested Interests*, Marjorie Garber studies the role of cross-dressing in relation to culture, and finds that “cross-dressing is not only found *within* representations of the primal scene, but also in itself *represents* a primal scene.”¹ She argues that cross-dressing is not only a constituent of culture, but also a “displacement”—the anxiety of economic or cultural dislocation, the anticipation or recognition of “otherness” as loss. In other words, she argues the phenomenon of cross-dressing demonstrates the cross-dressers’ agency to both construct and deconstruct culture.

Turning my eyes to the scholars reflecting on modern Japan, I find that although many historians have paid attention to the cross-dressing phenomenon in their respective researches, they tend to regard cross-dressing as a representation of something else. Donald Roden relates cross-dressing to Taisho gender ambivalence;² Miriam Silverberg takes cross-

¹ Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), pp. 3 and 389-390.

² Donald Roden, “Taisho Culture and the Problems of Gender Ambivalence,” *Culture and Identity: Japanese Intellectuals During the Interwar Years* (Thomas J. Rimer, ed., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 53. Roden studies the intentional subversion of gendered polarities, sexual ambiguity, and androgyny in post-World War I Japan. He believes that in pre-industrial Japanese cultural tradition, distinction between male and female were not nearly as clear-cut as in Medieval Europe. Meiji leaderships reinforced the clear demarcation of gender by legal measures, which only put underground a culture of peep show, street carnivals, and masquerades that appeared to make light of the reformulated codes of masculine and feminine etiquette. Taisho saw the rise of critics with expertise in psychology and sexology. These people gave positive explanations on “effeminate men” and “masculine women.” Androgyny became visible in the “high culture” of Taisho Japan. Roden agrees with Oya Soichi who equated the eccentricities of the age with “a society in the late stage of capitalism”—androgynous culture was a product of passive

dressing as an expression of the so-called “ero-guro-nonsansu culture” in high *modan* years;³ Jennifer Robertson’s *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan* argues that cross-dressing on stage demonstrates the performativity of gender, class and ethnicity;⁴ Gregory M. Pflugfelder links cross-dressing to male-male eroticism.⁵ Most recently, in some documentary films, cross-dressing is portrayed as a means to

consumerism and indolent connoisseurs of *kankaku bunka*-culture of feeling (p. 53).

³ Miriam Silverberg, “Advertising Every Body: Images from the Japanese Modern Years” in Susan Foster, Ed., *Choreographing History* (Bloomington, IN University Press, 1995); “The Café Waitress serving Modern Japan” *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Tradition of Modern Japan* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998); “Constructing the Japanese Ethnography of Modernity”, *Journal of Asian Studies* 51 no. 1 (1992) pp. 30-54; “Modern Girl as Militant” in Gail Bernstein, Ed., *Recreating Japanese Women, 1600-1945* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991); “Remembering Pearl Harbor, Forgetting Charlie Chaplin, and the Case of the Disappearing Woman” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 1 no. 1 (1993) pp. 24-76. In having written these publications Silverberg coined the term “ero-guro-nonsansu” to refer to the high *modan* culture of the 1930s Japan, which was characterized by its erotic, grotesque, and nonsensical features. Silverberg often uses the image of *moga* (modern girl), and cross-dressing women (Yamaguchi Yoshiko as Ri Ko-ran, or Mata Hari of Japan with Manchuria background), to challenge the established gender/sex hierarchy, class structure and sexual politics in her writings.

⁴ Jennifer Robertson, *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998).

⁵ Gregory M. Pflugfelder, *Cartographies of Desire: Male-Male Sexuality in Japanese Discourse, 1600-1950* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1999). There were cases in which the sodomy was committed by an active male inserter to a passive male insertee who dressed in woman’s clothes; and cases in which the male prostitutes dressed like women to win male customers.

construct transgender, transsexual, and drag identities.⁶ All these studies about cross-dressing in modern Japan tend to connect cross-dressing with something else—gender, sex, sexuality, modernity, nationalism, and identity; however the agency of cross-dresser itself in cultural construction has not been talked about very much.

Inspired by Marjorie Garber's enlightening perspective of cross-dressing, in this paper, I will discuss the relationship between cross-dressing and culture in modern Japan in two periods—the interwar period (1918-1942),⁷ and the late stage of capitalism since the late 1980s. The organization of this paper follows this order: 1. Dressing and cross-dressing; 2. Cross-dressing as cultural construction in the interwar period; 3. Cross-dressing as cultural deconstruction in the late stage of capitalism since the late 1980s.

Dressing and Cross-dressing

Clothing makes us human. As a system of signification, clothing speaks in a number of registers: culture, sex/gender, class, and sexuality/erotic style. Cross-culturally speaking, dress code varies from one culture to another, but there is one thing that remains common—dress has been traditionally gender-coded. In one sense, clothing is a way to reaffirm gender lines, and dress codes are supposed to be distinctive in discerning sex. However, the relationship between dress code and sex/gender is not always fixed. Take the veil for example. Marjorie Garber finds that in western culture the veil is a sign of the female or the feminine.⁸ But any pre-assumptions about the gendered function of the veil—to mystify, to tantalize, to sacralize—are only suspect in the North African desert, for example where the fierce Tuareg warriors wear veils to show their manliness. From this example we can see that particular garments have different meanings from a cross-cultural perspective.

⁶ *Shinjuku Boys* (New York, NY: BBC; Distributed by Women make movies) Directed by Kim Longinotto and Jano Williams; *We Are Transgenders* (1997), Directed by Ogawa Lulu.

⁷ Miriam Silverberg used the term interwar period to refer to the period from the 1920s to the breakout of the Pearl Harbor event. In this article, I use it to refer to the period after World War I and prior to Pearl Harbor.

⁸ Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 338.

Within a given culture, clothing constructs and deconstructs gender and gender difference. In many cultures, sex and gender expressions are supposed to match the one we were socially assigned at birth. Garber believes that as a socio-cultural construction, gender “exists only in representation.”⁹ In other words, clothing not only represents the gender difference, but also constructs and reinforces the gender difference. For instance, in early 1920s Japan, on public occasions in urban scenes, western clothes and short hair were the fashionable dress code for the privileged middle class men; most women at that time,¹⁰ whether in the private or the public sphere, still kept the traditional hairstyle and wore kimono.¹¹ If western clothing was a symbol of progress, modernity, and social status, the fact that men had earlier access to it is very telling. The men enjoyed the

⁹ Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 250.

¹⁰ *Moga* (modern girl) was an exception at that time. They dared to have bobbed hair and dress in western style clothes. The *moga* image created by the media was a negative one—a middle class consumer who crossed the gender line, behaved militant, and was sexually loose. In the first part of her article “The Modern Girl As Militant,” Silverberg generalizes the *moga* image created by journalism and media in the 1920s as such.

¹¹ *I Graduated but...* (1929) Directed by Ozu Yasujiro. From the film “*I Graduated, But...*,” and the illustration in Miriam Silverberg’s “Constructing the Japanese Ethnography of Modernity,” we can perceive the material difference between men and women in entering the modern era. In “*I Graduated, But...*,” the hero who lived in early 1920s Tokyo had a short haircut, dressed in western clothes in the public sphere, and had access to college education, baseball, Hollywood movies, and eventually a white collar salary job. His fiancée and mother came from countryside, dressed in kimono, and kept the traditional hairstyle. The fiancée was supposed to stay home to do the household chores, even when a modern job—café waitress—was available to her.

In “Constructing the Japanese Ethnography of Modernity,” Silverberg studies the different paces in entering modernity between men and women and how modernity reinforced the gender distinctions in the public and private sphere; the modern items adopted by men were mainly consumption and entertainment oriented—men preceding women in wearing western clothes. While the modern items needed by women were for mainly household keeping such as new cookers or kitchen wares.

privilege of leaping into modernity participating in the urban public scenes, and occupying respectable working positions while the women were left behind. Modernity did not immediately bring changes to women's life. In the public sphere clothing shows the distinction in a person's profession and class. In addition to speaking for an individual's aesthetic taste and their relation with fashion and their time, clothing and the individual serve to construct the urban landscape. Yet, excluded from modern clothing and the public sphere, Japanese women still lived in the traditional way and engaged in doing domestic chores. It is clear that in the time of 1920s Japan's clothing not only represented the gender difference, but also actively constructed and reinforced the inequality between genders.

Historically, clothing in imperial China and Tokugawa Japan spoke for a person's class and status. In both countries the state strictly regulated the dress code of each class through legal reinforcement to keep the social hierarchy and class structure distinctive and unchallenged. In China, the early Ming state law clearly laid out the proper clothing for each class (fabrics, colors, designs and patterns), with the hope of binding people to their original social status and proper place preventing them from achieving upward mobility through the visual implications of clothing. Merchants were prohibited from wearing silk clothes despite their increasing wealth. Throughout the imperial period specific colors of satin cloth were reserved for specific members of the privileged classes in China. For example, only the emperor could dress in yellow satin with dragon designs while red and purple satin were reserved for officials of different ranks. Commoners were resigned to only wearing black and blue cotton fabrics.¹² In late Ming this began to change. The blurring of dress codes among different classes corresponded to the relative social mobility gained with the loosening of social hierarchy and commoners began dressing upward for fashion and status.¹³ In Tokugawa Japan, *burakumin* were not allowed to wear shoes and had to wear certain turbans to indicate their inferior social status. Generally speaking, in both countries, clothing was regulated by the state to maintain social structure, reinforce hierarchy and keep people in their proper places.

¹² Yuan Zujie, "Dressing Chinese Society," MCAA 2000 conference paper.

¹³ Since the late Ming, rich merchants imitated and merged with gentry officials.

Clothing can also speak for one's sexuality and erotic styles. In *Cartographies of Desire*, Pflugfelder finds that in Meiji popular discourse certain dress codes served as a marker for sexual preference. He studies Mori Ogai's novel *Vita Sexualis*, and finds "Roughnecks"¹⁴ and "Smoothies"¹⁵ as two contending styles of masculinity in late Meiji school, each had their own dressing code. "Roughnecks" tucked up their sleeves, wore dark socks, and swaggered about with menacing shoulders; "Smoothies" dandified themselves in silk kimonos and white socks to win the favor of women.¹⁶ It is worth mentioning that dress code indicating one's erotic style or sexual preference is by no means a Japanese cultural specific. In *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1945*, George Chauncey finds "fairies"¹⁷ in pre-World War I, New York preferred to wear red ties, while dark brown and gray suede shoes were the homosexual monopoly.¹⁸ It seems that each culture has its own special dress code, which was a secret shared by "insiders" to indicate one's erotic style and sexual preference.

So far, I have discussed that clothing as a system of signification speaks for culture, gender/sex, class, and sexual practices. If dressing is encoded in such a way to speak in so many registers, then what significance does cross-dressing serve? I would say that cross-dressing represents cross-coding, which should be understood as cross-cultural, cross-gender, and cross-class practices. Cross-dressing is fetishism¹⁹—by choosing the

¹⁴ Mori Ogai, *Vita Sexualis* (Rutherford, Vt.: Enfield: C.E. Tuttle Co., 1972). "Roughnecks" refers to Meiji school boys from Kyushu who chose male-male sexual practices.

¹⁵ Ogai, *Vita Sexualis*, "Smoothies" refers to those boys from northeast, who chose male-female sexual practices.

¹⁶ Pflugfelder, *Cartographies of Desire*, p. 215.

¹⁷ "Fairies" were those males who were known as "female impersonators." They adopted unconventional style or article of clothing to signifying their identities as "fairies."

¹⁸ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: The making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940* (London: Flamingo, 1994) p. 52.

¹⁹ Freud's explanation of fetishism is "having penis as men." Female fetishism relates to "penis-envy." Lacan uses "phallus"—the structuring mark of desire as the fetish, and believes that the fetishistic cross-dressing by women enable them to enter the symbolic register.

fetishistic body accessories of the opposite sex/gender—hair, makeup, voice, posture, etc.; one can build the identity related to those body accessories. Cross-dressing, like the copy of simulacrum, questions the “original,” and disrupts “identity.”²⁰ It makes the “original” become “a parody of the idea of the natural and the original,” and reveals the arbitrariness of convention.²¹ Cross-dressing gives agency to those who practice it—it involves framing: selected components (artifacts, practices) are assembled and configured in desired ways.²² Cross-dressing creates ambiguity and ambivalence, which can be used strategically for resolution and controlling, and at the same time betrays the artifices that uphold the status quo.²³ Cross-dressing is boundary-crossing, it questions the assigned gender identities, and empowers women.²⁴

Here is an example of what cross-dressing can richly mean. In “Remembering Pearl Harbor, Forgetting Charlie Chaplin, and the Case of the Disappearing Western Woman: A Picture Story,” Silverberg gives an example of cross-dressing as cross-cultural, cross-ethnic, cross-class and

²⁰ Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 369. Marjorie Garber uses Walter Benjamin’s theory of mechanical reproduction (photo, film) to argue that cross-dressing has a close relation to repetition.

²¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 31.

²² Robertson, *Takarazuka*, p. 40.

²³ Jennifer Robertson, *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular culture in Modern Japan* (University of California Press, 1998), p. 40.

²⁴ Hu Ying, *Tales of Translation: Composing the New Women in China 1899-1918* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000). Hu Ying’s *Tales of Translation* studies late Qing Chinese women’s cross-dressing in real life (Qiu Jin, a Chinese woman who received her education in Japan and returned to China with a political purpose of founding a republic.) In late Qing fiction, the book finds cross-dressing served the functions of traversing the boundaries of nation, culture, class, and gender hierarchy. Cross-dressing empowered traditional Chinese women, like the heroine Caiyun in *Nie Haihua*, and opened new possibilities of womanhood for new women like Qiu Jin, who sacrificed her life in the revolutionary mission of overthrowing the Qing state and building a Constitutional Republic in China. Hu believes that a women’s taking masculine a name in itself (Zhang Zhujun, a school master, used a male pen name Luo Pu) can also be read as cross-dressing, which questions one’s female identity.

cross-gender practices. In 1937 in the treaty port of Tianjin, at a lavish party attended by the Japanese elite, Yamaguchi Yoshiko met and was attracted by Kawashima Yoshiko. Yamaguchi, the daughter of a Japanese colonial official and a Japanese mother, was brought up in Manchuria and Peking. In the midst of the intensifying anti-Japanese sentiment, her Japanese identity was a tightly held secret, and she passed as Chinese and graduated from a Chinese girls' high school. Later, in her film career, she was presented to her fans as an exotic Chinese sex idol—Ri Ko-ran. Like the state of Manchukuo was made “Chinese,” she was made by the hands of the Japanese into a “Chinese person.” Kawashima Yoshiko, known as the Mata Hari of the Orient, was indeed the fourteenth princess of the ended Qing dynasty. She was adopted by Japanese parents who became involved in political intrigue and spied for Japanese military authorities in Manchuria. Mata Hari of Japan appeared at the party as “the beauty dressed like a man.” On that occasion, the fact that Yamaguchi dressed in Chinese garb and passed as Chinese argued for cross-dressing as cross-cultural, cross ethnicity/race construction of identity. The Manchurian princess Mata Hari, who doubly cross-dressed as a Japanese male, challenged the categories of culture, ethnicity, class and gender.²⁵ This anecdote of cross-dressing used by Silverberg clearly demonstrates the fluidity of identity during Japan's modern movement. Between 1931 and early 1942, both gender and national identity were up for grabs through dressing; cross-dressing provided individuals agency to create and choose their identity in cross-cultural, cross-ethnicity, cross-class and cross-gender ways.

If clothing constructs/deconstructs culture, gender, class and sexuality, then the issue of who manipulates the dress code and whose pleasure or power this action serve become very important. From above, we learned that clothing gives power to the dominant culture: men, the privileged class, and the straight. Then cross-dressing, I would say, marks the power of the subalterns²⁶—the subcultures, women, the under-presented

²⁵ Silverberg, “A Picture Story,” pp. 253-254.

²⁶ In *Female Masculinity*, Judith Halberstam uses the rhetoric of colonialism to discuss the transsexual body—she believes transsexuals were represented as “empire” and the subaltern (p. 166). She synthetically employs Janice Raymond's identification of transsexual body as part of a patriarchal empire intent on colonizing female bodies and feminist souls, and Sandy Stone's theory that “empire” can “strike back.” Here I follow her logic, and extend

class, and the queers. In theory, cross-dressing challenges and deconstructs the power relations within or among culture(s), marks the fluidity of binaries and indicates the category crises. In practice, cross-dressing is deployed as a device to subvert or serve as disempowerment to the dominant culture, and to provide a critique of “representation” itself.

To understand better what cross-dressing represents, I would like to give Marjorie Garber’s opinion on cross-dressing: “Cross-dressing is about gender confusion. Cross-dressing is about the phallus as constitutively veiled. Cross-dressing is about the power of women. Cross-dressing is about the anxiety of economic or cultural dislocation, the anticipation or recognition of ‘otherness’ as loss. All true, all partial truth, all powerful metaphors.”²⁷ Here, I agree with Garber that cross-dressing is about cultural dislocation as much as I agree with her that cross-dressing is about cultural construction. I believe cross-dressing is about both, but in certain periods, its role in culture construction is more dominant, while in other periods, its role in cultural dislocation is more dominant. In Japan, when the state and its economy were expanding, and people identified themselves more with the state, cross-dressing practices mainly played the role of cultural construction. When the economy was stagnant, people had anxiety about the political and economic situation, and no longer identified themselves with the state, then cross-dressing was culturally deconstructive. In the following part, I will analyze the role of cross-dressing in relation to culture in two periods: interwar period—cross-dressing as cultural construction, and late stage of capitalism since the late 1980s—cross-dressing as cultural deconstruction.

Cross-dressing as Cultural Construction: Interwar Japan

Cross-dressing both constructs and deconstructs culture. In Japan, in different periods, on different occasions, it constructs/deconstructs culture in various ways. The interwar (1919-1942) Japanese culture of modernity was “characterized by identity fluidity, the consumption of images, and a focus on ‘play.’”²⁸ Cross-dressing as an attribute to this culture of modernity, had its own expressions and meanings. Many

the “subalterns” to include people from subcultures, women, the less-presented class, and queers.

²⁷ Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 390.

²⁸ Silverberg, “A Picture Story,” p. 255.

scholars have noticed that *moga*, the Japanese cultural heroines of the 1920s, were often cross-dressers.²⁹ Though the creation of mass media depicted *moga* as a glittering, decadent, middle-class consumers³⁰ “who through her clothing, smoking and drinking, flaunts tradition in the urban playgrounds.” Silverberg’s study³¹ finds that Japanese Modern Girls³² were militant working class women who produced goods, services, and new habits. Cross-dressing was a distinctive marker of Modern Girls—they unanimously chose western clothes and short hair, some of them even dressed in men’s clothes.³³ By cross-dressing (in western, or men’s clothes), modern girls rejected the gender and sexual³⁴ roles assigned by

²⁹ Phyllis Birnbaum, *Modern Girls, Shining Stars, the Skies of Tokyo: Five Japanese Women* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1999) Birnbaum constructs the lives of five iconoclastic Japanese modern girls (one writer, one film star). All of them subverted the “good wife, wise mother” ideal promoted by the Japanese state since the Meiji restoration. The writer and film star were both cross-dressers.

³⁰ Sally Taylor Lieberman, *The Mother & Narrative Politics in Modern China* (Charlottesville, VA and London: University Press of Virginia, 1998) Lieberman finds that in modern Chinese literature, modern girls are also depicted as urban consumers. Girl students are also modern girls, they are depicted by the female writers Ding Ling and Lu Yin as extremely sentimental beings even with a homosexual tone.

³¹ Silverberg, “Modern Girl as Militant,” and “The Cafe Waitress Serving Modern Japan.”

³² In “Modern Girl as Militant,” Silverberg purposely distinguishes between *moga* and “modern girl.” The former having denoted a negative image of modern women created by journalism, and the latter referring to working class women who experienced modernity as factory workers, cafe waitress’, etc.

³³ Mata Hari, Uno Chiyo, and the fictional figure Naomi all had dressed in men’s clothes.

³⁴ Ono Kazuko, *Chinese Women in a Century of Revolution, 1850-1950* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989); Patricia E. Tsurumi, *Factory Girls: Women in the Thread Mills of Meiji Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) Some modern girls (girl students and women workers especially) in Japan had homosexual relations with each other. See Pflugfelder’s “‘S’ is for Sister,” and Tsurumi’s *Factory Girls*.

Japanese tradition, they walked out of households into the open, working and playing alongside men. Cross-dressing empowers women and opens opportunities of men's domain to them—once dressed in western or men's clothes, Modern Girls entered the whole realm of the society, and enjoyed certain privileges of men, e.g., the western life-style. To a large degree, the modern girls' cross-dressing was an expression of female self-assertion in the era of socio-cultural transformation.

Modern Girls were not the only cross-dressers in Japanese high modern period. In "Taisho Culture and the Problem of Gender Ambivalence," Roden pays attention to the "effeminate man," whose femininity was expressed in clothing, language, and etiquette. Although Roden's discussion of "effeminate man" emphasizes their feminine manner³⁵ and disposition,³⁶ he does indicate that changes of clothes played a role in creating "effeminate man."³⁷ Effeminate men represented the intentional subversion of gendered polarities, sexual ambiguity, and androgyny in post-World War I Japan. Roden agrees with Oya Soichi that there was an evolutionary pattern from masculine civilization of the late nineteenth century to a more androgynous culture of the twentieth century "wherein men and women could freely experience each other's emotions."

Roden finds the historical reasons which can explain the appearance of "effeminate man:" in pre-industrial Japan, gender demarcation was not as clear-cut as in Medieval Europe. Meiji leaderships reinforced the clear demarcation of gender by legal measures, which only started an underground culture of peep shows, street carnivals and masquerades that appeared to make light of the reformulated codes of masculine and feminine etiquette. Taisho saw the rise of critics whose

Ono Kazuko finds homosexual relations among Chinese women workers as well, in her *Chinese Women in a Century of Revolution, 1850-1950*.

³⁵ Roden, "Taisho Culture and the Problem of Gender Ambivalence," see his discussion on Hasegawa Kazuo, the effeminate male star, p. 49.

³⁶ Roden, "Taisho Culture and the Problem of Gender Ambivalence", see his discussion on Nitobe Inazo, the eminent educator and diplomat, p. 51.

³⁷ Roden, "Taisho Culture and the Problem of Gender Ambivalence", He mentions that in the novella *Asakusa Kurenaidan*, Yomiko epitomize the gender ambivalence by playing both a "masculine" young woman and a "feminine" young man, through changes of clothes, language, gestures, and even names.

expertise was in psychology and sexology; these people used their knowledge to justify “effeminate men” and “masculine women,” and made androgyny become visible in the “high culture” of Taisho Japan. Roden seems to be impressed by Oya Soichi who equated the eccentricities of the age with “a society in the late stage of capitalism.” Oya takes androgynous culture for a product of passive consumerism and indolent connoisseurs of *kankaku bunka*-culture of feeling. Here I cannot agree with Roden and Oya at all. To say Taisho Japan was the late stage of capitalism characterized by passive consumerism is serious anachronism—I believe Taisho Japanese capitalism was still in its rising period, and industrial productivity and expansion rather than consumption and stagnation were the major economic trend.

I prefer to think of cross-dressing as an expression of the so-called high *modan*³⁸ “ero-guro-nansensu” culture. The reason is that in cultural study field, some scholars classified modernity into two categories: historical/industrial modernity, and aesthetic/cultural modernity.³⁹ Historical modernity relates to the industrialization, the rising of the bourgeois and the corresponding social cultural changes. Aesthetic modernity occurs later at the high stage of capitalism. As a cultural modernity, it has an anti-bourgeois taste. If industrial society worships the bourgeois value of masculinity, then the “effeminate man” is the product of the aesthetic modernity at the high stage of capitalism.

Noticeably, Japanese culture of modernity was inseparable from Japanese nationalism, imperialism and colonialism. Cross-dressing in culture marked the fluidity of the binary distinction between masculinity/femininity, Naichi/Gaichi (interior/exterior). If clothing reinforces the hierarchy of Japanese empire, then cross-dressing creates the ambiguity of the hierarchy and can be manipulated to reach out to Japanese colonies and control the minds within the empire.⁴⁰

³⁸ Silverberg, “A Picture Story,” Silverberg uses high modern period to refer to the years immediately before the Pacific War.

³⁹ Leo-ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of New Urban Culture in China 1930-1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). Walter Benjamin is another one who discusses the categories of modernity.

⁴⁰ Here, I used the word “empire” to refer to both the literal Japanese empire and the patriarchal empire that colonized women.

Silverberg notices that there was a transition in Japanese culture from the polymorphous/modern into the masculine/militarist from late 1930s to early 1940s.⁴¹ Robertson's *Takarazuka* provides rich sources to prove such transition in popular culture through Takarazuka Revue's performance. Takarazuka, an invented form of modern popular culture in Japan, was constantly shaped by the dynamic interplay of the capitalist commercial interest and state politics. The most distinctive stage image of Takarazuka Revue is *otokoyaku*—female actors perform as men. By choosing fetishistic body accessories—male voice, male hairstyle and dress, male body movements and postures, *otokoyaku* on stage (in some cases, even in their real life) enter the symbolic register of patriarchal order. In the video *Dream Girls*, an *otokoyaku* tells the interviewer that she feels free in acting as a man, while a *musumeyaku*⁴² says that she feels unnatural to act the female role. This not only supports Halberstam's contention that femininity is more performative than masculinity, but also shows that women understand masculinity—because the culture they live in is constructed by masculine principles. Yet “woman” and “femininity” on stage are already impersonations of man's image about woman (as the foe of man and masculinity). To perform womanliness is mimicry and masquerade for *musumeyaku*. In this sense, *otokoyaku* reverse the assumption that only men understand women—a woman can understand a man's feelings better and play the ideal man.

Why did the Revue choose female actors to perform men? Was it simply because women understand men better? Did the Revue design *otokoyaku* simply for commercial purpose or for the “resocialization of (bourgeois) girls and women” with unconventional aspiration?⁴³ I do not think so. Founded by a railway entrepreneur Kobayashi, Takarazuka Revue faithfully carried out its mission of boosting national railway industry, cultivating national mind, staging Japanese imperialism, and culturally building Japanese empire. I believe Takarazuka's cross-dressed *otokoyaku* is a symbol of Japanese nationalism and imperialism in relation to the west

⁴¹ Silverberg, “Advertising Every Body,” p. 136.

⁴² *Musumeyaku* are female actors who perform as females on stage.

⁴³ That is Kobayashi's explanation. He believes that Takarazuka girls make good wives because they are taught to be quiet and obedient. *Otokoyaku* make especially good wives, because they are supposed to understand men's feelings.

After World War I, Japan rose to be a major industrial power in the world. Yet, in international affairs, Japan was still perceived by the Western world as an inferior state. The western imperial eye looked at Japan through its Orientalism lens, and found it to be the masculine and Japan the feminized oriental other. If the masculine power of the west was from its big guns, big industry and big money, then the Japanese state was also able to claim its masculinity because of its industrial power and advanced weaponry. How was it then to change its feminized image in international affairs? If cross-dressing can challenge the “easy notion of binarity,” and put into question the categories of female and male, then to create Japanese masculinity on stage through cross-dressing would symbolize Japan’s ability to subvert the Western Orientalism model.⁴⁴ As an entrepreneur of the most important national industry—the railway—and a person who had close ties with the state, Kobayashi, the founder of Takarazuka Revue inevitably realized the dilemma of staging the Japanese national identity. The invention of *otokoyaku* in Takarazuka performance was a clever solution of this dilemma—though Japan was assigned to be “woman” in international affairs, this “woman” (like *otokoyaku*) could perform the paragon of man and the idealized masculinity. In this sense, *otokoyaku* marked the superiority of Japanese “masculinity” in relation to the West, and her success on stage and popularity among Japanese people had direct relationship to the Japanese nationalist sentiment. The cross-dressed body of *otokoyaku* spoke for the superiority of Japan, and performed for the Japanese empire.⁴⁵

Staging cross-dressing in Takarazuka performance also had a lot to do with Japanese imperialism. Takarazuka Revue’s reliance on the railway capital foretold its inseparable relation to Japanese imperialism. As a metaphor of the nation, the empire and progress, the railway absorbed the local interest into the state, and linked domestic strategies of wartime mobilization with imperialist expansion. During the wartime, Kobayashi’s profit-oriented interest in organizing and rationalizing leisure and entertainment overlapped with the state’s interest in controlling people’s minds. The state employed Takarazuka as a state-sanctioned corporate theater to counter the leftist theaters, popularize imperialism, and Japanize

⁴⁴ Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 10.

⁴⁵ Tamanoi’s “Knowledge, Power and Racial Classification: The ‘Japanese’ in Manchuria” raise the idea of the body as an empire.

Asia. Takarazuka was a useful device of Japanese imperialism for disseminating and enacting a pan-Asia vision of co-prosperity.

Cross-dressing in the form of cross-culture and cross-ethnicity/race on stage was an important strategy of Takarazuka to represent the Japanese empire. Constructing the hybridity of Japanese cultural identity, Japanizing Asian people and assimilating them into the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere, and creating the embodiment of the *gaijin* (outsiders) by Japanese, were all stage tactics employed by Takarazuka Revue, to serve the interests of the Japanese empire. In the late 1930s, mobile troupes of Takarasiennes were dispatched to war fronts throughout China, Korea, and Manchuria to symbolically weave together the disparate parts of the Japanese empire.⁴⁶ Radio broadcasts of Takarazuka were transmitted to Mongolia, China, Thailand, India, and Burma with the aim of “introducing Japanese theater culture to people living within the area of the Co-prosperity Sphere.”⁴⁷ From the above we can see that in the Takarazuka theatre not only was it demonstrated that the categories such as gender, ethnicity, and national identity as a performance but also served the goal of Japanese nationalism and imperialism by creating the ambiguity of masculinity/femininity, Naichi/Gaichi (interior /exterior).

To generalize the role of cross-dressing in interwar period as a whole, it is not difficult to see that cross-dressing played an active role in constructing the culture of modernity of the 1920s-1930s, and the culture of military nationalism and imperialism in late 1930s and early 1940s. If we agree with Marjorie Garber that cross-dressing both plays a role in cultural construction and represents cultural dislocation, then why during the interwar period was cross-dressing more about cultural construction rather than cultural dislocation? The answer has to do with both the Japanese economy during this period and the state’s role in cultivating nationalism. During this period, Japanese capitalism was still in its rising phase. The growth of industrial productivity and military expansion made the state more attractive to people’s eyes, so people were more willing to identify their interests with the ever-increasingly powerful state. Besides, the Japanese state made great efforts to cultivate people’s national consciousness by using mass media and state-organized associations to reach people living in the most remote and backward places, e.g., Suye

⁴⁶ Robertson, *Takarazuka*, p. 114.

⁴⁷ Robertson, *Takarazuka*, p. 129.

Mura.⁴⁸ The state's ambition to catch up with the West was so intense and so pervasive that it drove people with single-minded determination. As a result of both factors, domestically, there were no major political and social conflicts among different interest groups during this period. That is why cross-dressing, as one of the cultural aspect, mainly participated in constructing the dominant cultures in the interwar period culture of modernity in the 1920-1930s, and culture of military nationalism in the 1930s-1940s.

Cross-dressing As Cultural Deconstruction: Japan Since the Late 1980s

After half a century of obscurity, in late 1980s, cross-dressing became socially visible again in Japan. Since the late 1980s, cross-dressing as a device has been employed by various groups of people in their daily life—transsexual, transgender, and Drag queens. From the films *We Are Transgenders* and *Shinjuku Boys*, one can see the presence of transgender, transsexual and Drag communities in contemporary Japanese society. Their existence to a certain degree, is tolerated by the mainstream, and even gets representation in mass media. It is worth mentioning that all these three groups of people can be called “cross-dressers” in a sense. The most distinctive feature of such “cross-dressers” during this period is that they cross-dress to claim certain kinds of identity.

Though some scholars believe that transsexual, transgender, and Drag mark the fluidity of gender and sexuality, Judith Halberstam holds a different opinion. She argues that gender and sexuality “tend to be remarkably rigid.”⁴⁹ She believes that many gender and sexual identities “involve some degree of movement (not free-flowing but very scripted) between bodies, desires, transgressions and conformities;” people do not necessarily shuttle back and forth between gender roles and sexual practices at will, but do “tend to adjust, accommodate, change, reverse, slide, and move in general between moods and modes of desire.” If Halberstam is

⁴⁸ Robert J. Smith and Ella Lury Wiswell, *The Women of Suye Mura* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) Smith and Wiswell talk about how the state created women's associations to integrate rural women living in agricultural backwaters such as Suye Mura into official nationalism.

⁴⁹ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 147.

right, then what role does cross-dressing play in adjusting one's role and identity then? According to Marjorie Garber, cross-dressing can express the anxiety of economic or cultural dislocation,⁵⁰ and challenge the possibility of representation itself.⁵¹ Then since the late 1980s, it must be considered whether cross-dressing in Japan represented an alternative representation or an adjusted new identity. To answer this question, I feel it necessary here to analyze the identity of each group—transsexual, transgender, and Drag—and how they relate to cross-dressing.

Transsexual, despite its misleading name, is indeed about gender/sex,⁵² not sexuality. Gender and sexuality are two categories of identity, and one's sexual preference should not make difference to one's gender identity. According to Judith Halberstam, medical descriptions of transsexuals have been preoccupied with a discourse of "the wrong body." The technological availabilities of surgeries to reassign gender have made the option of gender transition available to those who understand themselves to be at odds with their bodies.⁵³ Halberstam does not believe that the aspiration for mobility within a gender hierarchy is the reason for surgical transition, but she does admit that medical gender reassignment has social and political consequences. Marjorie Garber believes that transsexual is not a surgical product, "but a social, cultural, and psychological zone".⁵⁴ I think Garber also believes in "the wrong body" theory about transsexual, but she tries to say it in a different way—it was the social, cultural and psychological factors that makes one feel that he/she is in a wrong body. Therefore it is safe to say that a transsexual is a person whose body is surgically altered to correspond with the gender they identify with. But even prior to surgery, they are already transsexuals.

What is the relationship between transsexuals and cross-dressing then? Garber believes that transsexual is the twentieth century's manifestation of cross-dressing—the anxiety of gender binarity is inscribed

⁵⁰ Garber, *Vested Interests*. p. 390.

⁵¹ Garber, *Vested Interests*. p. 353.

⁵² Here I used "sex" to refer to the biological differences between man and woman.

⁵³ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, p. 143.

⁵⁴ Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 106.

on the body (rather than clothes).⁵⁵ If transsexual can be understood as a special way of cross-dressing, given that it constructs/deconstructs culture, what does transsexual construct/deconstruct then? Why did late twentieth century's gender politics move from clothing to body then? Let us look at female to male transition for example. If a woman cross-dresses as a man, she is only the parody of man at most—she still does not have the penis, and her integration into the male world is only incomplete. The only way to be a true man for her is to have a penis. Transsexual surgery makes this possible for her in the late twentieth century.

Transsexual is one of the subaltern groups. If patriarchal society is a metaphor of an empire, then this patriarchal empire intends on colonizing female bodies and feminist souls.⁵⁶ Female to male transsexual surgery symbolizes colonial mimicry⁵⁷ in body politics. The female to male transsexual body is part of the patriarchal empire, and it has the potential to “strike back”—Sandy Stone calls for a “counter-discourse” within which the transsexual might speak as transsexual (not as man or woman). Though F2M transsexuals employ the colonizers' structure (male bodies), they are able to create their own discourse. From this analysis, we can see that transsexual deconstructs the hegemonic notion of fixed gender identity, and gives the marginal existence/discourse an equal footing in representation.

Transgender originally refers to people who live as the opposite gender in appearance and behavior without going through a surgical transition, although the boundaries between transgender and transsexual are increasingly unclear recently. Like transsexual, transgender identity says nothing about one's sexual orientation. Obviously, cross-dressing is an important attribute to the transgender identity, but a transgender is more than a transvestite—a transgender **lives** a life of the other gender rather than simply dressing as the other gender. Theoretically, it is possible to tell a transvestite from a transgender. For example, some *otokoyaku* of Takarazuka Revue only dress in male garb for performance, in real life, they

⁵⁵ Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 15. This is one of the points about which Garber is most frequently criticized.

⁵⁶ Janice Raymond's idea used by Halberstam in her *Feminine Masculinity*, p. 165.

⁵⁷ Homi Bhabha's term, which often refers to the practice of the colony to develop a structure similar to the colonizers, yet still different from it. Culture of the colony is the colonial mimicry of the colonizer's.

are normal and feminine women—they are transvestites on stage. Some *otokoyaku* prefer to wear masculine clothes in their daily life, yet they behave quite feminine—they are transvestites in real life. Some *otokoyaku* in daily life not only dress in male garments, but also behave manly—they are transgenders. Yet I have to admit that the difference between transvestite and transgender is never black and white in practice, because clothing itself constructs gender.

Then what is the relationship between transgender and culture? Like transsexual, transgender also provides a counter-discourse to the mainstream culture. Since in most societies, gender and sex are “supposed” to match; those whose gender expression do not match the one they are socially assigned at birth inevitably become gender-benders. Transgender practices subvert the rigid model of gender-sex correspondence, and fight for the diversity of gender identity in cultural expressions.

Drag identity has a lot to do with performance of gender. Drag performance demonstrates the theatricality of gender. Drag queens are often male professional entertainers who perform in feminine costume and makeup, despite their unmistakably male bodies. While noticeably, Drag queens have been the subject of mainstream movies for some time,⁵⁸ its counterpart Drag kings⁵⁹ only appeared much later and have remained highly controversial. The reason for such difference is that men can easily show the theatricality of femininity by performing as Drag queens, but women performing masculinity invades the authentic property of adult male bodies. Garber believes that drag is a de-constructive social practice, which analyzes the gender structure from within, and questions the naturalness of gender roles through the discourse of clothing and body parts. Doubling, mimicry, impropriety and undecidability are the common theatrical performance mode as Drag.⁶⁰ In other words, the purpose of cross-dressing in Drag performance is not to pass, but to show the theatricality of gender, to arouse gender ambiguity, and to create a postmodern gender pastiche.

⁵⁸ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, p. 231.

⁵⁹ Drag kings are different from male impersonators. The male impersonator attempts to produce a plausible performance of maleness as the whole of her act. A drag king makes the exposure of theatricality of masculinity into the mainstay of her act.

⁶⁰ Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 151.

From the above, we can see that transsexuals, transgenders, and Drag are all about gender identity, and they either rely on cross-dressing to construct their gender identity, or can be read as a kind of cross-dressing themselves. However, their cross-dressing plays a role of cultural deconstruction-transsexual challenges the assigned gender identity of one's body, transgender questions the rigid gender-sex correspondence, and Drag queen/king demonstrates the theatricality of gender. These three groups of people all subvert the orthodox gender identity in their respective approaches.

So far, I have discussed the transsexual, transgender, and Drag identity. Let us turn back to the Japanese the films *We Are Transgenders*, and *Shinjuku Boys*. If transsexual, transgender, and Drag all deconstruct gender identity in one way or another, what do these film representations tell us about contemporary Japan?

The bubble economy in the mid 1980s made Japan one of the richest countries in the world. Its material affluence, mass middle class, rising consumerism, and economic stagnation all marked Japan as having had entered the late stage of capitalism. Many of the forces that had shaped modern Japanese history have been fundamentally transformed. Japan needed not only rethink the values, policies, and institutions that had guided national life since Meiji period but also reassess its future goals and reorient its national purpose. The political corruption and scandals caused political turmoil in Japan since the summer of 1993; the failed economic reform could not save its economy from stagnation. The major issues reshaping the political scene are the issues of internationalization, but Japan is still inward looking-while clinging to the past order and discipline of its national life, it becomes less hospitable to reform, and less tolerant of new ways.⁶¹

It is suffice to say that contemporary Japan is in an age of political and economic transformation. The visibility of transsexual, transgender, and Drag communities just proves what Marjorie Garber believes about cross-dressing, as cultural "displacement-the anxiety of economic or cultural dislocation, the anticipation or recognition of 'otherness' as loss."⁶² The political and economic dislocations in contemporary Japan inevitably affect people who live there. Identity ambiguity is a cultural reflection of

⁶¹ Kenneth B. Pyle, *The Making of Modern Japan* (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1996), chapter 16.

⁶² Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 390.

the political and economic dislocations in Japan. When talking about Taisho culture, Roden believes that in Japan there was an evolutionary pattern from masculine civilization of the late nineteenth century to a more androgynous culture of the early twentieth century. Here I want to point out that from the late 1980s to the 1990s, Japan evolved from a high capitalist state with increasing productivity, economic expansion, and a dominant state culture and ideology, to a society in the late stage of capitalism characterized by economic stagnation, consumption, and polymorphous culture. This polymorphous culture can be observed from the multiplicity, ambiguity, and ambivalence of people's identities.

In *Shinjuku Boys*, all the transgenders have suffered gender identity crisis, and their gender identities are very ambiguous and ambivalent. Gaish, a handsome transgender waiter at Club Marilyn⁶³ said, "I do not think I am a girl. I do not want to be a real man either. I am in between." Coming from a broken family, Gaish used to feel that life was meaningless, it would be better if she was never born. Feeling the image of a girl is too weak and helpless in the society, she/he develops masculine personality and adopts a transgender way of living by providing services to her/his female "business" customers. Now she/he finds meaning of in life—"they (customers) need me." Gaish is neither a transsexual nor a lesbian. She/he lives in her/his natural body, and dresses and lives like a man. Gaish never allows the customers to see her/his body, and does not want to be touched by them either. Tatsu, another waiter, is more complicated in her/his gender and sexual identity. Although Tatsu takes hormone to change her/his physical features, she/he never goes through transsexual surgery. She/he might be called a stonebutch in the sense that she/he looks very masculine in appearance though Tatsu has no penis. Besides, she/he has sex with her/his girl friend Tomoe, and they live together like husband and wife—Tomoe does not care that Tatsu has no penis. Kazuki, the third transgender waiter at Club Marilyn, is not as masculine in her/his private life as in her/his public life. In her/his private life, she/he even wears clothes with lace. She/he lives with Kumi, a male-to-female transsexual, and they even plan to get married. Kumi used to be a Drag queen in a nightclub. He/she recently received a M2F transsexual surgery. Given Kumi's unusual

⁶³ Club Marilyn is a cafe club in Tokyo where waiters are women who dress in man's clothes to serve their female customers.

gender, our present language is not enough to define Kumi and Kazuki's sexual identity.

In *We Are Transgenders*, transsexuals in contemporary Japanese society are represented. In contrast to transgenders who form a community in Club Marilyn, transsexuals in this film are all male-to-female individuals. All of them feel they were born in the wrong bodies, and went through surgeries to be changed into women. Yet to be a transsexual in Japan, one has to live under huge social pressure, and even at the risk of their career opportunities. The M2F graduate student eventually comes to the USA to study, and the nineteen year old M2F, despite his/her wish of being an OL (office lady), cannot find jobs other than being a female impersonator at a nightclub.

Both *Shinjuku Boys* and *We Are Transgenders* show the diversity of gender and sexual identity in contemporary Japan, and their richness in cultural practices and expressions. Oftentimes, such identity and practices can even cause a crisis of language—the limitation of our present language cannot exhaust the rich repertoire of gender and sexual identity and practices.⁶⁴ In the 1930s-1940s, the Japanese state was able to cultivate the people's national consciousness to pursue the common national interest-to catch up with the West; people were also willing to sacrifice their own diversified interests to serve the state's goal. That is why the diversity of gender and sexual identity at that time did not surface up and cause language crisis. In the late 1980s, Japanese economy trend shifted from industrial productivity and expansion to consumption and stagnation, which marked Japan as entering the late stage of capitalism.⁶⁵ Japan had already achieved its national goal of catching up with the West, and risen to be the economic leader of the world. People were no longer attracted by the outmoded official ideology and culture,⁶⁶ and even the state itself was not

⁶⁴ For example, in *Shinjuku Boys*, Kumi's sexual identity and gender identity are both beyond the scope of our present language.

⁶⁵ A term used by Oya Soichi. Frederic Jameson uses the term "post industrial society" to refer to the late capitalist economic trend of consumption and stagnation.

⁶⁶ In Japan, since the Meiji restoration, for more than a century, the slogan to "catch up with the west" had been an important constitute of Japanese nationalism, and had unified Japanese people together to build a strong modern nation state. By the 1980s, Japan had not only caught up with the

certain about the national interest of Japan in the future. In an age of political turmoil and economic stagnation since the late 1980s, Japanese people, who used to live under the unified official ideology and identify their own interests with that of the Japanese nation, have now become more and more unsatisfied and disillusioned with the state. Searching and asserting individual identities replaced nationalist sentiment in the 1980s' Japan-those identities and practices which had been long-subjugated by the state culture/ideology now surfaced up and struggled for their own discourses and cultural expressions. Such identities constantly deconstructed the categories of the dominant language and the official cultural expression, and created their own discourses and cultural expressions. In the late stage of capitalism, cultural deconstruction and reconstruction in Japan goes side by side with the political and economic transformation.

Conclusion

Though Marjorie Garber points out that cross-dressing can construct and deconstruct culture, this study of cross-dressing in two different periods in modern Japan suggests that **cross-dressing does not both construct and deconstruct culture at any given time**. Under certain political and economic situation, when the state is able to integrate different interests and bind people together to serve the goal of the state, the diversified cultural discourses will be subjugated to the state culture and ideology, and rendered silent. When the goal of the state can no longer hold people together for a common national interest, different groups will each struggle for their own discourses and interests. In this process, they deconstruct the present rigid cultural structure, and try to write their own histories into the History.

west, but also surpassed the west in many senses. The patriotic cohesion, which bound people together for more than a century, lost its luster in the 1980s, and could not attract the people any more. The political turmoil and economic stagnation since late 1980s further disillusioned the people. Instead of identifying themselves with the nation, the Japanese in the 1980s thought more about their individual identities.