

Crossdressing and the Negotiation of Gender in Nineteenth-Century Japan

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Abstract

In her seminal monograph *Josō to Nihonjin (Male Crossdressing and the Japanese, 2008)*, Mitsuhashi Junko analyzes four case studies of biological men in nineteenth century Japan who donned female clothing to live their lives as women; in other words, they crossdressed and gender crossed. Mitsuhashi has proved the existence in nineteenth century Japan of a practice which allowed men to negotiate their gender identity, thus assuming not the male gender, as per societal expectation, but the female gender.

In this paper, I will expand on Mitsuhashi's results by examining the experiences of both crossdressing men and women from the nineteenth century drawn from diverse written and visual sources, ranging from *zuihitsu* (miscellanies), tribunal reports, *nishikie* (brocade pictures), fictional tales, and journal articles. I will examine the sources through contextualizing the data in the cultural and social milieu of the time. By comparing the life stories of crossdressing men and women, I will show that their experiences shared fundamental points as regards to: (1) the reasons why the subjects negotiated their gender; (2) the complex ways men and women used fashion to gender cross; (3) the social status the individuals occupied and the jobs they pursued; and (4) the linguistic items the sources used to refer to the individuals themselves, to their crossdressing, and to their gender identity.

By illustrating these aspects of the practice, I will present a more detailed overview of crossdressing and the negotiation of gender identity in nineteenth century Japan. In particular, I will demonstrate that not only men but also women crossdressed and gender crossed. Furthermore, I will offer a more finely nuanced framework of the motivations behind the practice, the attire and accessories crossdressing people used, their status and the jobs which were available to them, and the linguistic concepts that were applied to the subjects. In this way, I will make an important contribution to the understanding of gender in the history of Japan.

Introduction

Sometimes newspapers, wrote an anonymous journalist in *Yomiuri shinbun* 13/4/1881, reported on stories of people like Ohide, a young woman who hated doing works reserved to women to the point that they dressed and behaved like a man so to live their life as a man.

With this intervention, I aim to deepen our knowledge about the life histories and the experiences of people like Ohide who did not align their gender performance to their anatomical sex but, on the contrary, adopted the gender performance that the society and culture of the time normally associated with the other sex.

Groundbreaking research on the subject has been conducted by Jennifer Robertson (1991, 1998), Gregory Pflugfelder (1999), Mitsuhashi Junko (2008, 2022), and Nagashima Atsuko (2023). These scholars have studied how a few people who lived in the late Edo or Tokugawa period (1603-1868) adopted the gender performance of the opposite sex by wearing the clothes and hairstyles that contemporary culture deemed appropriate for the other sex. While these researches are extremely valuable to lay the foundation for next examinations and indeed this very paper, they also present three main limits:

- They have focused on crossdressing as the only practice that allowed gender-nonconforming individuals to negotiate their gender;
- They have conducted single case studies, thus the observations drawn from them are valid only for said cases;
- The case studies the scholars have conducted have predominately dealt with gender-variant men, leaving the experiences of gender-variant women under-researched.

With this paper, I aim at filling these knowledge gaps. To do so, I examined a wider sample of cases to identify shared points in the ways gender-variant individuals adopted the gender performance of the other sex. My objective is to explore the ways gender-nonconforming people negotiated their gender performance not as single case studies but as a set of practices that were available to people who adopted the gender performance of the opposite sex. Furthermore, I considered more cases of gender-variant women.

As primary sources, I mainly used for the late Edo period *zuihitsu*, “miscellanies,” and *kenbunshū*, “reports on things seen and heard,” and for the early Meiji period (1868-1912) newspaper articles. I also used illustrations, writings of *Kokugakusha*, laws, sentences, *jokun* writings, “moral tracts for women,” and fictional tales. By examining these sources, I noticed that contemporary testimonies revealed important aspects of the lives gender-nonconforming people led. These aspects revolved around three main topics:

- The practices which permitted gender-nonconforming people to negotiate their gender: crossdressing, but also naming, occupations, and jobs;
- The motivations that drove gender-variant subjects to adopt the gender performance of the opposite sex;
- The linguistic concepts mainstream society coined to refer to and explain gender-nonconformism.

With this paper, I would like to present my findings on these topics, each of which I will discuss in further detail in the next sections, with the goal of introducing a wider picture about the life experiences of gender-variant people in nineteenth-century Japan.

The Practices with which Gender-Nonconforming People Negotiated their Gender: Crossdressing, Naming, and Jobs

Crossdressing

By crossdressing, I mean the practice for gender-variant individuals to wear the clothes, hairstyles, accessories, and body language that a given culture and society commonly associated with the other sex.

- For gender-variant men, crossdressing might consist in:

As Takizawa Bakin (1767-1848) reported in *Tōen shōsetsu* (1825), a gender-nonconforming man self-named Okatsu assumed a feminine appearance by taking the following steps: they wore their hair in a bobbed style (*marumage*) with a hairpiece, combed their hair (men generally did not comb their hair but tied them in a topknot), used pins, and donned clothes and *obi* appropriate for a woman (Source: Takizawa Bakin, *Tōen shōsetsu*, in Sunaga 2012).

The *Tokyo nichichi shinbun* 813/1874 contained in a *nishiki-e* illustration an artistic rendition of Ooto, a gender-variant man who grew up as a girl/woman and married a man (Source: *Tokyo nichichi shinbun* 813/1874, reproduced in Takahashi 1992).



In the image, Ooto is the figure on the top left and they appear together with a man, presumably their husband, and a cat. As shown in this rendition, Ooto blends female and male characteristics:

- Ooto as feminine:

Ooto's body: Ooto looks minute: the clothes they are wearing appear very big and engulf Ooto's body. Moreover, Ooto appears to be short and their head and hands are small. Ooto is sitting in a straight posture which *ukiyo-e* and *nishiki-e* prints usually associate with women;

Association with sewing: Ooto is shown mending a garment. Furthermore, in the room there are boxes of sewing supplies which contain needles, thread spools, and fabric scraps. The illustration links Ooto with sewing to highlight a passage of the accompanying text, which informed the reader that Ooto was taught by their parents to sew;

The cat: the cat presumably serves to further highlight Ooto's femininity and sewing ability, seeing as cats in *ukiyo-e* and *nishiki-e* prints often appear alongside women and playing with thread spools;

- Ooto as masculine:

Ooto presents a masculine-coded characteristic in their short hair. According to the text, Ooto used to have long hair. However, officials who checked information entered in the *koseki*, the family register, found out Ooto lied about their biological sex, probably registering themselves as a woman on their marriage certificate. As punishment, the officials had Ooto cut their hair short so to present themselves as male. By rendering Ooto with short hair, the *nishiki-e* portrays Ooto as masculine from this point of view.

In summary, the illustration represents Ooto at the same time as feminine for their petite body, clothing, and the associations with sewing and the cat and as masculine for their short hair.

- For gender-variant women, crossdressing might consist in:

According to Sudō Yoshizō (born 1793) in *Fujiokaya nikki* (1804-1868), in the late Edo period a gender-nonconforming woman self-named Takejirō shaved the hair on the top of the head in the *sakayaki* style, wore a *hanten* jacket, and adopted men's mannerisms and habits such as going to the men's section of public baths (Source: *Fujiokaya nikki*, in Koike and Suzuki 1987).

In *Kasshi yawa* (circa 1821-1841), Matsura Kiyoshi (1760-1841) drew an artistic rendition of Takejirō:



- Takejirō has their hair shaved in the *sakayaki* style;

- They wear a cloth rolled up around their waist and whose hem ends above the knees; according to Takeda Sachiko, Japanese-style clothes were gendered for women if the lower part is longer and hides the shape of the legs, while clothes were gendered for men if the lower part is shorter and shows the shape of the legs (Source: Takeda Sachiko 1998, 2014). If we accept Takeda's explanation, we can consider Takejirō's cloth as appropriate for use by a man;

- Takejirō wears a *fundoshi*: the use of this type of underwear was usually reserved to men, as it was gifted to young boys when they turned thirteen as a symbol of sexual maturation, while young girls, at the same age, were gifted underskirts (Source: Nagano 2011). In *Kōshoku gonin onna* (1686) by Ihara Saikaku (1642-1693), a character finds out the boy with whom he's about to have sex is actually a girl in cross-dress because the girl does not wear a *fundoshi* (Source: *Kōshoku gonin onna*, in Emoto 1984);

- Although these elements are all usually associated with maleness, Takejirō is shown as having breasts, a detail which signals that they were anatomically female.

In summary, Matsuda drew Takejirō as biologically female, as indicated by their breasts, while he coded their hairstyle and clothing as male.

Naming

Gender-variant people usually took names associated with the other sex. For example, Takejirō, whose birth name was Take in *kana*, assumed the male name Takejirō in *kanji* (Source: *Fujiokaya nikki*, in Koike and Suzuki 1987). Similarly, a young biological woman assumed the masculine name Nakajirō in *kanji* and the feminine name Onaka in *kana*, while a young biological man assumed the feminine name Okame in *kana* and the masculine name Kametarō in *kanji* (Sources: *Yomiuri shinbun* 13-15/6/1884). If we compare these cases, we can notice the following pattern:

- Gender-variant individuals assumed names that maintained a fixed core, in these cases Take, Naka, and Kame;
- To create a masculine sounding name, gender-nonconforming women could attach to the fixed core the suffixes found in numerous men's names such as -jirō and -tarō and wrote their names in *kanji*; as it is well known, Japanese has long associated maleness with Chinese characters;
- To create a feminine sounding name, gender-variant men could attach to the fixed core the prefix O-, or alternatively null prefix as in the case of Take, and wrote their names in *kana*; Japanese language has long associated femaleness with the roundness and simplicity of the *kana* syllabary.

Jobs

In late Edo and early Meiji Japan, job fields were commonly gendered and gender-variant individuals might perform jobs that were deemed typical of the sex they wished to live as.

As concerns gender-variant men, we have seen the case of Ooto who worked as a “maidservant” (*hōkō*) thanks to their sewing proficiency. The newspaper article specified that Ooto had only female colleagues, seeing as this kind of job was generally reserved to women (Source: *Tokyo nichichi shinbun* 813/1874, reproduced in Takahashi 1992). In *Kumo no itomaki* (circa 1846-1850), Santō Kyōzan (1769-1858) reported on a man named Jinkichi who worked as a “hairdresser” (*onnakamiyui*) for *onnagata* and townswomen, a job that Santō considered generally performed by women (Source: *Kumo no itomaki*, in Ōhashi 1929; see also Groemer 2019).

As regards gender-nonconforming women, the sentences ruled against Takejirō stated that they pretended to work as a magistrate, a line of work which was available only to men (Sources: Sentences reproduced in Nagashima 2023, see also Robertson 1991, 1998 and Imai 2002). In *Tōen shōsetsu* Bakin wrote about an individual self-named Yoshigorō who did hard physical labour lifting loads and heavy objects. As Bakin said, such a job was considered appropriate and doable only by a man and not by an anatomical woman, but in spite of this expectation Yoshigorō was as strong as the huskiest men of the time (Source: Takizawa Bakin, *Tōen shōsetsu*, in Sunaga 2012).

Motivations

Gender-variant people could adopt the gender performance associated with the opposite sex for a variety of reasons. According to contemporary testimonies, gender-variant men adopted women’s gender performance out of an innate desire:

- In *Waka no hokakushō* (first half of the nineteenth century), the *Kokugakusha* Motoori Uchitō (1792-1855) reported on a biological man who, because of a “characteristic” (*seishitsu*) of theirs, “imitated the ways of speaking and behaving of a woman” (*gengo kyodō onna no gotoku ni manebite*), “even in the clothes” (*isshō ni made*) they wore (Source: Motoori Uchitō, *Waka no hokakushō*, in Motoori 1902);

- Bakin wrote that Okatsu dressed as a woman because they “liked their body” (*sono mi no konomi*) like that, presumably they liked the cross-dressed body and/or the female body (Takizawa Bakin, *Tōen shōsetsu*, in Sunaga 2012);

- According to early Meiji journalists, men crossdressed out of an “innate inclination” (*shōrai to konomi/ōrai*; Sources: *Yomiuri shinbun* 29/5/1875; *Yomiuri shinbun* 12/4/1878; *Yomiuri shinbun* 21/9/1892);

In the case of gender-variant women, they adopted men’s gender performance mainly because they wanted to perform the jobs and occupations that socio-cultural habits reserved to men:

- According to a verdict ruled against Takejirō, they wished to live as a man because they despised “women’s occupations” (*onna no shogyō*) and would rather do “men’s occupations” (*otoko no shogyō*; Source: Verdict reproduced in Nagashima 2023);

- As we have seen in the introduction, the *Yomiuri shinbun* of 13/4/1881 presented the strikingly similar case of Ohide who wished to live as a man because they “hated women’s

occupations and preferred men's occupations" (*onna no waza to kirai otoko no waza to konomu*).

While the sentence and the newspaper article did not explain in what men and women's occupations consisted, according to *Onnadaigaku* (1716-1736), a famous piece of the genre known as *jokun* or "moral tracts for women," "women's occupations" (*onna no kō*) were domestic and reproductive jobs such as cooking, sewing and mending clothes, cleaning the house, washing clothes and tableware, and taking care of their beauty (Source: *Onnadaigaku*, in Ishikawa 1977). However, *jokun* did not specify what men's occupations were, possibly because these were strongly correlated to family and status and thus were difficult to define. As we have seen, Takejirō pretended to be a magistrate, while Yoshigorō did hard physical labour.

Linguistic concepts

Sources of the late Edo and early Meiji periods employed many linguistic concepts to refer to and explain gender-variance:

- An anonymous journalist who wrote an article for *Yūbin hōchi shinbun* 30/4/1881 n. 2470 described a gender-variant young man as a *henjō danshi*. This term came from the Lotus Sūtra where it referred to the daughter of the Dragon King who turned into a man to subvert the idea that women had to be reborn as men before they could achieve Buddhahood (Source: Yamamoto 2018). In Edo-period *zuihitsu*, for example in *Mimibukuro* (1784/1787-1814) by Negishi Yasumori (1737-1815), *henjō danshi* was also used to indicate hermaphrodites, most often women, who during early adulthood developed male genitalia (Source: *Mimibukuro*, in Sunaga 2012);

- In *Saitō yago* (first half of the nineteenth century), the *Kokugakusha* Tonomura Yasumori (1779-1847) explained the gender-variance of a woman as a type of *futanari*, or "double form:" as Tonomura specified, the expression indicated an individual who had the upper body of a man and the lower body of a woman or, alternatively, both the male and female genitalia (Source: *Seitō yago*, in Sunaga 2012);

- Journalists who wrote for the *Yomiuri shinbun* 7/8/1876 and 26/1/1890 described two gender-nonconforming men as *han'in'yō*. This term, literally meaning "half *yin* and half *yang*," seems to have explained human sexual biology by reference to the *yin yang*, with *yin* as the female element and thus the origin of the female genitalia and body and *yang* as the male element and the origin of the male genitalia and body. It is possible that, like *henjō danshi*, *han'in'yō*, too, indicated a body that in adulthood developed a new set of genitalia or, like *futanari*, it might have indicated a body with both male and female primary and secondary sexual traits.

By explaining gender-variance as a form of hermaphroditism, writers of the late Edo and early Meiji periods apparently interpreted gender as tied to sex and thereby explained a man acting as a woman and vice versa as an indication that the individual in question possessed a body that was, at the same time or consecutively, male and female. In this manner, testimonies of the time apparently understood gender-nonconformism, as they did gender-conformism, as related to biological determinism, i.e. it was the body that influenced the gender performance of a given individual and, while cisgender men and women adopted

respectively the male and female gender performance, gender-variant people presumably negotiated between the two genders because their changing body dictated so.

Conclusion

In this paper, I attempted to identify the practices with which gender-variant individuals negotiated their gender adopting the gender performance of the opposite sex, their motivations, and the linguistic concepts with which mainstream society referred to them and explained gender-nonconformism.

As we have seen, gender-variant individuals usually adopted the clothes, hairstyles, accessories, and the body language that were typical of the opposite sex. Furthermore, they took the names with prefixes and suffixes that were generally used for the opposite sex. Lastly, they assumed jobs that the culture of the time associated with the opposite sex.

The reasons why gender-nonconforming people negotiated their gender were multifaceted: while men had an innate interest in crossdressing as women, women wished to perform the jobs usually reserved to men.

Lastly, mainstream society understood gender-nonconforming individuals as hermaphrodites. This condition also explained this phenomenon, which was understood in the frame of biological determinism.

Gender-variance thus was a complex phenomenon both for the gender-conforming people themselves and mainstream society. While I hope this intervention has contributed to widen our knowledge on the topic, much more research will need to be conducted in the future.

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