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**COSPLAY IN CHINA:
POPULAR CULTURE AND YOUTH COMMUNITY**

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Abstract

In China, cosplay, which is originated for Japan's costume play, has not simply played as another role of pop culture, but it has represented its unprecedented influence among those youngsters to the public with the form of cosplayers' association. By raising the questions that "why it is so popular" and "why youngsters devote themselves to this cultural activity", the research is to contribute to studies on youth culture in China. Based on observation of a typical cosplayers' association in Hangzhou, the following issues will be examined. Why cosplay is the particular pop culture that draw young people's attention? How and why youngsters gather together and form such organizations as "Cosplayers' association"? Based on the character of the central topic, the main approach of this research focuses on qualitative methods, particularly case study and focus group. The intensive interviews and participant observations are the main source of the primary data, while phone interviews and online interviews are the accessorial proof. The result of this research shows the fact that both their interests and social pressure driven the young generation into the culture of cosplay while cosplay gives them a way of expressing their desire and choice of life. And with people who share the same interests, the awareness of self-identity is raised, thus the interest-driven gathering becomes a structural organization, cosplayers' association. In a profit-dominated society with heavy regulations such as current China, a youth culture like this, eventually gathers more and more people and becomes their last shelter from this cruel world.

Keywords: cosplay, globalization, ACG, cosplayer association, Chinese youth, social identity

Foreword

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1. Introduction

1.1 A brief introduction to Cosplay and cosplayer

Cosplay is a kind of performing activity originating from Japan. Though it is not possible to settle the exact time of its initiation, the term “cosplay” was created by Nobuyuki Takahashi around the year 1984, while he was attending the 1984 Los Angeles Science Fiction World Convention. Impressed by the costumed fans, he wrote a report published in Japanese science fiction magazines, using the word “cosplay” to refer to costume play (Xie, 2005:52). As a short term for the words “costume play”, cosplay is simply considered as a role play in which participators dress up like famous fictional characters. Figures from animation, comic and games, in short, the “ACG,” are the main sources of those fictional characters (Kelts, 2006:151).

But the definition of this term varies from different perspectives. While people normally think of a broader idea that cosplay is anyone dressing up in the particular costume and acting like famous characters such as Superman or Marvel heroes, the core players of cosplay, who are also called as “cosplayers” or “cosers”, believe that cosplay is the realization of a fictional character, which means that cosplay brings the fictional character alive from the virtual world to this real world through a living human body (Xu,2008). A coser from Hangzhou, called “thirteen”, explained the difference between cosplayers’ and normal audiences’ opinions on cosplay: “even some random people put on an emperor’s costume, he’s still not an emperor within, since he has no soul to match”.

1.2 Research problems and purpose

As a popular activity that combine ACG and fascinating costumes, cosplay has drawn people’s, especially Chinese youth’s attention, and has got a significant influence among them. Young cosplayers devote a lot of money to the activity. According to my interviewees, the most expensive costume, a self-made armor from the cartoon

“Saint Seiya”, cost more than 70,000 yuan.¹ During the last decade, cosplay has developed dramatically in China and local cosplayers claim that China has the best cosplay shows in the world (Wan,2010:E24). The research mainly aims to examine the different forms of cosplay in Japan and in China, and their unique characteristics which gather so much attention, popularity, and also ebullient debates. By portraying the situation of Chinese cosplay, the first part of the research will provide a general picture about the cosplay and explain details about the phenomenon.

The second purpose of the research is to contribute to the study of how cosplay is part of young people’s identity formation and a form of self-expression. In China group performing shows are more common than individual activities which is the case in Japan. Though the cosplay is one kind of non-profit voluntary activity, and the association is non-official in China, fans are eager to join in cosplayers’ association and become a coser. They are willing to spend money and devote their spare time to this activity. As a unique phenomena in China, the birth of such organization implies a simply fact that the cosplayers share common interests and identity(Zhang, 2005). The second part of the research try to explain why Chinese young fans devote themselves to these groups and what kind of emotional satisfaction they get from this. The study will shed light on a cultural phenomena and its societal dimension, and will explore such issues as subculture versus mainstream culture, globalization and local cultures, individual and group identities. The study will furthermore enable us to understand the values and aspirations of young Chinese and how they negotiate self and identity in a global market economy.

1.3 Hypothesis and research questions

It is an obvious fact that cosplay is a byproduct of the ACG industry, and it grew to a position of popular culture and youth culture within a decade (Zhang,2005). Two aspects of popular culture will be examined in the research. The first one relates to the

¹ From interviewee, the “Principal” from ”304” association

form and idea of cosplay. Since cosplay was born in Japan, and then transported to China, the product was somehow refilled with the local concept and form. It eventually becomes a product that shows how traditional values and modern culture merge. The second part is that the cosplayers' association represents not only the cosplayers' personal identity, but also their common values and needs. The emergence of such groups reflects traditional ways to create a collective "sense of belonging" and can also be seen as an attempt by young people to organize themselves against the control and pressure from authority such as the state, or parents. (Zhang,2005).

The core questions in the research related to youth and pop culture are: Why is cosplay so popular among the young generation in China? Three sub questions will explore this in more detail

- a. What is the general definition and form of cosplay? What are the special characteristics of Cosplay in China?
- b. What do these unique characteristics of cosplay represent?
- c. What makes it possible for cosplay to become popular in China?

Related to the issue of social or group identity formation and the cosplayers' organizations, the key question will be: Why is China the only country that has established exclusive cosplayers' associations which only pick ACG fans? There are also some sub questions:

- a. What is a cosplayers' association? And how were they established?
- b. What drives cosplayers to participate and devote themselves in such non-official and unregistered organizations?
- c. Do they really create a shared identity? Does this identity challenge traditional values or mainstream culture? What are young people expressing through such organizations?

The hypotheses based on literature reading and fieldwork is that cosplay culture in

China has developed some unique features. It is a hybridization of global culture and shaped by the specific social characteristics of youth life in contemporary China. In other words, it is a production of glocalization(Zhang,2005). There is also a local conflict between mainstream majority culture and minority culture in China, and cosplay culture and associations can be said to belong to the latter (Chen,2007). With the shared demands and interests, cosplay fans shape their identity as cosplayers and gain self-esteem within such organizations.

1. 4 Research design and methods

Due to special characteristics of cosplay as both youth and pop culture, this research will mainly use qualitative methods such as interviews and focus group interviews. Since the cosplay phenomenon developed from Japanese ACG which was imported to China since the late 1980's, it is almost natural that both cosplayers and audiences are youngsters. And since there are cosplayers' associations which were founded by those young people, it was somehow easy to find and follow those participators through the special social network. As one of my interviewee, Xiaomu claimed, "There is hardly any cosplayer who plays cosplay individually", the culture phenomenon itself naturally narrowed down the research targets to members of cosplayers' associations. Furthermore, since modern media, the internet, was the main medium for this phenomenon to diffuse the influence, comparing to youngsters from less developed rural areas, young people from urban areas had more opportunities to have any idea about this culture phenomenon, to get involved in cosplay activities, and to participate in the associations. Considering the fact mentioned above, the research would mainly focus on urban cosplayers, especially those association members.

Through my former experience and social network, the fieldwork was conducted in two different cities: Shanghai and Hangzhou. Shanghai is one of the biggest and most globalized cities in China, while it is also the city where one of the two largest cosplay exhibitions "China joy- Cosplay carnival" was held in recent years(Zhong,2007:16). I conducted fieldwork in Shanghai while at Fudan university,

where I had two local mentors, Professor Pan and Professor Shen. The reason why I chose Hangzhou as the other field work spot, is that Hangzhou was one of the first 9 ACG industry bases in China². And due to the local government's supportive attitude towards ACG, Hangzhou had the most cosplayers' associations³, and meanwhile, it was the city where the other biggest cosplay exhibition, the national cosplay competition, was held⁴. Since I had certain connection with some of those associations in Hangzhou, especially with one of the biggest cosplayers' associations in China, the "304", which has more than 500 members, the field work was carried out smoothly and invaluable interviews were done within a short time.

The whole field work process was mainly based on both participatory observation and interviews. I attended the last "China Joy – Cosplay carnival" in Shanghai, during July 2009, and spent one month in Hangzhou doing intensive interviews with cosplayers and other interviewees. On the participation aspect, attending the "China Joy" show gave me a direct first impression about the whole process of carrying out a show. And during my stay in Hangzhou, the close observation on how cosplayers perform, how they spend their time within the association and how they start their recruitment also helped me understand the phenomenon. Since I had been a cosplayer as an undergraduate student at university, the sense of distance between interviewer and interviewee was somehow reduced by both shared topics and points of views, and in that case, the conversations between us also became more casual, which led to the result that these cosplayers invited me to participate in their performances, other activities and dinner parties. Thus, after taking a close and direct look at them and their group activities, the feedback could be reliable since there was hardly any time and room for the interviewees to pretend their improvisational reaction. As somewhat

² <http://www.chinanim.com/index.php?N=baseinfo&id=75>, *Zhongguo donghua wang*(China animation.com), 2008, "*Quanguo 15 jia guojia donghua chanye jidi jieshao*" (Introduction of 15 national animation and comic industry bases), Jul.31st

³ From the interviewee, the "Principal" from "304" association.

⁴ <http://www.cicaf.com/root2.0/Default.aspx>, *zhongguo guoji dongman jie* (Chinese International ACG festival), official website

of an insider myself cultural and social misunderstandings during the conversations were significantly reduced.

The primary data of the research mainly came from interviews. 14 in-depth interviews were conducted face to face while three interviews were done through online chat. The questions were mostly open-ended questions, and thus those spontaneous and explorative answers from my interviewees honestly represent their actual views. With a non-judgmental attitude, the interviews were mainly conducted in the form of a casual talk, which led to spontaneous feedback and answers. The core questions of the interviews centered around issues such as, “What is cosplay in China?” and “Why is it so fun that you decided to join a cosplay association?” The aim was to try to discover the inner motivations of those interviewees and find out the key points explaining why cosplay had a tremendous development in China and why the cosplay association itself was so popular. Follow-up questions were asked during each of the interviews: “What is the motivation for you to participate in cosplay?” “Why do you choose certain characters?” “What is the process of a whole cosplay show?” “Why is there hardly any individual cosplayers?” and so on.

Among all the 15 interviewees in Hangzhou, there were six females. And eleven interviewees were cosplayers, while nine of them were from Hangzhou the “304”. In order to get information and different views from other people, the rest six interviewees were not cosers. One female interviewee, who participated in the China joy in Shanghai, was an ordinary girl. She admitted that she didn’t know much about cosplay and went to the China joy exhibition just to be the company of her friend, a ACG fan. Thus, her friend became another interviewee of mine. She was a Japanese ACG fan, but didn’t have any experiences about cosplay. The other three interviewees were ACG fans with certain experiences about cosplay. All the interviews except one, were born in the 1980’s, in other words, they belong to the “post-1980’s generation”. While 12 of them are currently university students, 4 interviewees had already graduated from university. The only one interviewee born before 1980, was a mother

whose son participates in cosplay association.

While the interview offered the primary data for the research, additional sources of data included cosplayers' blogs, online chat forums and cosplayers' magazines which provided significant information. Several previous academic works related to the topic, cosplay in China, also enlightened and led me to focus on certain aspects, such as the driven power of this phenomenon, the origins of cosplay.

1.5. Thesis disposition

The study begins with an examination and general information about cosplay in its country of origin, Japan. The concepts of cosplay, along with its development in the globalized context, are also discussed in this chapter. Furthermore, since it was a byproduct of ACG industry, the second step is discussing the local ACG industry in China, its policy change and the current situation which lead to the development of local cosplay. The next part of the thesis concentrated on Chinese cosplay and its unique associations, which gather youngsters born in the 1980s. Through the case study of a typical cosplayers association, the "304", the identity of those cosplayers are examined and the culture phenomenon analyzed in more depth.

2. Popular culture and Chinese youth culture

2.1 Popular culture: Theories and current research

The pop culture includes diverse forms of cultural production and consumption. In the contemporary Chinese context, while it covers a wide range of forms such as music, film, literature and all kinds of plays, it also refers to both mass culture and sub-culture, for example cosplay, and homosexual culture. Tom Gold puts it like this when trying to sum up what popular culture means:

"I use 'popular culture' to refer cultural products produced for the mass market, which reflect market-determined popular taste and are for enjoyment. This is in contrast to more elite or high culture which has a much narrower appeal and poses more of an

intellectual challenge to the consumer. It is also in contrast to political contrived directed culture ”(Gold 1993:908)

He thus emphasizes that comparing to the high or elite culture, pop culture has a much broader appeal and acceptance for consumers. For its basic character of market-driven taste, the pop culture also is unofficial culture that is in contrast to political contrived directed culture.

In the book “Pop china”, the author Kevin Latham has raised the idea of China’s pop culture that it “consisted of ideas, beliefs and practices that have origins at least partially independent of the state. It includes any kind of culture that has its origin in the social side of the tension between state and society” (Latham,2007:29). And the author also follows Gold’s concept of pop culture, develops it to identify two key points within the concept, as the market and the mass. While the market means those potential consumers, he implies that as a huge country which has a long and significant history, China has historical and political connotations that combine both mass and traditional culture. According to the author, one example represents this connotation: the Chinese word “*Dazhong*”, which means the mass, still has the connotations of socialism, workers and peasants(Latham, 2007:28). But after 1980’s, things change with Deng’s “open door ” policy in China, the propaganda from the state no longer dominates the culture aspects. With more tolerance on the media control, the market and the mass to some extent have their freedom on choosing their favorites, which means the ideological freedom makes it possible for pop culture in China to grow.

According to Anthony Y.H. Fung, pop culture is much more than a trivial mass culture which only had an entertaining function(Fung, 2008:26). It also has seriousness vis-à-vis critical and political contemplations in relation to the state and civic society” (Modleski, 1986). And the mass production of culture which involves the most crudely conceived capitalism results in circulation of symbolic meaning and ideology (Garnham, 1990:155). Fung implies that the pop culture, which is invented

by the history and society, not only represents discourses and the ideologies of that society, but also portrays the citizens' preferences and desires. Meanwhile, the history and the society also "manufactures, manipulates, and distorts popular culture, politically as sources of nationalism, socially as representation of social relations in daily life, economically as products of transnational corporations and through the forces of the political economy of globalization"(Fung, 2008:25). Through certain process, the political implications are particularly noticeable in a nation's popular culture.

2.2 Pop culture in China: state-market relationship

According to Fung's opinion, when a new form of culture and cultural production enters into a state, normally the standard criteria for those foreign culture would mainly depend more on market and economic considerations, rather than any political rationality and ideology(Fung,2008:27). But in China, due to the different political and social condition, there might be another story. "Understanding Chinese popular culture very often requires careful attention to how precisely the state is involved in and related to forms of social and cultural activity and practices. Popular culture does not exist outside of or in contrast to the state but very often in a constant and evolving dialogue with it."(Latham,2007:33) Fung has his argument that authoritarian regimes may often have a higher political principle over economic interest. Before 1980's, China was one case. During period of pre-1980, the state institutionalized their communism ideology to dictate the economy and any other aspects. (Fung,2008:32). Local cultural products were higher restricted. Only 8 model dramas were allowed to be shown in the whole nation's theatres, and people looked like the duplicate of each other since they all dressed in same clothes. With its ideology, the state ignored the market demands.

This situation changed from the early 1980's when the economic reforms started. There was a relaxation of the political climate and reduction of political intervention in people's daily life at the same time that people's disposable income increased and

they came to have more leisure time(Latham,2007:15). Non-political cultural consumption such as popular love songs, more entertaining TV programs, clearly reflects the preference and desire of the Chinese people. Thus, new and diverse consumption patterns and consumer behaviors developed which were the opposite of the politically contrived directed culture. The emergence of popular culture in other words implied greater individualism and freedom of choice in China.

Since cosplay is one kind of pop culture, a Chinese sociologist, Xu Yi, describes cosplay as a subculture from the main ACG culture, which is local youngsters' choice, in his thesis "The Fashion of Cosplay and Its Influence on youth". Xu also mentions this cultural transportation of cosplay in China, and he shares the same point with Tom Gold that the existing popular culture in a realm of society is often opposed to the state, and demanded by the mass. Comparing to the tradition bias such as "cartoon was just about fairy tales for the kids"(Xu, 2008) that represents social conservative, working to uphold standards of law and other that are consistent with the status quo, Japanese pop culture is clearly much easier for audience, especially younger generations to accept. Even under the situation that China has its open-door policy from the late 1980's, the most rational strategy was to get approval of the state in order to minimize the conflicts. Thus, this culture may be rearranged and restructure into a new form which was more suitable for both local needs and the political principle.

2.3 Popular culture and globalization

The book *Japanamerica* explains how Japanese culture "invaded" the U.S.A and describes the significance of cosplay culture as a part of Japanese pop culture. The book also emphasizes the recent success of Japanese intellectual property, as well as the exported cultural ideas. "They clearly suggested that others are appreciative as well. Young Japanese are especially aware that people outside their country can be hooked on cultural ideas"(Kelts,2006:121). And cosplay culture is another successful example in other countries beside Japan. In the book, the author also points out the

fact that the Japanese culture, along with the Japanese value and ideas it represents, is widely accepted by people in other countries(Kelts, 2006:154). The messages behind this culture are different comparing to the local tradition, and they manage to bear a seeds of significant shifts in the meaning and structure of that long-running genre of popular culture. TV series, soap operas, music and ACG, those cultural products keep exposing Japanese culture to the rest of the world.

While Kelts's idea is mainly about the culture product itself in the globalization process, Fung concentrates more on the relationship between the nations and globalization. Imported culture and local ones are not completely "distinct, separated and opposing realities"(Ang,1996:153) and sometimes the national and the global ones have a symbiotic relationship. According to this understanding, Chinese Communism and global capitalism are no longer enemies(Fung, 2008:31). There is a convergence between local and global cultural forms in the sense that global capital and culture are being localized in various ways.

2.4 Youth culture: China's "post-1980 generation"

With the transportation of the cultural products, it is obvious that those cultural ideas spread and grow in local people's hearts. Zhang Lei, a researcher from Central China Normal university, studies Chinese ACG fans. He argues that due to the ignorance of ACG industry and the lack of local ACG productions in the 1980's, make it possible for imported Japanese ones to occupy the whole market. Based on the open-door policy, Japanese animation, comic and games have rushed into local children's lives and become the company of this generation(Zhang,2005). Due to this situation, Zhang argues that the imported ACG culture has rooted in the young generation's hearts, and young people born since the 80's, they share the same childhood interests and memories. By their teenage they become strong Japanese ACG fans and acquire a special identity and group mentality.

According to Zhang's argument, the poor economic condition in China has somehow

limited the growth of local ACG industry. Japanese animations are imported to China, masterpieces such as “Dragon ball”, “Sailor Moon” or “Doraemon” (Schilling,1997:40), not only fulfill Chinese kids’ great demand of entertaining, but also present them with new themes such as love, youth power and sexual power, which are more close to audiences’ daily lives. Taking the manga “Sailor moon” as an example, the main character, the sailor moon, she has inherited Clark Kent’s tradition, to enact the transformation from human to superheroes. But unlike superman stories which concentrates on portraying a superhero who is capable of saving the whole world every day, the “Sailor moon” mostly represents an image of a ordinary female high-school girl who occasionally fight against evil. In other words, for Japanese fictional roles, the human character is more real. Their life may also be filled with everyday pleasantries of shopping, or playing video games.(Allison,2000:260). And comparing to those Japanese masterpieces, the lack of domestic products in the ACG industry obviously give Japanese pop culture a chance to plant their seeds in Chinese youngsters’ hearts. Thus, as the shared memory of those Chinese youngsters, Japanese pop culture has shown its unique significance as the basic foundation for those youngsters to create a Japanese ACG fan group, a social group that connect more of those young fans(Zhang,2005). And since cosplay culture is a byproduct of the Japanese ACG culture, thus cosplayers are also a part of Japanese ACG fan group. Zhang’s study on emergence of the Japanese ACG fans group provides enough background, and thus contributed to the study on how cosplayers’ association was born.

Stanley Rosen has described who Chinese youth born in the 1980’s are characterized as the “me generation” by the media, and criticized for being “reliant and rebellious, cynical and pragmatic, self-centered and equality-obsessed”(Rosen,2009:360). He believes that the global trend has made those youngsters very international, and also very pragmatic, materialistic, largely concerned with living the good life and making money. But at the same time, he also suggests that those youngsters have their unique character that “desperate to believe in something and very willing to make sacrifices

if they are persuaded that the cause is just.”(Rosen,2009:361) Thus, when those youngster try to devote themselves into TV, operas or video games, they become the first generation of couch potatoes, or maybe addict to popular culture such as online games, Hollywood movies. And of course, for those youngsters, cosplay is one of those options.

The pressure and the criticism which the “post-1980s generation” have suffered are much more than this. In 1979, Chinese government established the “one child” policy as a basic principle to control the growing population. The policy has meant that most urban children today grow up in one-child families. People even call those child without any siblings as “ little emperor ”, because they are the center of the family, who enjoys care and love from other elder family members. According to survey Fung used in his article, 61.4% of elder people consider those post-1980s generation as “always consider themselves as center of attention”(Fung, 2010:164). Media also portray the generation as self-center, vulnerable and less social. Expectations from the family also add burdens on their shoulders. As the only child in the family, while enjoying the overwhelming love from other family members, they also suffer the pressure brought by their elders. While the mainstream values force them to follow the rules, post-1980s generation may go through a rebellious phase and sense a need to find out their own identity and to express themselves. Keenly realizing what the youngsters are capable of as shown in the Tianmen Square protests, the state understands that the implication of youngsters’ community which based on “young people’s fashioning of selfhood, culture identity and identification taken as a collectivity” can be influential(Fung,2009:289). Thus, instead of causing problems on the political domain, the state by all means channels young generation’s passion, along with the potential problems, to the cultural domain, since that is the rational strategy for the government to reduce the risk of raising political opposition and public disorder. And meanwhile, the state’s recognition of profit they may gain from the cultural domains also stimulates the government to divert young generation’s attention from social issues such as high housing prices, officials’ corruption, low

income, to cultural industries. And thus, for the state, cosplay, which is largely related to the ACG industry, is also an answer.

Under social circumstances like this, a sociology master student, Chen Lu argues that with the pressure, sometimes even the oppression from the society, young ACG fans and cosplayers, they gradually find each other and thus create their own organization in his master thesis. In other words, mainstream value pushed those cosplayers to find their cultural identity and to create certain organizations. (Chen,2007). Another researcher, Luo Yi, points out that the characters of cosplay itself represents the internal reasons for the emergence of cosplayers' association in his master thesis. He assumes that the reason why youngsters has the tendency to chase pop culture can be divided into two parts. One is that people would imitated the majority in order to match for the bigger atmosphere, while the other one is that meanwhile, individual person would like to be someone unique(Luo,2006). And the cosplay group fulfills both desires by providing those fans a community in which they satisfy themselves. The core activity of such group gives fans a chance to achieve their value, discover inner identity and express their desire, while the form of such group gathers those fans together, providing those fans a sense of belonging. To some extent, the cosplayers association is somehow an exclusive community, a cultural shelter for those young generations to avoid the pressure for mainstream society and reality, to gain their own self-esteem and find their company who shared same identity(Luo, 2006).

3. Cosplay and its development: Japanese origin and global impact

3.1.General information

The word “Cosplay” is a portmanteau word that combines both elements “costume” and “play” together. While “Play” represents that it is one sort of performing activity, “costume” implies that people need particular outfits and accessories to be a specific character. The predecessor of the cosplay is the role play, which also needs specific costumes to achieve. The major differences between those two performing arts are the

origins and sources which the play represents. For cosplay activity, the sources are mainly modern animations, comic and video games, especially Japanese ones(Xie,2007:52).

Modern cosplay activity was born in Japan during the 1980's. During those early years, with the fast growing economy, the entertainment industries, including the animation, comic and games industry, had come to their boosting development(Xu,2008). Related exhibitions were held. During those exhibitions, some Japanese ACG fans, they voluntarily dressed up in their self-made costumes, looking exactly like their beloved characters from the ACG products and thus drew people's attention. This non-official action soon became popular among fans, since it was a convenient way to gain attention and to express their love about the fictional role. Several years later, in the year 1984, the term "cosplay" was created by Nobuyuki Takahashi during his visit to the Los Angeles Science Fiction World Convention (Xie,2007:53).

The cosplay is the byproduct from ACG, people who do cosplay activities are also fans of ACG products, and they are called cosers, or cosplayers. In their cosplay activities, they utilize same costume, appearances, poses, items and action to recreate the particular fictional character from the target sources, to imitate that role and its related scene. Through those processes, those ACG fans manage to express their feeling about the original masterpiece and love for a certain character. In the process of cosplay, a culture phenomenon, participators imply not only the fact that they are fans of cosplay and its related ACG productions, but also reveal the core concept of such activity as a unique cultural symbol. The products of Japanese cosplay, are mainly pictures, like example below:



Photo 1 and 2: the original piece and the cosplay product

3.2 The source of cosplay: ACG in Japan

The essential of cosplay has determined that for cosplay activities, there should be an original source. Since cosplay was the byproduct of Japanese ACG industry, it is obvious that Japan's fascinating ACG product is that source. It can be classified into three kinds, one for boys, another one for girls, while the rest are for adults. Those ones for the boys concentrate their topics mainly on fighting or sports, which emphasize their themes of "making hard efforts", "cherishing the friendship" and "achieving the victory"(Izawa,2000:144). The positive themes, with various storylines and charming characters, are always attractive to young males below 18. Masterpieces such as the fighting manga "Saint Seiya", or basketball theme "Slam dunk" were nationally popular hits that encouraged young boys and became their shared memory(Zhang,2005).

Those ones for the girls are a different story. Comparing to ones for boys, their target group are girls under 18. Thus, the themes are mainly about love, fashion, and romances, while the topics are mostly about fairy tales, or common daily lives. And

⁵ Pictures from an interviewee, *Huangfu Weigang*, a male coser in Hangzhou

unlike those boys' rough fight or exciting adventure, to attract girls and to meet their needs, the portraying style of girls ACG is somehow more delicate, tender and feminine. Since those ones which aim on girls are closer to the real life, they can easily be recomposed into real person TV series, and become another kind of blast among youngsters(Allison,2000:264).

The rest are for adults above the age of 18. Those products' themes and topics can be varied according to their greater tolerance. More mature life experiences and philosophy are usually represented and discussed in those products. And some of them also can be easily recomposed into real person TV series. Fifteen years ago, the famous comic based TV series "Tokyo love story" was a huge success and a perfect example of this category⁶.

As Japanese animation, comic and video games are the most fascinating cultural products they can ever provided to the whole world, it has combined all most every "cool" aspects in life, sexual power, superhero's ultimate power, fantasy dreams from childhood, those attractive characteristics can be easily found in those ACG: "Sailor moon" stands for the women's sexual power while the huge superhero Ultraman, human-being's responsible friend, represents the Superhero's unstoppable power(Schilling,1997:279). And while "hello kitty" attracts young girls' attention with its cute appearance, Doraemon is known by the entire world for its endless powerful tools from future that can fulfill every dream, every fantasy that you can ever dream of. Thus, due to the diversity, they manage to provide almost infinite topics and roles for fans to imitate, in other words, to cosplay(Zhang,2005).

3.3 Being cool and looking good: The aesthetics and visuals of cosplay

Based on the diverse categories of ACG products, cosplay, the byproducts of ACG culture, and meanwhile the condensation of ACG industry, also represents different

⁶ From interviewee, "13" from "304" association

images and characters.

From the very beginning, one of the main purposes for cosers dressing up as fictional roles were to draw people's visual attention. Based on the visual sense, since the discourse of such ACG industry and its byproducts are all creatures from this period of visual culture. The pursuit of beauty in the visualization is the main content and the goal of the cosplay activity⁷. Comparing to other culture and their inner meaning, in cosplay culture, the outside appearance is much more significant than the inner value. Or in other words, during the cosplay, the appearance equals its inner value since they are almost the same thing here in this very activity. To some extent, fans' original passion for cosplay is based on the pursuit of beauty. The positive attitudes for visual culture have created an atmosphere that extends people's interest to re-create an external image. And the cosplay provides people the opportunity to become someone they want to be.

And as mentioned before, the styles of Japanese ACG are mainly diverse, fantastic and delicate, in other words, it was a "cool" style. The standard of "cool", just like the fashion, it may change from time to time. And here it is mainly a flexible standard which implies ACG characters' elements such as charming appearance, great charisma, and unique personality. Since almost every character in the ACG productions is cool, good looking in some way, and they naturally become the perfect objects and the sources of cosplay. Thus, even the cool standard is just like the fashion, changing from gothic style to asexual aesthetic, from ethical style to modern outfit, the main principle remains: While girls tend to choose those ones as idols, or sexy sisters, guys also have a clear tendency to choose handsome, mature samurai. And with the change of fashion, for a while, everyone felt honorable to dress as an "cool" asexual figure. But there is hardly anyone who would choose ugly characters to cos, and there is hardly any ugly main roles in Japanese ACG actually. Unlike

⁷ From interviewee, Sis "*Manman*", from "304"

western style ACG, even the definite villains in Japanese ACG are often very charming, sometimes even more attractive than the heroes.

And due to its specific process, the ordinary method to record a cosplay activity, and its basic product, or the expression, the medium of cosplay, is taking photos. In order to re-create the exact, at least, the similar environment background as the original scene, those cosers would try their best to find the perfect spots. If the original piece is about middle center of Europe, then they will find a European style park where they take pictures. Until now, static photo pictures are still the most traditional and major outcome of cosplay.

3.4 Exported culture and cosplay development abroad

With the coming wave of globalization, different aspects are influenced by this unstoppable process. Cultural phenomenon is also blooming under such environment. From the 1980's, any foreigner who had access to Japanese cultural products, such as animation, comic, video games, or even some kinds of newly created festivals, they can sense the unique characters within those existences, which emphasized that fact "this is Japanese" again and again(Kelts, 2006:123). Japanese people gradually become aware of the fact that within the flow of globalization, Japanese pop can attract people from other countries. Previous success on exporting material products such as Sony walkman, Honda cars and Sushi, have also increased Japanese people's confidence that exporting their intellectual products will be another hit in other countries(Kelts, 2006:133). They are right about this. After several years of exporting their cultural products, those intellectual properties which use to be domestic, for example, pop idols, fashion costumes, ACG, and even pornography, they manage to explore new uncharted territories(Zhang, 2005). In 2005, ACG industry became the third largest industry in Japan, and meanwhile, Japan has become the country which exports the most culture products in the world(Zhang, 2005:E13)

Taking the United States as an example, according to American journalist, Douglas

McGray, Japan's "gross national cool" has made deep inroads into American culture(Kelts,2006:151). In the US, Japanese animation is a huge success which grow at a rapid speed. In the early digital age, this growth had not only given Japan its first fully functional experience of being an exporter of intellectual property, but also made its eyes wide open to a new world of opportunity. According to Douglas' idea that even Japan is "usually written off by the rest of the world as aggravatingly insular", and all they have about their cultural is basically tiny and weather-battered(Kelts,2006:152), it is ironic that once Japanese people have a clear understanding of the significance of imagination, ideas and asymmetric thinking, their culture's influence is no longer limited only within their own island.

Thus, with the wide spreading of Japanese ACG industry and its products all over the world, as their byproduct, cosplay also becomes popular. Since the development of ACG industries is a unstoppable one which gives continuous birth of charming characters, it keeps providing sources and motivates the development of cosplay activity. Nowadays, cosplay has grown to a position that is not only a byproduct, but also one kind of pop culture which represents both popularity and value.

And the globalization process also brings more changes to cosplay, makes it much more than just merely pictures. Since 2003, Aichi Television Broadcasting was sponsor to hold an annual event called "the world cosplay summit " which attracted participators from all over the world⁸, with the purpose of promoting the ACG culture and building up friendship with fans from other countries. And later on, with the support from the government, it becomes the largest international cosplay event in the whole world, and is currently much more than a commercial exhibition⁹. Thus, from Japan, the original place where cosplay was born, with the world's largest ACG industry and the consuming market as its backup force, cosplay culture grows to a

⁸ <http://www.tv-aichi.co.jp/wcs/e/what/index.html>, World cosplay summit, official page

⁹ <http://www.tv-aichi.co.jp/wcs/e/what/index.html>, World cosplay summit, official page

worldwide thing. And furthermore, stereotype about participators of cosplay is broken by the current situation. College-aged males are no longer the main part of the mass that are interested in cosplay culture(Kelts, 2006:153). Demographic figures have changed at current animation and comic exhibitions: the percentages of different gender cosplayers are almost equal, and close to the normal gender ethnic distribution. Since the essential characteristic is to make fantasies come to life, there is hardly any pressure for people to accept. After the culture transportation, the cosplay culture, along with other Japanese pop culture, has gained an established status.

3.5 The influence of Internet during the process

Giving birth to the outburst of new techniques in major aspects of people's daily life, the globalization process influences a large part of modern people's lives in various means, including the birth of new media, the internet. With the fast development of the communication and media, the internet manages to connect people from all parts of the globe. Thus, it also had helped spreading the cosplay culture from a domestic phenomena to a worldwide thing.

China, as a country that has the world's largest population, has 384 million netizens until the end of 2009. 28.9% of the total population are netizens who spent 18.7 hours per week surfing on the internet. Among Chinese teenagers, there are 195 million netizens. (CNNIC, 2010:10) With its unique characters of real time interaction and communication, more and more people, especially youngsters, are becoming netizens chasing various information all the time. Beyond the number of users, the new technique also has its great effect on others aspects. Since everyone who gets free access to internet has his freedom to share his or her own idea and information, the internet becomes an open forum sharing information that differs from local domestic media. (Pavik, 1998: 320) And for youngsters, popular topics always draw their attention, and cosplay is one of them.

Since the major outcome of the cosplay is photo picture from fans who are often

amateurs on photograph, the traditional media such as magazine and newspapers somehow limits the development of cosplay. And thus the scale of cosplay often remains an unusual individual thing until the internet was born. In China, the internet provides cosplay fans a platform to present their products, whether image pictures, or video clips, while it also provides them a real time virtual community where they can gather together and communicate with people who share same interests. From the late 1990s, there were blogs, online-chatting room, open or membership forums which allowed cosers to upload their cosplay pictures(Zhang,2005). Their existence also make it much easier for people to get access and understanding to such pop culture. Through those online spaces, fans from everywhere can get to know each other, which has somehow broken down the invisible limitation, or even the national boundary, since there is no boundary online. Taking China's cosplayers as an example, according to their memory, the first time they heard the word "cosplay" was from students who studied in Japan through online chat, and the first time they got to know such activity was also from Japanese cosplayers webpage. With the similar background, during the wave of globalization, the transportation of cosplay idea to other countries, like America, share the similar story with China.

Taking China as an example, after realizing the great potential market in the ACG industry, local government announced regulations to limited foreign ACG and to encourage the local industry(Xu & Luo,2008:70). But the internet made the limitation futile, since it is still easy for those cosers to have free access to Japanese ACG products through the net. Internet has eliminated the territory disparity and ensures that more and more youngsters get involved in the cosplay culture. According to local interviewees' idea, the internet makes it possible for fans from different parts of the states to share an equal access to the latest ACG information, which meant that the original sources of cosplay culture would not suddenly sink under the government regulation and restriction. And furthermore, the netizens in China, has built all kinds of website, and open forum to show their photos, recruit more fans, or discuss their

products. In China, such websites like “China cos net”¹⁰, or some associations’ websites, like 304’s “red city”¹¹, contain thousands of pictures to represent their activities. Famous cosers, like “the No.1 coser in China” *Huangshan*, or members in the “304”, they all have their own spaces, and even fans. Somehow, a virtual community of cosplay was born on the internet. And down below is the picture from *Huangshan*’s personal page, his official forum¹²:

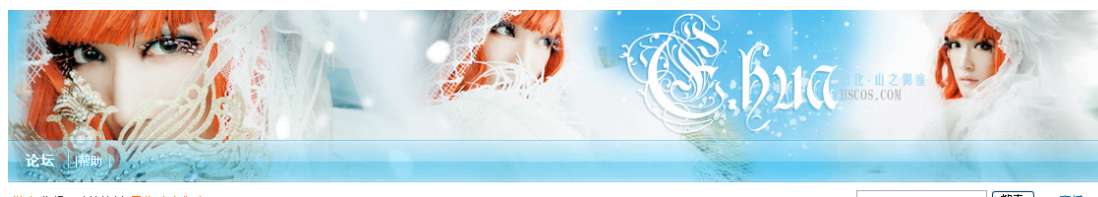


Photo 3: the background picture of Huangshan’s webpage

4. ACG industry in China

4.1. Open-door policy from the 1980’s: import of Japanese ACG

After the cultural revolution period back in the 1970’s, the economic reforms forced Chinese people to concentrate more on the economy rather than the culture(Latham,2007:33). Within the reform era, as the ACG industry in China were somehow ignored by the masses, the development in the local industry declined(Zhang,2005). The whole industry was occupied by three stated own factories, and the investment into the industry could barely compare with the international average. Due to the bias that the animation is only for kids below 10, certain problems remain in the production process of animation and comic, for example, the designs of the characters are too childish and naïve, the lack of action figure and the beautiful static background(Zhang,2005). And the most important issue among those problems is that the topics and themes only concentrate on education and are limited as the educational material which has a cartoon cover. Thus, the Chinese ACG products are totally no match for both the market demand and children’s interests. The whole

¹⁰ <http://www.chinacos.net/>

¹¹ <http://www.hz304.com/>, Red city, 304’s website

¹² <http://hscos.com/>, Cosplayer *Huangshan*’s webpage

industry was in a period of stagnation.

And with the absence of local ACG production, the open-door policy had changed the situation in the ACG industry. From the late 1980's, through both government import and the illegal private business, Japanese ACG products rushed into Chinese market. "Saint Seiya", "Doraemon", "The Flower Child Lunlun", "Pretty Soldier Sailor Moon", once those masterpiece came into local kids' sight, they easily occupied their minds and rooted deeply in the young generation's hearts. Comparing to the childish local products, Japanese ACG products has much wider themes and topics that represent other kinds of lifestyles and fantastic dreams or illusions which attract huge amount of people since the late 1980's(Chen,2007). Realizing the potential market needs, local television stations imported animations from Japan, while private business started to pirate comic copies of Japanese ACG productions in the early 1990's. As mentioned above, Japanese ACG products, which have different styles, were aimed for various groups of local audiences and occupied more than 90 percent of the market share soon. (Zhang, 2005) Growing up with those various kinds of Japanese ACG products, local young generations who were born from late 1980's have a shared memory of animation and comic. According to a recent survey, "the top 20 favorite cartoon character among Chinese kids", 19 of those 20 characters are from foreign animations. And even "monkey king", the only local one, maybe is referring to "*Sun Wukong*", the hero who shares the same name with "monkey king" from the most popular Japanese manga "Dragon ball"(Zhong,2007:16).

4.2. The awareness of local market: regulation and restriction

With fast development on the economy, ACG industry are widely accepted globally as a growing industry for couple of years. Taking the year 2002 as an example, the entire global production value of this industry was 26.8 billion. In the next year, the figure became 31 billion. Thanks to the early realization how significance this industry could be, Japan is in a leading position. It had an average production value, over 9 billion from its ACG(Zhang, 2005:E13). The import value from this industry

was four times than its steel industry. The other countries, such as America, Korea, also realized the potential market power of this industry. Now, the United State has an annual 5 billion production value in the related industry. The ACG culture and its related productions become a main tendency in the global market.

Under this circumstance, China could no longer stay the same. The government realized the market potential, and tried several methods to stimulate the development of local industry, to awaken it from sleeping. On April 20th, 2004, State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television announced “*Guangyu fazhan woguo shiying donghua chanye de ruogan yijian*”, (Several points related to developing China’s animation industry), encouraging private companies to invest in this industry, and forcing local TV channels to increase both the amount of animations programs and local animation products(Xu & Luo,2008:70). The regulation has emphasized that among all animation programs, local ones should occupy at least 60% share. Since then, related regulations and principles emerges continuously. And thus, the year 2004 is regarded as the start of local ACG industry. In 2006, State Council of the People's Republic of China submitted a joint proposal from 10 departments, the “*Guangyu tuidong woguo dongman chanye fazhan de ruogan yijian*”, (Several related points about developing China’s animation and comic industry) (Xu & Luo,2008:70). Nine cities, including Hangzhou¹³, were titled as the developing bases of ACG industry. The government officially has a positive and supportive attitudes towards this industry instead of the former bias and ignorance.

Based on the facts mentioned above, it is obviously that besides the high passion of Chinese fans and cosplayers, the government policy is also a significant driving power behind this culture upsurge. After realizing the potential market of ACG industry, the State Council of PRC had established a related principle, “*Guanyu*

¹³ <http://www.chinanim.com/index.php?N=baseinfo&id=75>, Zhongguo donghua wang(China animation.com), 2008, “*Quanguo 15 jia guojia donghua chanye jidi jieshao*” (Introduction of 15 national animation and comic industry bases), Jul.31st

tuidong woguo dongman chanye fazhan de ruogan yijian”, “Several related points that develop the domestic animation and comic industry”(Xu & Luo,2008:70), announcing government’s supportive attitude towards the ACG industry and its related activities including cosplay. Several cities’ high-tech districts were cataloged as the developing base for ACG industry. According to the 2006’s report from State Administration for Industry and Commerce, until October of this year, there were 5473 animation and comic related companies and enterprises in 27 provinces and territories. 447 universities had set animation major, which involved 466,000 students, and 1230 universities had founded related major(Xu,2008). Even later, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television had announced regulation and restrictions that foreign animation programs can’t be broadcasted on any channel during the golden time, from 17:00 to 21:00 (Xu & Luo,2008:71). Local ACG channels should broadcast Chinese cartoon during those hours. This regulation officially prohibits foreign ACG, especially Japanese ones, in the local market in a disguised form, in order to protect the domestic ACG industry.

4.3.Golden time for cosplay

The regulation and restriction from the government have ironically helped the wide spread of cosplay in China. Such methods of the stimulation to promote local ACG were somehow in vain, since people can still have access to Japanese ACG through the world wide web, and the lack of related technique, the regulation on the topic, the limited themes and the unspoken bias against the ACG, those reasons again have not only turned Chinese ACG productions humdrum, educational and childish, in other words, boring and unattractive, but also have pushed local audiences to Japanese ones’ side again(Zhang,2005).

And due to the heavy regulation and prejudice about animation and comic, the lack of original animation and comic works remains. Thus, local governments’ concentration and support focus mainly on ACG exhibitions. With the government’s support, As parts of the plans, those exhibitions are also widely held in major cities, spreading the

ACG culture, It somehow grows from a byproduct to the leading actor in China's ACG territory. And instead of the animation and comic masterpieces, the cosplay activities draw the most attention. Nearly every ACG exhibition has its cosplay part or competition. And the level of cosplay activities gradually raises from individual to nationwide. In the year 2005, through fierce local cosplay competition which was combined with the annual ACG exhibition, Hangzhou government had selected four top cosplayers to take part in the biggest international cosplay event, the World Cosplay Summit in Japan(Chen,2008:E5).

Thus, eventually, those positive policies benefit the cosplay and its related associations. Some participators even claims that due to the lack of original products, now the local ACG exhibitions are merely cosplay exhibitions. But this is good news for cosplay culture. The positive attitude towards ACG industry has created the right atmosphere for cosplay to develop. Cosplayers and cosers' associations have a significant progress, growing from unofficial organizations to permitted ones that are always parts of the national ACG exhibitions(Zhao,2006:E3). And since there are hardly any ACG productions, most local ACG store survive on selling cosplay items. Local exhibitions and competitions also have stimulated the forming process of cosplayers associations, since most of the cosplay competitions and exhibitions require the group participation rather than individual participators.

Since 15 cities were set as the ACG industry base, they also became the base of cosplay performances. The cosplay and the cosplayer's community have a boosting development in the mainland China, and their influence spread all over the country. Since Japanese ACG mainly attract elder teenagers, as a pop culture, it gradually become popular among young generation, especially university students, expressing their demands and representing their values.

5. Cosplay in China: activities and associations

5.1. Background and introduction

Although cosplay originated from Japan, for the last decade, it starts to play a significant role among Chinese youngsters. The first cosplay performance happened in Hongkong 1993, a group of novel fans dressed in soldier uniforms which were originated from the fiction novel “*Legend of the Galactic Heroes*”. Five years later, the Hongkong comic association held the first animation and comic exhibition, which involved most of ACG fans and was a milestone for cosplay in Hongkong. The first cosplay show in Taiwan was held in a building called “SAGA World” of Gaoxiong city, on August 27th 1995(Xie,2005:54).

The development of cosplay in mainland China was much later than in Hongkong and Taiwan. There was no concept of cosplay until the year 1998, individual cosplayers showed up in ACG exhibitions(Luo,2006). But with the help of new-born media, the internet, the influence of cosplay from nearby territories such as Hongkong and Taiwan, has accelerated the developing process in mainland China. After only two years, the first national cosplay competition was held in Beijing. And other metropolis like Shanghai, Guangzhou and Wuhan also started their tradition to hold annual ACG exhibition and cosplay competition. The China joy exhibition is now the third largest ACG exhibition, and the largest cosplay competition in the world. In Shanghai, during the year 2005, there were 11 registered public ACG exhibitions from January to March(Xu,2008).

5.2. Local change of cosplay concept

After cosplay has traveled to China with the globalization process, it soon became popular among young people for its fancy appearance and visual attraction. But gradually, local circumstances and elements has changed the original cosplay into a new performing activity in several aspects.

The original meaning of cosplay is to re-create the exact scene in the original ACG products. Cosplayers try to make the same costume as the fictional characters and

perform the fictional characters' behavior. In that case, the cosplayers are the bridge that connect both fiction and reality, the agent who make the fictional scene real. Through this performing activity, the cosplayers are able to express their feeling about the original products. But now in China, the cosplay has its own development.

As one Chinese coser "13" had emphasized, "you have to get the soul to create the character", the soul he mentioned here, is cosers' unique comprehension. Normally, cosers in Japan follow original scene and characters strictly, since they can easily get access to the original ACG products such as the official design, scripts or the drama play, to be their references. Both the lack of original references and the creative idea from the locals has created a different inner concept in China. Due to the different understanding of the original pieces, local cosplayers tend to add their own ideas and points of view into the activity, which obviously change the original characters. Thus with such diversity, the re-structuring process results in a different one from the original piece. In other words, the local cosplayers do not only represent the duplicate of fiction characters, but add their own creative points to the original form and content. For example, one of those creative re-invention style is called the "kuso", the spoofing. The word "kuso" is from Japanese, meaning adding laughable points into the original story to subvert the former image, and to increase the contrast between the new image and the former one. This is one typical way of local cosers to produce their own stories based on the former characters. The limited situation eventually has provided local process new creative points, a totally new relationship between original ACG products and cosplayers. It again represents the fact that local elements give new significance to the discourse from the original products by creating their own similar products once again. Chinese cosers are no longer the duplicate of the original pieces, but also become the creators by adding their own understanding and performing their own roles during the local cosplay. For example, a ninja character from the game "Sengoku Musou" in the picture-03 below, he is dumb in the original piece, but by imagining the possible character from his appearance, the coser, my interviewee "13," transformed the character into a talking role in the play he

participated in.



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Photo 4 and 5: static photo and photo from a live performance

5.3. Localized performing style

The concept of cosplay is not the only thing that has its local development. There follows the development of expression methods. Since in China, cosers believe that the cosplay is not only the real human's version of the fiction characters but another creating process, the traditional photos which show only static scene or role can no longer satisfy the growing demand. And the visibility contains not only the static images but also the active scene play.

As mentioned above, in Japan, the cosplay is more like an individual activity which involves much less people comparing to Chinese ones. And with its mature domestic ACG industry, official plays or dramas are also part of the production chain. In that case, since there is already the true main version of the ACG products, there is hardly any room or need for cosers to create their own play based on the original piece. But in China, the cosers have used this certain performing style as “play”, emphasize their

¹⁴ Pictures of interviewee “13”, from a “304” organized show

own idea about the roles, and act out a more vivid role than a static image. The group cosplay for local cosers, is mainly a play which involves the target characters. And furthermore, as mentioned above, most of the local cosplay competitions and exhibitions require groups' participation rather than individual participators, this also has stimulated the cosplay in China to develop from a single activity to group ones. So, in local context, Chinese cosers would choose the dynamic drama or opera to bring the activity onto the stage.

The usual way for cosers is to pick up a certain one or several typical scenes from the original pieces as a reference, and then to write their own play transcript and conversation lines based on their own understanding and the references. Comparing to the old static pictures, such dynamic expression may not be able to represent a delicate solo image and details of a cosplayer's appearance, but such group play can obviously imply interactions between different roles, and thus portray clear images of more vivid characters. Thus, as a result, in the local context, the "play" part is especially emphasized by those cosers. In those plays, comparing to the main plot, the other accessory aspects such as the background music, the sound effects and the dancing style, are totally originally created by those cosers. Unlike the costume and main plot of the play, those stuffs have no certain reference for cosers to follow or to copy. So such elements become an extension of their own comprehension rather than the original idea of the author's. Cosers have to make up their own choices of the music they use in a play, the lights which make different visual effects, and of course the ground field they need to take the video shot. In other words, even with the same cosplay transcript based on the very same scene from the same original masterpiece, the results of two cosplays still vary because different cosplayers groups have different comprehensions about the original piece. And other elements including the poses, lights and sound effects, are also re-designed according to cosers' own understanding. During my fieldwork, I have witnessed cosers from association "304" practicing the dance step they invented for the next show which act out in "Taipai

International Book Exhibition 2010”¹⁵. *Yaqie*, a female coser, explained that basically, cosers participate such activities for fun, and considering the financial issue including renting the stage, the setting of background light, the record of music, sometimes they prepare the show for business exhibitions or celebrations such as this book exhibition in Taipei. And here is the video clip of their performance, in which audiences can see a typical Chinese cosplayers’ group performance.

http://www.tibe.org.tw/tibe/comic/news/20100201_04.html

And now, with the technical development, besides the static pictures, and the dynamic drama or play, other expression methods are also developed by Chinese cosplayers. Animation music video clip is one of those expressions. One basic style is to follow the normal animation video clips as original references, and then to represent the same video again, with real person cosers instead of the fiction cartoon characters. Another developed style is to produce an original music video clip with cosers who dress as and imitate the target fiction character. Since it combines both static images and dynamic actions to present the inner cos theme, this style of cosplay production soon become widely popular.

According to some local cosers’ idea, those developments in the concept and performing style are based on the typical local elements, that is, the huge population in China. As mentioned above, cosplayers are all Japanese ACG fans which grew up with the ACG productions. With the large population from the entire young generation, it is more likely for local cosplay activities to involve much more people than other places. And unlike the situation in Japan that cosplay is mainly an individual performance, in China, this cultural phenomenon is usually presented in group activities, for instance, cosplay dramas, cosplay plays, and even video clips. Such performing styles determine that in the local context, cosplay is no longer an individual thing. In other places, once people dressed as a certain cartoon character,

¹⁵ http://www.tibe.org.tw/tibe/comic/news/20091231_01.html

and they claimed that they were cosers with picture proving that they had done so, then, they are no doubt a coser. But in China, in order to be a coser, people have a different procedure to go through and then become admitted as one by the others.

5.4. The emergence of the associations

China's cosplay, has not only developed its concept and form, but also has developed the organization aspect among the youngsters. Thus, for ordinary fans in China, there are three main ways for local fans to participate in a cos activity, and to be a part of the cosers' community, and to be a "real" coser. The first one is to join a current cosplayers' association and take part in the coming play. The second one is similar with the first one. The only difference between those two is that in the second one, people don't really join the association, but only take part in the show through a temporary recruitment of a particular play. The last one is taking part in the individual department of certain cosplay competitions, such as The China Joy, or the national cosplay carnival¹⁶. But considering the fact that under the particular circumstance, there is hardly anyone would carry out the performance alone, while most of the cosplayers has joined a certain association in their own city. In this digital age, as mentioned above, the internet, including online chatting software such as QQ, MSN, or online forums, chatting rooms, blogs, or website has widely spread the cosplay culture, and represents a fact that cosplay is a simple activity close to every ACG fans life(Zhang,2005). It is obvious that internet has played a crucial role in the forming of cosplayers community. The internet is no longer a one-way media such as the traditional newspapers, magazines or TV. Its free access and people's equal participations, this kind of interactive communication has created a virtual community, a platform on which participators can shape their individual identity, and also follow the shared principle and rules in the group. During the process, the internet has shaped the image of cosplayers, helped them to build a typical identity as a "real coser", and gathered cosplay fans together in a virtual group. Starting from this cyber Utopia, the

¹⁶ From interviewee, *Xiaomu* from "304" association

cosplayers have the chance to find each other, and begin to form their special organizations, the cosplayers' association, in their real lives. "Without the internet, there may not be cosplay associations" Xiaomu claimed.

Thus, with the wide spread of cosplay culture, the communication technique and the support from the government, young generation organizes associations to gather more cosplay fans into the activity. From the late 90's last century, cosplay associations emerged in China. Taking Hangzhou as an example, by the year 2008, a city with 8 million people, had more than 60 cosplayers' associations(Chen,2008:E5). Since those associations didn't have the responsibility to register in certain government department, the actual number could be more than that figure. And according to some interviewees, "Right now, every university has at least one registered official student cosplay association"(Wu,2007:57), which implies a fact that the developing speed of cosplay association is also incredible.

6. Chinese cosplayer associations

6.1.General information and development

Most of cosplayers associations grow in the university, and student interests associations are their prototypes. Those student associations cover a wide range of student activities, such as chess games, debate, or sports, and their main duty is to carry out and organize such activities to provide young university students to participate in such interest activity and meanwhile meet people who share the same interests. And of course cosplay is one of those activities. Thus, by using those student interest associations as samples, cosplayer fans, which are mainly university students, imitate the similar infrastructure with those associations in order to run the cosplay activities. Normally, several leaders raise the idea to form a cosplayers association, then a chairman, and several secretaries who run for different department are elected by all participators. The aim of certain organizations is to carry out the cosplay activities, to spread cosplay culture among youngster, and to involve more

fans to join the group enjoying this cultural activity. Their main activity is to play various cosplay characters and to participate in exhibitions.

Thus, after the group of fans has achieved certain achievement in a competition, or they have published an official announcement on the net, a new cosplayer association is officially born in that case. The scale of a cosplayer association can be varied according to its influences among fans from that territory. While the minimum ones may only have three members, the big ones can have over hundred members. And due to the fast growing speed, there is no complete survey that can tell the exact number of cosplayers associations. In big cities such as Shanghai, Hangzhou, almost every university has at least one cosplayers association in the campus. With the convenient communication methods, utilizing student cosplay association as the prototype, independent cosplay associations, which don't belong to any units and have no registration in the government department, also emerge and become the main stream form of cosplay associations. Only those extremely large ones may registered as a small private company, which reduces some problems while signing the contracts for business shows. Right now, almost every big city has one or two representative cosplayers' associations. For example, in Hangzhou, once cosplayers mention the association, the "304" is always the first option. And adding on those un-registered ones on the list, the total number of cosplayers associations is definitely over a thousand in the whole country. In Hangzhou, according to the survey from a cosplayer's alliance "Hangzhou animation and comic league", the amount of cosplay association had reached 35 in 2005.

Originated from student associations, the cosplayer associations inherit the same characters from student associations. Since they are both unofficial organizations formed by grass-rooted citizens, unlike registered enterprises or companies, cosplayer associations have a loose structure. Furthermore, as the activity is non-profit, with such core tenet, the association itself is also non-profit. It is the shared interest, pure passion and members' sense of belonging that connect those cosplayers in a group.

Actually, unlike other formal groups which have a clear list of member names, in cosplay associations, such as 304, there is no such records. “The record stays in my cell, and in my mind.” The head of 304, the “principal” smiled and pointed at his own head. As a non-government organization, the cosplay association has to utilize its attractive activity and fancy cosers in order to draw people’s attention and thus to recruit new members. Three major methods are used for the recruitment. A small number of new members are introduced to the association by the old members. Some of them are attracted by the fantastic shows presented during the exhibitions. Most of the newcomers are recruited through the recruitment advertisements on the internet. Most of cosplayer associations have their own websites, or blogs. On those virtual community, members of the association are capable of publishing their group activities, news, productions and recruitment ads. Once some members have an idea of cosplay roles from a newly released animation or game, normally the first thing for them to do is to spread out the idea and to start recruitment online. Through this process, more and more ACG fans are involved into the association, and the association thus extend its influence in the territory.

And the shared memory about Japanese ACG products successfully combine those fans together, and become the very basic foundation of the cosplayers’ associations. Even according to those members’ idea, they don’t really have a strict standard of qualification. But the different understanding of “cosplay”, and other recognitions, have naturally settled a strict boundary between cosers and ordinary people in their daily life. A certain reaction, ideas about ACG culture and the understanding of cosplay and its related terms has eventually set an invisible boundary for them to tell who is really “one of them”. Thus, within the group, particular manners are developed while terms are also created from the ACG culture. The group is somehow like mafia or other secret organizations, running on its own unique track, following the particular principle which is based on the ACG culture. So, in other words, the cosplay culture, which is based on the ACG culture, become a key word and the essential group culture, clearly identify the potential group members that share the same interests and

memories, and separate them from ordinary people.

6.2.The function of the cosplayers associations

Since the association is founded, their core activity, cosplay, is widely carried out in the region. For cosplayers in the group, the organization gives them a chance to change their identity into another charming character and thus reduces their pressure from the ordinary society.

During their childhood and early youth, the lifestyle of youngsters were restricted by the mainstream social values transmitted through parents and school. Due to the lack of financial support and mental independence, they didn't really have other options besides school life and family life which was somehow ordinary and boring. In a fast developing country, local youngsters have to suffer the heavy pressure from the competitive society, which resulted in raising negative emotions such as depression. According to a survey made by several major medias and websites, comparing to the older and younger generation, the "post-1980s generation" has suffered the most pressure. Among all 3313 "post-1980 generation" interviewees, 52.6% of them think that they suffer serious pressure from the society. 67.85% of them are not satisfied with their current life, while only 1.7% think that they enjoy their lives. The high housing price, the low income and the difficulty in job-hunting are the top three issues for them. Graduated university students who live in big cities with a income below 2,000 yuan are even forming a new social group, the "ant family", which are inhabited by groups of low-income college graduates.(Qiu & Li, 2010) In that case, those "post-1980 generation" has represented their characteristics as "very pragmatic and materialistic, largely concerned with living the good life and making money." (Rosen,2009:361) It is obvious that the accumulation of those emotions and pressure of "post-1980 generation" need to be reduced and eliminated through certain way. Cosplay is one answer that make those youngsters willing to devote themselves.

Thus, the cosplay association, by carrying out cosplay activities, provides cosplayers

an opportunity to re-create the fiction world and be a part of their dreams. By joining those organizations, youngsters find themselves a way that they manage to enjoy a life style they ever dreamed of, and escape from the real world's pressure and thus reduce the negative emotions. "The cosplay, it does calm me down and reduce my dissatisfaction about the reality" most of my interviewee from the fieldwork shared the same idea. Some interviewees even implied that since they had the chance to express and to release their inner feelings, they now had more tolerance towards pressure or disappointing reality. "Because at least I have cosplay as my world", some of those cosers claimed. Sister *Manman*, one female interviewee from the "304", emphasized that it was the cosplay that help her avoid, overcome and keep away from the pressure from parents and the "boring topics only about concerning money, vehicles and housing among adults". The only elder interviewee, coser *Huangfu Weigang's* mother, a woman in her late 40's, also agreed that the cosplay did help her son calm down and become more peaceful, even more mature when dealing with pressures.

And the cosplayer associations have not only provided fans' chances to reduce the pressure, but also helped them representing themselves in a way. By acting out the other identity and life style, they are no longer only the consumers of ACG culture, but also producers of ACG based cosplay culture. As mentioned above, unlike the domestic ACG products which share an educational concept, Japanese products are less childish and more mature. By portraying different topics in life, they manage to discuss the meaning of life and its significance, revealing the inner ideology. As fans' of those products, cosplayers are also affected by them during their imitating process, and start to think about their own significance. As mentioned in the last chapter, Chinese cosers have developed cosplay into a group performing show rather than the static image exhibition. Before association carry out one particular cosplay show, the first step for cosers in the association is to design the character and to recompose the scene based on the original material. Thus the cosplayers associations become producers of a new cultural form. And the elements cosers add in the play have no

doubt represented their own ideals and dreams

Furthermore, the fancy outfits also help cosplayers to gain self-esteem. As the general idea, the costumes from Japanese ACG products are usually fancy and fashionable with its vision. Their dress and other accessories are often of great style which relates to the colorful life. To some extent, choosing a charming role means that at that point, the coser himself is also a unique one which is charming and fashionable. Cosplayers associations help them to achieve this with its resources and shared experiences. And for youngsters who really want to escape from the daily pressure and ordinary life, one of their deepest wish is to become someone unique, or someone special. Thus, those youngsters consider the cosplay is an exciting, popular fashion, and they find it as the best option for them to build their own unique sense of fashion by acting some unique charming characters. Meanwhile those youngsters also want to be accepted by the mass, and treated as normal people. In that case, as both the executor of cosplay performing and the organization of cosers who share the same interests and value, the cosplayers association is capable of meeting those youngsters' ambivalent demands of being special and ordinary at the same time.

The cosplay itself is a foreign words which was imported from Japan to China, and its related word "cosplayer" and its short form "coser" have emphasized a simple fact that people who do cosplay activity have already categorized them as a sub culture group. And thus, the cosplayers association, by carrying out cosplay activities through various ways, has helped potential fans to discover, develop and admit their identity as cosplayers from their ACG fans background. And furthermore, in a cosplayers association, cosplay fans find other people who share same interest and value. Since they have already shared cultural background, and grew up under the influence of Japanese ACG products, their shared identity make it possible to communicate on the same level. While the same identity ties cosplayers together tightly, the organization manages to bolster their members' self-esteem through the continuous interaction among group members.

As mentioned above, cosplayers eventually are youngsters who had their own culture, a sub culture which represents values that differs from the mainstream. Thus, the misunderstanding and bias from the mainstream, especially from authorities like elder people, somehow still imply negative ideas and considered cosers as strange others. Since the sub culture is barely understood by the majority of the society, rumors about cosplay and cosers emerge. The authorities criticize that cosplay's non-profit character as a total waste of money, and cosplayers are nothing but kids who are addicted to Japanese ACG which would do harm to them. Taking my interviewee, Mrs. *Huangfu* as an example, she was strongly against her son, *Huangfu Weigang* to participate in cosplay activities, and not to mention organizing a cosplay association himself. She used to have this idea that it's a waste of her son's money and time, and more seriously it is ruining her son's future life. It was not until her son's association won a price in the competition held in Hangzhou did she gradually change this bias into a neutral attitude, which thought cosplay was just a regular interest just like chess games, or sports. But somehow, even the emerging of the associations has developed and presented the positive aspect of cosplay to the public, the prejudice still stands among the rest of ordinary mass. According one of my interviewees words, her university principal used to claim that Japanese ACG was "Japanese cultural invasion which tried to corrupt Chinese youth generation" while he knew nothing about it¹⁷. Thus, comparing to other sub culture, since cosplay originated from Japanese ACG products, the so-called "culture invasion" as well as anti-Japanese emotions adds more pressure on cosers, they have to suffer more bias from the society. According to a case from 304, once they were hired to participate and perform in an exhibition for one game design company, the contract had announced clearly that no Japanese style cosplay shows allow during the exhibition¹⁸.

The misunderstanding, bias and prejudice have no doubt pushed away cosplayers

¹⁷ From the interviewee, a female Japanese ACG fan, nickname "A Bu"

¹⁸ From the interviewee, Sis *Manman* from "304"

from the majority of the society and rooted a sense of psychological distinctiveness in the mind of cosplayers. For cosers, cosplay is part of their lives and inner world in which they can release themselves and share a different standard comparing to the normal world. Due to this cultural gap between cosers and ordinary people, cosplayers naturally find each other and then form minority groups. The unique standard and culture have somehow separated them from the main society.

Young cosers need a space to explore and grow their own identity. And thus, the cosplayers association provides a space, a platform for cosers to leave the computer screen, to walk out the door and to get into a group starting their own connections in the real world. Through the interaction and communications between group members, they tend to develop their special language terms, united ideas and value. For example, among all cosers I had interviewed, all of them shared the idea that in the association, every time during the preparation of a cosplay show, members enjoyed the feeling that everyone was working on the same thing, making hard effort to achieve the same goal. In the whole process, the special term they used, the division of works they arranged, the topic they shared, all of those interaction and communication happened in the group, based on their shared cultural background, had clearly distinguished them from the society, increased their self-esteem within the group and thus bound young cosplayers to their organization tightly.

7. Case study: the “304” cosplay association in Hangzhou

As the general situation of those associations are similar, it means that any local cosplayers association's can be representative of general trends. Meanwhile, the majority of my interviewees were for one of the most famous and typical cosplayer associations in China, the “304” association from Hangzhou. So I have chosen the “304” as the case. My interviewees have confirmed some of the general trends mentioned above, and in this chapter more details would be examined.

As one of the biggest and earliest cosplayers association, it was founded by five

female cosplay fans on aug.4th, 2001, in Hangzhou. As a city of tourism and culture, , government in Hangzhou commits itself into the entertainment industry, including local ACG, and exhibitions. With local government's positive attitude and support towards the ACG industry, the cosplay association grew so fast that according to my informer, Sis *Manman*, who was somehow related to the administration aspect in the association, after ten years' development, the membership of 304 had already reached the number of 500. Due to the equal proportion of gender roles in the ACG, the gender proportion between male and female is almost equal. Judging from my own observations during the association celebrating dinner party, the percentages of both genders was half to half. As mentioned above, cosplay has its aesthetics character of being cool and good-looking, thus no matter which gender they are, those members are mostly good looking ones.

And as the biggest one in the region, "304" was often invited by enterprises to perform in business shows. Even one significant characteristic of cosplay is non-profit; they may still need the income for carrying out business performing shows to make their finance even. But due to the different understanding about cosplay, while the companies' ultimate goal was using cosplayers to draw people's attention and thus to gain profit, those cosplayers actually still insisted that their association was non-profit. *Manman*, she explained that for those companies, they didn't really care what cosplay was, they just used cosers as cheap models who could gain people's most attention for the company and company's products. And on the cosers' side, performing in a business show was "just a way to collect the working capital, the fund to support the next cos". Through this form of collaboration, both of them had get benefits. "While those companies use us to work attract their customers, we use their money to promote the level of our cosplay. Our purpose is not about the profit, it's making those business entities to pay the bill for us." *Manman* explained. So in this case, those core members of 304 had even registered their own small entity to negotiate business with corporations or companies.

In general, they are essentially a non-government organization which doesn't have a strict management system, and there is no accurate figure of its membership. The age range of the members is from 14 to 28, which means that all the members were born after 1980. The "Principal", the current leader of 304, is one of the first members of the association. He explained that there was no strict regulation to join in the association, everyone was free to join. Normally, the ACG exhibition, the internet forum, and member's introduction are the main method for them to recruit new members. So every year there will be newcomers in the association. The interviewees I talked to, their membership ranges from 2 months to 10 years. As the interviews went on, those cosers all admitted that they were Japanese ACG fans, and those products motivated them to take part in cosplay activity and association.

It was interesting that even the newest member in the association shared the same point of view with the older member, whether on the definition of the cosplay, or on the feeling about the association. They clearly had their own term in the group, and most of them devoted their whole spare time to the group, since the activity took time to practice, and perform. Considering the fact that Chinese cosplay is mainly group performance which involves more than three people, and larger ones such as "*fengshen yanyi*", which was produced by 304 members last year, has more than 20 people, cosers often devote all their spare times in communicating and practicing with each other. During their period of preparing for a show, they are somehow only combined with each other, and thus hardly any of them has friend that has nothing to do with cosplay. Among 9 of my interviewees from 304, 7 of them claimed that their best friend is, or was cosers. One of my group interviews occurred in a dance-training room of a university. The intensive practicing lasted four hours, but none of them had any complaint. Actually, cosers were happy to do so. When talking about the question "what make you happy in the association", all the interviewees had mentioned one aspect that "when we were preparing for a show, everyone gathered together to make hard effort for the same goal. It feels like a big family in which I feel like a part of it".

But according to the mainstream opinion, which is ruled by the old generation, the cosplayer is a meaningless activity and waste of both time and money to some extent. Thus, most cosers implied they had difficulties with their parents or other elders. As Rosen had emphasized in his article, those young generation would devote them into what they believed in (Rosen, 2009:361). Cosers from 304 had similar situations like this. Some of them went through a huge conflict with their family. One female interviewee, “the hell butterfly”, she told me that two years ago, after her mother threw away all her cosplay items, in order to insist her interest of cosplay, she just left home for 6 months. And her family finally compromised until she had gained certain achievement in the national competition. And for someone who had less pressure from the parents, like *Xiaomu*, after he became famous, his parents gradually took a positive attitude and felt proud of him. And as mentioned above, Mrs. *Huangfu* and her son also shared a similar story.

But somehow, the extreme passion on this interest had enlarged the distant feeling between cosers and ordinary people: seven out of total nine interviewees implied their best friends were also cosers in the association. And elder cosers, for example, *Manman* and the “Principal” explained that they did have distant feeling among people at the same age, since their interested topic didn’t really match. “All they talk was just about money, housing and vehicles. It was too pragmatic and materialistic, and it’s not my thing. But in the association, people shared the same topic, interest, and even the special language terms” *Manman* claimed. Cosers talked about not only their activities and ACG products, but also other pop culture such as Japanese soap opera, music and movies were also their interests. Similar interests did combine them tight together. Comparing to their ordinary life, in the association, cosers felt much more happiness, passion and freedom. 50% of my interviewees strongly agreed with the idea that in the association, they felt more secure and comfortable. “It feels like a real family, and I never regretted that I was one of them”. Members of “304” claimed.

8. Conclusion

The results of this research shows that the globalization process brought not only the technique development, but also the new individualism through the form of culture phenomenon. In China's case, with the open door policy which provided people freedom of choices, the market-oriented economic had its influence raising popular culture that represented people's desire, preference, and also the individualism. Even with the local context which developed both the form and concept of the popular culture and thus repressed the individualism, youngster became fandom and gathered into communities to express themselves. As the authorities somehow keenly realized the potential power of those youth's community and thus lead the youth's passion to cultural aspects rather than political ones, such popular culture, for example, the cosplay and its related associations, became the shelter that youngsters devote themselves into.

As a byproduct of ACG industry, cosplay originated from Japan. And during the globalization process, along with the export of Japanese cultural products, cosplay was also exported to other countries as the United States, Korea, and China. Back to the 80's of last century, in China, the pop culture industry was somehow ignored by the state during their propaganda agenda. Thus, not to mentioned masterpieces, there weren't any ACG products in the market. Globalization was the key that changed the situation. Once the open door policy was established by Chinese state, Japanese ACG products rushed and occupied the market within the globalization trend. Gradually, the "post-1980 generation" became a generation grew up with Japanese ACG products which represented a different lifestyle and culture from the traditional or pre-reform values and culture. After the cosplay's transporting to China through the internet which was also a significant invention of globalization, its aesthetical idea, its original sources and its visual impact, they have awaken the shared memory deep in the post-1980 generation's heart, and attract some of the youngsters to participate in this activity. Meanwhile, with the high pressure such as housing price and low income on their shoulders, the young generation is eager to find a way to reduce the negative emotion, to express themselves and to communicate with others. Cosplay, is one

answer for them.

The state government's positive attitude toward local ACG industry supports the development of local cosplay. And both the regulation for imported ACG products and the lack of local products create an interesting phenomenon that local cosplay has occupied the exhibitions held by the government and thus has a large space to develop. With the free access to internet, in other words, free access to foreign ACG masterpieces, the cosplay culture is again strengthened by local fans. The large population and the financial situations of the youngsters have determined that local cosplay activities mainly carry out in group forms rather than the individual shows comparing to the original ones. The discourse of cosplay is restructured by the locals adding elements such as their own comprehensions. Furthermore, local cosers develop not only the performing style and concept of cosplay, but also shape the identity of cosplayer. With the spread of the internet, more youngsters get to know and involve into this unique activity.

According to cosplay's one characteristic, acting like other fictional roles which are the ideal images for youngsters, by doing so, cosers manage to become someone else, and thus avoid pressure from the state and society. With shared interests and values, more cosers emerge among the post-1980 generation. Once they gather together, cosplayers' association eventually is born to organize and to recruit cosers participating in group performance. As the local concept of cosplayers is admitted by the ACG fans and those associations, this cosplayers associations help cosplay fans gain self-esteem, build their special term and languages, and shape their identity. Within such organization, cosplayers feel like home and get their sense of security along with satisfactions by interacting and communicating with people sharing similar values and interests.

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