"It's an Asian Thing" : Cosplay and cultural identity in Singapore

Elizabeth MacLachlan and Leng Leng Thang
National University of Singapore

Objective

- To contribute to the discourse on globalization, culture and identity by focusing on trans-Asian cultural connections (Iwabuchi 2001; Chua 2002).

== Does the introduction of new modes of consumption related to Japanese popular culture goods bring with it changes in the way consumers construct images of themselves, Japan and the world? If so, what are they? How is in consumed and with what effect?

Outline

- Some theoretical discussions
- Cosplay in Singapore
- Cosplay as community
- Discussion: cosplay hierarchy, Cosplay Singapore style?
- Concluding remarks

Some theoretical ideas

- Global cultural flows (Iwabuchi, Appadurai, Ang etc)

- Fandom studies (Jenkins, Tulloch etc)

== *an interdisciplinary body of research that focuses on social groups that form when people share a strong interest in a particular popular culture text*(Jenkins, Tulloch etc).

Fandom studies

- communities formed around cultural texts share the same characteristics including openness towards anyone, disregard of status in outside world, democratic, judges merit only on contribution to fan community.

- fandom membership is particularly attractive to groups who might otherwise be marginalized in mainstream society such as gays, women, physically disabled.

- fan culture has no limits, fan community should be able to transcend not only physical boundaries and social boundaries, but also cultural boundaries.

Cosplay

Cosplay (*kosupure*), short for "costume play", is a Japanese subculture centered on dressing as characters from manga, anime, *tokusatsu* and video games, and, less commonly, Japanese live action television shows, fantasy movies, Japanese pop music bands, Visual Kei, fantasy music stories . . . and novels.

(Wikipedia http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cosplay)

Cosplay in Singapore

- 1976: originated in Japan from comic market in Tokyo
- Dec 1999: first public convention in Singapore (organized by Miyuki Anime Club)
- 2002- setting up of Singapore Cosplay Club(SCC)
- Dec 2001: "discovered" by news and TV media
- Convention with 2000 in attendance; with 12,000 fans in total

Cosplay 2008

- Cosplay competition for the youth at

  Singapore Toy & Comic Convention 2008

- Cosfest 2008

- CosCon@Games Convention Asia (20 Sept)

COSPLAYER PROFILE

Gender: **80% female**
Age: **14-25**
Ethnicity: **90% Chinese**

Categories of cosplay
Manga, animation: 75%
Games: 20%
J-rock, Visual Kei, heavy metal: 3%
Others: 2%

What is the cosplay community?

- Anime/ manga/ game fans & artists
- Online with occasional, intense meetings

Why do people cosplay?

- **Sense of community**
- **Experience stardom**
- **Personal satisfaction**

Fans in New Places: Cosplay in Singapore

A short film by
Elizabeth MacLachlan &
Thang Leng Leng

Global Cosplay Hierarchy

- Japan
- East Asia (HK, Taiwan, Macau)
- Southeast Asia (Singapore, Malaysia)
- Bottom: West (US and Europe)

Japan as Number One

- Original is best

- Incorporate Japanese elements into cosplay

- Apply Japanese aesthetic

Singapore as Mediocre

- Poor weather

- Can't wear makeup

- Manga / anime perceived as 'kid's culture'

- Fans are "too cheap"

West as Worst?

- Lazy in costume making
- Lack of physical similarity to characters
- Disrespectful

(Brazilian Team won 2008 World Cosplay Summit)

"I think Chinese are more *Confucian*, but Japanese are more *confusion*..."

(male informant discussing the phenomenon of 'hentai' in Japanese cosplay)

Cosplay, Singapore-style?

"Please refrain from any public display of undesirable behaviors, such as vulgarities or homosexuality"

- no revealing clothing

- no cross-dressing

- no *hentai (*an erotic spin on cosplay*)*

Contradictory effects of transnational cultural flows

- Critique of Japanese society

- Critique of Singaporean society

- Preservation of conservative Singaporean values

Cosplay as global fandom

- The possibilities and limitations of global fan cultures engendered by acceleration of transnational cultural flows brought about by dissemination technologies.

- Freedom for youths to associate themselves beyond the borders of the nation, at the same time, the need to ground the connections in something more tangible.

- 'ethnicity' and 'regionalism' by cosplayers with the lack of other common trait.

- 'common past' in Japanese pop c. as possible common trait?