

Subculture inspires young male cross-dressing trend

Special clubs, 'cosplay,' 'anime' just latest twist to long tradition

By MINORU MATSUTANI

Staff writer

He's a 52-year-old medical doctor who goes by the name Ayaka Ogawa when living out his cross-dressing fantasies of being a woman in her mid-40s.

"As you see from my (cross-dressing) age, I look young when I disguise myself as a woman," the doctor, who only wanted to be identified as Ogawa, said in a recent telephone interview. "I



Crossover appeal: Takarazuka actresses (from left) Fuuto Nozomi and Rio Asumi along with male cross-dresser Mitz Mangrove promote Unilever Japan cosmetic cream in Tokyo on Oct. 18. KYODO PHOTO

feel good being told I look young."

He takes care of his skin because he wants to keep being praised, and says he looks more youthful during his cross-dressing ("josou") life.

According to Takaaki Ido, ex-publisher of Otoko-no Ko (Boy Girl) Club magazine, which provides information for male cross-dressers, their numbers are up. Ido launched the magazine with publisher Sanwa Shuppan in 2008 and was

pleasantly surprised with the feedback.

"Readers' responses were very good. I often received photos from readers who wanted me to publish them in the magazine," said Ido, who left Sanwa Shuppan in late 2010 and plans to start another magazine early this year also dedicated to cross-dressing. "There is definitely a business opportunity."

The number of cross-dresser events and participants have increased recently, Ido said. The dance gathering Propaganda, held in Shinjuku Ward, Tokyo, on the last Saturday of each month, has grown to attract some 300 participants at a time. Roughly half are male cross-dressers and the rest are women and men dressed as men, Ido said.

Cross-dressing is not necessarily a reflection of sexuality, as partakers may not be gays going drag or transvestites, and male homosexuals generally don't cross-dress. Nor should the activity be associated with a serious medical or psychological condition, including gender identity disorder. Most cross-dressing men lead generally normal lives.

Ido divides male cross-dressers into two categories — middle-aged men who have hidden this penchant, calling them "Asakusa-kei" after the traditional Tokyo district of the same name in Taito Ward, and "Akiba-kei," young men who openly cross-dress as a fashion statement, deriving their name from the Akihabara electronics, manga, "anime" and "otaku" geek mecca nearby.

The former has seen little change in numbers, but the latter has surged as "cosplay" (costume play) becomes more popular, Ido said.

The surge in the latter is expected to draw more "Asakusa-kei" out, he said.

Keeping their preferences secret from their families and colleagues, closet cross-dressers visit devoted salons or shops where patrons can don women's clothes and be photographed at a typical cost of about ¥20,000 for a two-hour session.

The 1979 opening in Asakusa of Elizabeth, one of the first and foremost of such salons, became a magnet for male cross-dressers, he said.

Their Akihabara counterparts are a recent phenomenon, but their ranks are rising rapidly because they are motivated by anime, cosplay and other subcultures that congregate there, Ido said.

Anime characters typically feature asexual beauty and "kawaii" cuteness. People dress up as such characters at worldwide cosplay events.

On top of Akihabara's subculture, media exposure of male cross-dressers, including Matsuko Deluxe and Mitz Mangrove, raise awareness of such preferences, said Kaede Mizuha, the female owner of Yokohama-based cross-dressing salon Artemis.

"Ms. Deluxe and Mangrove are very hyper, upbeat and their talk is fun. They are very open and proud to be cross-dressers and give very positive impressions of cross-dressers to the public," Mizuha said.

She found demand from foreigners encouraging. Since she added English text to the Artemis website and created an English-language Facebook site in December 2009, she has received at least 10 inquiries a month from foreigners, including Asians, mostly Chinese, and Westerners interested in wearing kimono, she said.

Most male cross-dressers have similar motivations: They want to look beautiful or want to satisfy their curiosity. But what provides the trigger varies greatly.

Ogawa said he has been curious about cross-dressing since childhood. When he was in his 40s, he went to his high school reunion and was shocked to see how his classmates had aged. He decided he should do what his heart tells him because life is short.

"I consulted my wife before beginning to cross-dress seven years ago. She gave me fashion advice and supported me," he said. He and his wife decided not to disclose his preference to their two daughters, aged 19 and 17, but they found out two years ago. They are also supportive, he said.

In the case of a 50-year-old man who goes by the pseudonym Kana Hoshino, the death of his wife was the trigger.

"I don't have children, so after my wife was gone, I had

nobody to hide anything from," said the man, who began dressing in women's clothes six years ago. Both he and Ogawa go to cross-dressing salons and occasionally go out shopping, eating and riding trains in women's attire.

Meanwhile, a 24-year-old male who goes by the female name Yuri and who sometimes visits Propaganda, was initially curious and thought he looked cute the first time he dressed as a woman. His parents don't know about his other life, but he gets his girlfriend's help when choosing makeup and outfits.

"When my girlfriend and I go to (cross-dressing) events, I am in (cross-dress mode). But she prefers me in normal attire on other occasions," he said.

Japan has a long history of cross-dressing males.

"Nihonshoki," or "Chronicle of Japan," written in the eighth century, describes Yamato Takerunomikoto disguised as a woman, Mizuha said. Until the Edo Period, people dressed their sons in girls' clothes to pray for good health because girls were thought to be more resistant to disease, she said.

And of course opposite-gender representation has long been a cultural element of stage entertainment, from kabuki to the all-female Takarazuka musical troupe, whose members play both sexes, to TV celebrities dressed in drag. Recent features have dwelt with men inclined to apply makeup and undergo aesthetic and other services common with females, and cosmetics firms rising to meet the male market.

Even though the pedestrian cross-dressers don't fit the typical pattern of Artemis clientele, Mizuha says she welcomes the popularity.

Ido is hopeful cross-dressing won't be just a passing fad.

"I think it will survive as a genre of fashion," he said.

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