

Two Perspectives of Being a Cosplayer: Japan vs Europe

Interview with Hikari GREEN
and Naoko “Fran” TAMURA

Hikari Green

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Hikari Green is a Japanese cosplayer working in the financial sector. She represents the idea of cosplay and hobby in various mainstream media in Japan and abroad. She is regularly invited to interviews about Japanese culture, pop culture and cosplay activities by Japanese as well as foreign media. Various brands in Japan invites her to pose as a model for their products, events and cafeterias. With the help of these side jobs, she is able to represent cosplay as an interesting hobby to a general audience.

Naoko “Fran” Tamura

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Naoko “Fran” Tamura is Japanese businesswoman, active in cosplay communities and activities since 1987. She helped with the organization of the biggest cosplay event in Japan, the World Cosplay Summit. There, she gained a lot of experience and thanks to her great level in English she was able to provide much needed help to international cosplay guests and attendees of the convention. She regularly attends conventions abroad, either as a cosplay guest or cosplay competition judge. She recently started her own business company with international trade in the food and wine industry. Thanks to this business she is able to travel worldwide and she often connects cosplay and her daily job together.

Interviewer



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Anna Paulína Jelínková is a PhD. candidate affiliated with the Faculty of Mass Media Communication of the University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, Slovakia. She focuses on subcultures, fan studies and participatory culture. In her dissertation she deals with an in-depth study of the cosplay phenomenon in the European-Asian context. She teaches subjects focused on academic writing, the correct use of research methods and fan studies and knowledge about participatory culture.

Anna Paulína Jelínková (A. P. J.): Cosplay as a hobby activity has a tradition in Japan. When did you first encounter this phenomenon?

Hikari Green: I grew up with *otaku*¹ culture from an early age. In Japan, various otaku and fan magazines with chapters from popular manga comics, such as Weekly Shonen Jump, have been published. I've always loved reading them. In one of these magazines was a report from Comic market – Comiket, which is a meeting of manga authors – mangaka, and manga readers. The cosplayers who took part in this event were also mentioned in these magazines. But there were very few of them at the time, and it was more of a rarity.

Naoko “Fran” Tamura: Even before cosplay, I always loved drawing manga. I attended *Comiket* – Comic markets with my friends and helped them with their booths, where they sold their drawings and *doujinshis*.² I also used to draw a lot and enjoyed these conventions. First time I saw cosplay was at Comiket – few of my friends made their own costumes and cosplayed their favourite characters. My first convention I visited as a visitor – not a cosplayer was in 1987, at that time only a few people were wearing costumes.

A. P. J.: When did you make your first cosplay and what character did you chose? Did you attend a convention in cosplay as well?

Hikari Green: I started cosplaying when I was a high school student. My first cosplay was Nina from *Suikoden*, she was a high school student too, wearing a simple high school uniform, that's why I chose her. I also liked her character as well. At that time (early 2000) there were not any cosplay shops, so this costume was made from parts of outfits I already owned. I took this costume to convention as well, secretly, of course. My parents did not want me to go to convention, and I thought I had fooled them, but they figured it out and were not very happy about it, as I was minor at that time. Today, they do not have problem with it.

Naoko “Fran” Tamura: My first cosplay that I wore to convention in 1995 was Souichiro Jin from the manga *Slam Dunk* – this costume was made by my friend. The first costume I made was Angel from the game *Tekken 2* and I wore it to a convention in Japan in 1997. Both of these characters are male, and I chose them, because I am tall and my cosplay group needed these characters. Also I like these characters personality as well.

A. P. J.: How is cosplay perceived in Japan compared to the European approach?

Hikari Green: Thanks to cosplay I travel a lot, either as a guest, cosplay competition judge or just as a visitor by myself and I see many differences. First of all, cosplay in Japan is overlooked, and the general public sees it as extravagant hobby. Many Japanese think that cosplay are ladies in sexy outfits, and it is sexualized a lot. In western countries, when people think of cosplay they usually think of big and popular costumes like Iron Man, Spider Man or Wonder Woman. In Japan many cosplay girls only make outfits of sexy characters in bikini, hence Japanese think of cosplay as a sexualized hobby. That is one of the reasons why I do not like to cosplay sexy versions and prefer male characters.

1 Remark by the authors: Otaku is a term used for fans of anime, manga, comics and pop culture media.

2 Remark by the authors: Doujinshi is a fan drawn manga of already existing manga/anime. It is similar to fan fiction or fan art.

Naoko “Fran” Tamura: I would say that in last 10 years perception of cosplay in the eyes of Japanese people changed. Before, I was very nervous when someone knew that I do cosplay, I never spoke about it with anyone other than my cosplay friends. Today, society is more open to this hobby, cosplayers are presented in mainstream media and on the internet. People do not hold strange feelings towards cosplayers now. Cosplayers are viewed as artist or actors I think.

A. P. J.: What are the main differences between Japanese and European conventions?

Hikari Green: My first convention abroad was in 2009 in Thailand, I went there by myself. I remember that Thais were really surprised that Japanese came to their convention. Thanks to kind visitors there I build up a strong fanbase abroad. Later I started to receive invitations to foreign conventions to judge cosplay contest, or just be a guest there

Naoko “Fran” Tamura: When I travel to foreign conventions, I usually go alone, but I never feel lonely. Once I am there people approach me and chat with me. When they realize I am Japanese, they are even more excited, because usually, they are also fans of our culture. I really enjoy meeting people abroad and talk with them. In Japan, we do not have such a strong bond in communities, like westerners do. I usually hang out with few of my friends. Also, in Japan we do not hold panels or presentation blocks like in Europe, it is usually more about market – selling and buying mangas, merch, and so.

A. P. J.: Does your family, friends, co-workers know that you are cosplayer?

Hikari Green: I am open about being a cosplayer, it is no secret for me. My family is supportive, since I have a regular job and cosplay as a hobby. In Japan I am quite active in mainstream media – I was in several magazines and on TV as well, trying to introduce the world of cosplay to the general public. Thanks to my job in the financial sector, I am invited as a cosplayer to media often – because for Japanese, my daily job is respectable, but cosplay is perceived strangely. But when it is combined, in me as a person, the casual viewer is more willing to listen. I was also interviewed in few foreign fan magazines as well.

Naoko “Fran” Tamura: I do not share the fact that I am cosplayer very easily. Basically only my otaku Japanese friends know about it, and surely my close family. My family is neutral about it. This year I opened my own business in international trading, after working many years as an employee. My colleagues did not know that I am a cosplayer, I did not have the urge to tell them either. I have many international friends that I know from conventions, who know I am a cosplayer and I am happy about it, since I can speak about my favourite manga and anime with them and even plan cosplays together.

A. P. J.: What does cosplay mean to you? What emotions does it bring in you?

Hikari Green: Cosplay is my life – cosplay changed my life significantly, since I was a young girl. Thanks to cosplay my view has been broadened and I got to meet many different and interesting people. Cosplay is not only about wearing costumes and putting on make-up, it is a way of my life. I am able to express my feelings, my passion through costuming, crafting and role playing.

Naoko “Fran” Tamura: The purpose of cosplay is to express passion of someone who loves wearing costume, who loves to become their favourite character from game, anime, manga... For me, cosplay is my most beloved hobby, in more depth, this is how I express myself. When you say cosplay, I instantly imagine a person who loves anime, manga and pop culture. It makes me excited. Thanks to cosplay I made and am still making many new friends, I get to know people on different level, and am able to travel across the world.

A. P. J.: Do you think cosplay is for everybody?

Hikari Green: Yes, I think it is. I met people with different opinions about this topic. Most of them were not even cosplayers. Some of them told me that I am too old to cosplay (I was about 35 at that time), that cosplay is too childish. All of the veteran cosplayers I know are proud to be cosplayers, and age does not play a role when their hobby makes them happy. Some of the veteran cosplayers do not approve of young cosplayers, who do not make their own costumes. This is based on the fact, that 20 – 30 years ago, there were no cosplay shops, wig shops or anything for cosplayers, and we had to make everything ourselves. This is very different today, when all you need to do is go on eBay, Amazon or Aliexpress and you can buy everything for your cosplay. I find it super useful and helpful, but still, mostly I do all of my costumes and props by myself.

Naoko “Fran” Tamura: I am sure that cosplay is for everyone. In the Japanese community, I heard many times, that cosplay is not for everybody – bigger people should not cosplay thin anime characters, if you are too tall you should not cosplay short characters and vice versa. I do not condone this sentiment. Being a cosplayer means expressing yourself and your passion. It does not mean you are an idol or actor and need to look some specific way. I figured that in western countries, communities are much more welcoming in this regard, and they do not judge cosplayers who do not look 100 percent like character.

A. P. J.: Do you perceive cosplayers who only buy costumes, and do not make them by themselves differently?

Hikari Green: Kind of, yes. For me, fans who only buy costumes and props and do not make them by themselves are more like models than cosplayers, maybe I would call them light cosplayers. I do not hate on them, I do not think of them as any less. As long as they have fun and are nice to everyone else I find it okay.

Naoko “Fran” Tamura: Not really, as long as the rules are not broken (as for cosplay competitions, where you cannot attend in bought costumes) I do not have problem with it. Cosplay is a hobby for everyone, and you don't have to make everything by hand. There are different aspects of cosplay which one can enjoy. Be it crafting, prop making, sewing, roleplaying, or just chilling in costume with your friends.

