

Cosplay and Chinese Social Order: Tension and Compromise

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Abstract: Cosplay, as a cultural phenomenon, is viewed as a tangible reflection of contemporary youth's desire to escape reality and explore unconventional ideas in the collectivist values championed by mainstream Confucianism. This article illustrates why Cosplay can coexist relatively harmoniously with the existing Chinese social order, despite the inherent tensions and conflicts between these two realms. By employing Foucault's theory of "docile bodies and power" alongside ethnographic field research, the author aims to reveal that the coexistence of Cosplay within the contemporary Chinese social system is facilitated by the fact that under the constraints of Confucian appearance politics and the personal identity conveyed through appearance, a dynamic relationship emerges between Cosplay and traditional social values. This relationship can establish a foundation for mutual compromise, despite underlying confrontations. By doing so, it reduces friction between the two sides to a manageable level while fulfilling the requirements of power dynamics and supervision.

1 INTRODUCTION

Cosplay, which originated to describe costume enthusiasts, refers to individuals who dress as fictional characters. This phenomenon began in the 1970s alongside the rise of the doujinshi market, which includes hobby magazines and comics. In contemporary culture, particularly with the rapid connectivity of the Internet, cosplay now encompasses the practices of dressing up and embodying characters from manga (Japanese comics), anime (animated shows), tokusatsu (special effects films or television series), and video games (Dyer, 2021). This vibrant cultural activity, influenced by Japanese, European, and American comics, was introduced to China in the 1990s. Although it has matured over nearly four decades, the reception in China has been mixed. While cosplay enjoys popularity among younger audiences to some extent, it has often faced challenges in being entirely accepted within the East Asian social framework, which is primarily influenced by Confucian traditions.

China's moral framework, rooted in Confucianism, sets it apart from cultures abroad. However, as a widely recognized cultural expression in the modern era, Cosplay must confront the influence of

Confucian values. Therefore, a contradiction between the two sides appears. On the one hand, cosplay, which serves as a distinctive form of self-identification and allows individuals to express their identities within groups, often reflects a dissatisfaction with mainstream societal values. Consequently, when Cosplay publicly showcases the logic behind these behaviors, it is viewed as a challenge to the traditional Confucian social order, which acts as a judge of public behavior. As a result, Cosplay faces stringent restrictions and censorship and is frequently demonized in the Chinese social order. However, on the other hand, behind the apparent conflict lies a vastly different narrative. The development of cosplay in China is progressing at an impressive pace, bolstered significantly by government support. In 2024, notable exhibitions such as the "BiliBili World" and the China International Digital Interactive Entertainment Expo (China Joy) will debut in Shanghai, showcasing cosplay as a central highlight. These events, set in the city's renowned business districts, are anticipated to attract substantial foot traffic and enhance international interest (Shanghai Observer, 2025). Furthermore, data analysis from the China Research Institute of Industry indicates that the scale and audience for China's animation industry are poised

for continued growth. Young people are eager to queue for tickets to experience the diverse styles of various cosplayers. With support from their families and the government, they increasingly enhance their spending power in the two-dimensional realm represented by cosplay (China IRN, 2024). This stark contrast prompts us to ask an important question: Why do such differing views on cosplay exist within the same social system? More specifically, how can cosplay evolve quickly and coexist harmoniously alongside a strict Confucian-oriented social order?

The significance of this study lies in its expansion of the field of appearance politics and its exploration of how identity, as represented by appearance, adapts to varying social contexts. For many scholars, appearance is intricately linked to social norms. Individuals often utilize their appearance to signal or aspire to a particular identity, thereby fostering a sense of pride within that group. Appearance politics broadens this idea to encompass how society and government exert control over personal identity as communicated through appearances. Typically, to further the goals of foreign trade politics, social authorities manipulate narratives and visuals, managing the interpretation of these appearances to seek legitimacy. This manipulation manifests in official resumes, photographs, statues, and propaganda posters (Lu, 2016). In examining the role of Cosplay within a social order primarily influenced by Confucian values, this article adopts an objective stance to analyze how Chinese social authorities employ both implicit and explicit measures--whether coercive or non-coercive-- to promote Cosplay as a suitable means of reinforcing the legitimacy of the traditional social order. At the same time, the author hopes to use this perspective to examine how Chinese social values adjust their positions and compatible elements to seek reconciliation with Cosplay, or even to compromise with each other to create mutual benefits. Similarly, the original intention of shaping self-identity through dressing in accordance with one's personality is not dictated by external influences such as societal expectations or the opinions of others. Instead, it is motivated by internal factors, including personal desires and interests (Sun et al. 2011). By adapting anime characters, individuals not only shape their identity but also respond to the transformation of cosplay itself in various ways due to social situations. Consequently, it is essential to examine the dynamics of how the personal value orientation represented by Cosplay interacts with the mainstream value system of Chinese society. Due to social

reality's complexity, cosplayers can subtly resist regulatory power by adopting an identity that differs from the mainstream social system or actively embrace social order and break free from its constraints. Therefore, this article aims to explore both the challenges and opportunities that the identity represented by Cosplay faces as it seeks to integrate into the Chinese social framework.

Both Cosplay and the social environment need to identify the inherent sources of tension and the potential for positive compromise in their interactions. However, the following two perspectives diverge from this premise to some extent. First, within the framework of postcolonialism, Cosplay is seen as needing to transcend the narrative context and definitions imposed by colonialism. Consequently, Bai (2024) argues that Cosplay is often misinterpreted as an anti-social youth subculture characterized by being anti-social, excessively self-aware, and inclined to escape reality. However, the fact is that Chinese Cosplay participants do not aim to reject the mainstream narrative by creating an imaginary utopia, as explained by the colonial context. This stance asserts that there is no inherent conflict between cosplay and the social system, with scholars striving to define cosplay as a "pure" form of self-expression, free from secular influences. Individuals choose their attire based on personalized criteria, independent of external factors. Besides, many scholars argue that individuals engaging with the second dimension often demonstrate a lack of political or critical aspirations by adhering to patriarchal Confucianism and the pervasive norms of consumerism. They view Cosplay as a transitional space that bridges the realms of art and personal desire, oscillating between the material and immaterial worlds. This fictional and intangible practice can be overlooked by the mainstream social system that scrutinizes Cosplay only when deemed necessary (Jacobs, 2010, 2013) (Fung et al, 2019). This perspective argues that the harmonious coexistence of cosplay and the social system within Confucian culture is due to cosplay's adaptation and submission. In this view, cosplayers serve as passive recipients of social order, consistently navigating censorship and oversight from higher authorities to mitigate potential threats to their practice.

Whether one dismisses the connection between Cosplay and social reality, merely perceiving it as a clothing preference, or staunchly believes that Cosplay serves as a significant compromiser of the social system, there exists a degree of overconfidence

regarding the transformation of foreign elements through local culture. This perspective may foster the assumption that the personal identity reflected in appearance will invariably align closely with societal norms. Local culture can assist foreign elements in crafting local narratives to some extent and expedite their integration into social reality. Still, it cannot entirely eliminate the inherent meanings associated with their places of origin. In other words, even after undergoing the transformation and practice of Sinicization, Cosplay will still retain elements from Japanese and Western comics that are often perceived as "anti-Confucian." This characteristic allows participants the freedom and resources to express their identity. As a means of identity expression, Cosplay can foster a personalized identity distinct from the mainstream ideology of Chinese society, rather than compelling individuals to conform their values to the dominant narrative. Therefore, alongside exploring foreign trade politics and identity as conveyed through appearance, the author seeks to address gaps in previous research by examining the "foreign culture" inherent in Cosplay and discussing its tension and potential reconciliation with China's Confucian social system.

In summary, this paper will be organized into three sections to address the aforementioned issues and to address the gaps left by prior academic work related to cosplay. First, the author will provide a comprehensive overview of the research methods and theoretical foundations underpinning this study. The ethnographic field investigation method, along with Foucault's concept of the "docile body," will be thoroughly explained. Subsequently, the author will conduct interviews with cosplayers in Greater China to gather valuable insights, integrating these findings with theoretical frameworks to explore the fundamental tension between cosplay and the prevailing social system, as well as the potential for compromise between the two.

2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

The primary research method employed in this paper is a quasi-ethnographic approach aimed at understanding the behaviors and experiences of cosplayers, which serves as valuable data support. This method is particularly suitable for the study, as it allows ethnographers to gain insider perspectives

through interviews and observations. In this context, the author conducted in-depth interviews with 15 cosplayers, all selected from cities in Greater China renowned for their vibrant cosplay culture, including Hong Kong, Wuhan, Hangzhou, Chengdu, Beijing, and Shanghai. The demographics of the interviewees vary significantly, encompassing a wide range of occupations from college students to employed professionals, and their income levels also differ markedly. Most interviewees used nicknames in the second dimension for Cosplay to protect their privacy. While the author was transparent about the research purpose, cosplayers tended to be cautious when discussing sensitive topics. Consequently, the author approached these subjects gently, modifying questions and providing appropriate explanations. Additionally, the author leveraged the personal networks of the interviewed cosplayers to broaden the sample selection, as they were eager to share their experiences and encouraged their fellow "comrades" to also voice their perspectives publicly.

This article employs Foucault's conceptual framework of the "docile body" as a foundation for analyzing ethnographic interview data. Foucault examines the interplay between power and the body, particularly focusing on the relationship between the two and the rise of "educational power" within the context of modernity. He argues that the body becomes a central element of power dynamics in contemporary society. Unlike in pre-modern societies, where power operated through external markings, modern power seeks to cultivate a form of self-control within individuals. (Foucault, 1995) Consequently, the educational mechanisms in place produce what Foucault describes as the "docile body." In the realm of Cosplay, the docile body represented by participants becomes a malleable entity. It is shaped by constraints, disciplinary practices, and discursive structures aimed at achieving productive and standardized outcomes. Discourse plays a crucial role in shaping thought patterns within specific temporal and spatial contexts, influencing how we manage our bodies. Our physical existence is intertwined with our capacity for expression; we are not only tangible beings but also creators of meaning (Lysaught, 2009). Thus, when considering docile bodies in the context of cosplay, it is essential to contextualize all players themselves; their performances, behaviors, and thoughts are considered part of the "docile body" mentioned in the arguments below. This was done by examining the influence of institutional power, such as national and

social authorities, and the effects of productivity, including those arising from cultural digitization and the neoliberal economy.

However, Foucault (1995) argues that the relationship between power and the body is not as straightforward as assuming that the body will inevitably yield to the forces of power. Rather, the concept of the body extends beyond mere physical existence; whether it can be transformed into a "docile body" also raises questions about subjectivity. Individuals have the capacity to employ a variety of techniques to manage their bodies and minds, thereby cultivating their unique identities. These practices can include meditation, exercise, and self-reflection, alongside the development of aesthetic and moral emotions. Consequently, "self-care" serves as a means for cosplayers to resist institutional power, fostering a sense of autonomy and self-determination. They must continually enhance and maximize the realization of their values in an environment characterized by relentless commercialization and materialism.

3 TENSION BETWEEN COSPLAY AND CHINESE SOCIAL ORDER

Despite ongoing dilution, the internal contradiction between Cosplay and the social order shaped by traditional Chinese Confucianism remains evident. This tension fundamentally arises from the clash between the self-discipline of the "docile body," influenced by political power, and the body's self-awareness. The Chinese Confucian social framework seeks to regulate Cosplay participants' "proper" development as "bodies" through sustained, repeated, and non-violent control. In response, these participants strive to resist the subtle shaping imposed by mainstream societal values and forge their meanings. This section will first explore the internal logic of Confucian appearance politics to illustrate the mechanisms of regulatory power. Subsequently, the author will draw on ethnographic interview data to demonstrate that the tension between regulation and the regulated is inescapable.

3.1 Confucian Appearance Politics

The foundation of Confucianism's concept of appearance politics is its belief that a person's outward appearance is connected to their inner self. Thus, by observing someone's appearance, one can

discern whether they possess genuine truth in their heart. Xunzi (2025) argued that the external appearance of text and its emotional function are interconnected. The ritual system uses external items, such as money and goods, as tools to establish a distinction between what is considered noble and humble. It also employs a system of rituals and morals to differentiate between these categories, with the level of enjoyment associated with each serving as a marker of their divergence. Xunzi's teachings outline the fundamental prerequisites for embodying Confucian rituals: appearance serves as the foundation, while the hierarchy is the ultimate goal. To attain the status of a gentleman, one must first cultivate the "legal appearance." This entails rectifying and honoring one's appearance in accordance with established etiquette, as well as adhering to the objective principles appropriate to one's rank to fulfill both political and moral responsibilities. Only by doing so can one manifest a solemn and respectable manner of rituals.

The analysis presented above convincingly demonstrates that the social order characterized by Confucianism inherently politicizes appearance. By attributing sociopolitical significance to external appearances, Confucianism establishes a favorable evaluation of certain styles while marginalizing those that do not align with mainstream social values. Role-playing, often regarded as a subculture or a deviation from the dominant culture, is frequently classified as "low culture" and perceived as a threat to "high culture" aesthetics within the cultural hierarchy. This subcultural expression can be viewed as a symbolic challenge to the conventional notions of beauty prevalent in public discourse. The unconventional attire and exaggerated makeup associated with such expressions defy the stringent expectations of seriousness and respectability in public, necessitating scrutiny and judgment from higher social ranks (Xu, 2004). The appearance politics governed by Confucianism effectively become a politics of respect. The solemnity dictated by clothing serves as a "scare tactic" to ensure governmental stability and societal peace. Once the public internalizes this expectation, it fosters a self-reinforcing vigilance. Consequently, an orderly and tranquil society is structured according to a valued hierarchy.

3.2 Supervision from the Chinese Social Order

Since the 1980s, China has strategically developed

and regulated its pop music, animation, comics, and fashion industries. This approach has been extended to Cosplay, marking a new era of cultural expression. Cosplay and its associated industries possess unrestricted content, substantial grassroots support, and significant global acceptance. According to Foucault's theory, the docile body is subjected to institutional powers, such as the state and educational or correctional systems, and the productivity of related industries and platforms, which impose discursive discipline and normalization in public spaces and among consumers. For the "docile body," state power operates in a bottom-up, capillary fashion, leading to many forms of opposition derived from the diverse power relations within society (Foucault, 1995). Consequently, Chinese social values have shifted away from direct repression and passive censorship, opting instead for a more comprehensive, patient, and experimental approach to control and shape Cosplay and its industry. This strategy can be classified into two primary forms: First, Chinese Confucianism seeks to cultivate Cosplay practitioners personally. This encompasses tasks such as establishing Cosplay-related industries, capturing market share, providing content through official media channels, and training talented individuals to become future content creators. Second, Chinese Confucianism gently supervises and regulates the culture. This involves suppressing threatening products, managing disobedient participants through relatively mild means, and steering fan network activities toward non-political or pro-government domains (Chew, 2023).

In response to the growing popularity of Cosplay, the government's primary strategy has been to sponsor and organize large-scale anime exhibitions. Such exhibitions have been held in China since the late 1990s, though they initially drew only a few thousand attendees. Starting in the mid-2000s, the state progressively tightened its control over cosplay activities during these events. Qianchen, a cosplayer from Liaocheng, Shandong, affirmed this development:

"Government participation is essential for anime exhibitions and cosplay events in Shandong. I recall that last year's Taishan Animation Festival started with the mayor and other leaders giving work reports, and higher-level officials also participated in the inspections. These kinds of activities are quite 'Red' in Shandong. Personally, I prefer not to participate in cosplay at anime exhibitions because I feel a sense of restraint and psychological tension."

Through Qianchen's insights, the author conveys a nuanced message: as a significant public venue, the comic exhibition serves as a platform for Cosplay participants to engage with the tangible, three-dimensional world. Accordingly, the Chinese social order subtly fosters a "proper" cultural atmosphere at comic exhibitions by investing in funding and infrastructure while establishing informal guidelines for producing suitable content. For instance, during the Taishan Animation Festival referenced by Qianchen, numerous government officials highlighted the importance and rationale behind integrating traditional Chinese Confucian culture with the two-dimensional realm in their speeches. Feng Nengbin, deputy mayor of Tai'an City, remarked, "If Taishan is secure, the entire world will be secure. The profound culture of Taishan serves as a continual source of strength for the growth of emerging industries such as animation, which in turn provides communication and influence to the former." Additionally, the distinct intellectual properties of the Taishan Cultural Festival, such as Taishan Boy and Taishan Da Ni, symbolize the foundational values of Confucian culture, including courage in the face of adversity, kindness, and wisdom (Chinese Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2024). These traditional Chinese social values, intertwined with Cosplay elements, are a product of the country's institutional strategies. They reflect the Confucian culture's expectation for Cosplay players to uphold social order and promote positive energy. The aim is to reconcile the universal values of youth, freedom, equality, and fraternity reflected in animation, allowing Cosplay participants to assume greater agency in shaping their cultural identity. As the "disseminators of faith" undergo this transformation, Cosplay evolves from being perceived as contrary to Confucian culture to emerging as a vibrant ally in the new era to reinforce the Chinese cultural soft power (Saito, 2021,2022).

Secondly, the moderate regulation of Cosplay styles and themes serves as an essential measure for fostering a proper representation of this art form. This approach shares a rationale similar to that of regulating celebrities within Chinese society. As transnational cultural flows and market-driven mass media continue to expand, both Cosplay and the entertainment industry are rapidly gaining influence (Xu & Yang, 2021). For Cosplay enthusiasts, the aim is to harness the power of these contemporary cultural communicators to advocate for "virtue and art," which leads Chinese society to invoke Confucian

principles. This seeks to ensure that the content of Cosplay remains within acceptable boundaries in terms of socialist values, morals, party policies, and ideology. CN, a cosplayer from Hong Kong, elaborated on how this is manifested during comic exhibitions.

"In mainland China, the key rule for comic exhibitions is that Cosplay participants must not violate public order (for example, Cosplayers cannot wear too strange costumes to scare children). Although most Cosplay materials come from Japan, all comic exhibitions prohibit wearing kimono-related costumes (such as my favorite series "Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba"), unless players want to make trouble. Additionally, any large comic exhibition explicitly forbids costumes or themes that involve political, ethnic, or religious issues."

CN's remarks vividly illustrate how Chinese society exercises authority to discipline Cosplay participants, a cultural elite, thereby instilling a "chilling effect" among the general public. However, this is merely the initial step. To cultivate a noble sentiment towards Cosplay aligned with socialist values, the concept of familial affection, as emphasized by Confucianism, is also employed to subtly guide the evolution of Cosplay, encouraging a compromise in a semi-mandatory manner. For instance, Xiao Mo, a novice cosplayer who has recently entered the scene, shared his experiences:

"My parents come from a small rural town, and their views are quite conservative. They are not very familiar with popular culture, such as cosplay. Since I was a child, my family has been very strict with me, leading to restrictions on my outings to play. Because of this, I never dared to share the specifics of my interest in cosplay with my father; he would undoubtedly ban any unusual costumes from being worn in our house. As a result, I have been saving money from my living expenses to buy cosplay costumes."

Although Xiao Mo's family did not entirely restrict his Cosplay activities, their lack of financial and emotional support created considerable challenges for his experience. The root of this issue lies in his parents' disdain for unconventional costumes, which stems from their adherence to Confucian values and rituals. This situation illustrates that, even when using mild measures, coercive tactics have lost their effectiveness; thus, social order must seek the consent of those it governs. One practical approach to gaining this consent is to align with individuals who resonate with the public's emotions, possess their trust, and can

lend legitimacy to the controlling authority (Leibold, 2010). In Xiao Mo's case, his family's traditional beliefs lead them to unconditionally trust the beneficial influence of social order, positioning them as allies in the effort to suppress "foreign and strange costumes." When this dynamic is successfully established, Confucianism adapts to a changing society, ultimately earning public recognition and reinforcing its authority in cultural governance.

The two aforementioned approaches to regulating and shaping Cosplay illustrate that the "body" has consistently been influenced by the dynamics of appearance politics under Confucianism, with variations in the scale, object, and method of such influence. Regarding Cosplay regulation, the initial step in Confucian social order involves a system of rewards and punishments: individuals are granted rewards and privileges for exemplary behavior, while bad behavior is met with punishment and the need for atonement (May, 2005). When comic exhibitions can effectively promote the social education and moral cultivation underscored by Chinese tradition, they often informally accommodate fan-driven transactions and activities, catering to a new generation of cultural communicators. Conversely, when potential sources of unrest arise, the Confucian traditions of order and prohibition are revived as cultural instruments to assert social authority. The subsequent step involves scrutinizing technologies that integrate hierarchical observation and normative judgment and classifying and evaluating individuals via newly established notification systems. The reach of state power has expanded across various social domains, emphasizing regulating and monitoring marginalized groups and their activities, making the body and daily life central targets (Yuan & Tian, 2023). Consequently, the Confucian ideals of family harmony and the principle of "order among the old and young" have emerged as powerful tools for governing Cosplay, leading to its evolution in a semi-mandatory context. This phenomenon results from transferring state power to various supranational organizations and local or grassroots citizen groups. Through these two steps, Confucian social values have effectively supervised and shaped Cosplay within Foucault's theoretical framework, leading to its suppression in an objectified mechanism and compelling it to accept the exercise of power.

3.3 Resistance from Cosplay

In their pursuit of navigating the intricate landscape

of power dynamics, Cosplay and its participants continually confront the surveillance and norms imposed by Confucian appearance politics. Drawing on Foucault's theory, it is understood that where there is power, there is resistance, manifesting in diverse forms wherever power is exercised (Foucault, 1995). This hopeful notion of resistance is rooted in the symbolic expression of the self-concept among Cosplay players in the contemporary era, where appearance serves to convey their identities and the perceptions they wish to project to others. Within this framework, Cosplay participants are anticipated to leverage their "docile bodies" to merge the virtual identities they adopt from their roles with their aspirations, thereby crafting and maintaining a distinctive identity that sets them apart from the traditional Confucian value system. This identity encompasses two primary dimensions: individual identity and group identity, with a nuanced interrelationship between the two. Initially, Cosplayers cultivate a pleasurable, fantastical self-identity that offers an escape from reality, subsequently developing a unique and potent group identity to challenge the legitimacy of the Confucian value system.

Currently, China's Generation Z urban youth remain under the influence of their parents and adults, constrained by established and revered spatial classifications such as family, school, and society. The challenges they encounter include, but are not limited to, their status as only children, high parental expectations, competitive educational and economic systems, and the enduring impact of hierarchical traditions that view young people as juniors within the family and society (Chen, 2021). In response, they often turn to the unique world of Cosplay to create an alternative space, employing various strategies to question, neutralize, and subvert the existing social order, allowing them to escape from the cultural and symbolic confines of reality. This realm enables them to fully explore and express their identities, much like Elana Peng, who has four years of Cosplay experience, articulated:

"For me, cosplay is a way to escape reality by embodying different characters. I often find real life boring, and many of my values and ideas are difficult to express. Cosplay allows me to create a virtual world where I can express the personality often suppressed in everyday life. The clothing I wear daily feels like a disguise, but when I put on the costumes of my favorite characters, I feel confident and truly myself. I believe this reflects my rebellious spirit."

Based on Elana's thoughts, the author suggests that the motivations of cosplay participants reflect their resistance to China's Confucian social system. Many cosplayers, like Elana, embody their favorite characters to fulfill roles or dreams that are absent in their everyday lives. The act of performing imagined identities holds significance when expressed and experienced within a specific context. Through role-playing, an individual's identity can transform from a high school student into a mighty hero, from a woman into a strong, empowered figure, or an ordinary person into a wealthy celebrity (Rahman et al. 2012). This transformation offers excitement and satisfaction to participants, serving as a compelling reaction to the rigid expectations and pressures imposed by Confucian appearance norms. In their everyday attire, players are subjected to continuous monitoring and influence from the central authority. At home, parents instill in them the values of obedience and adherence to the directives of their elders. In school, social pressure compels them to achieve good grades. Should they fail to meet these expectations, they risk being stigmatized as failures and labeled as lazy, rebellious, indifferent, or fitting into negative stereotypes. However, when they wear Cosplay costumes, they attempt to embody virtual characters, empowering them to challenge these labels. This fusion of identity with their chosen roles liberates them from the responsibilities typically associated with conventional clothing, leading them to believe they can reinvent themselves and transform their reality. This metamorphosis allows them to reimagine their ordinary selves with a fresh appearance, ushering in dreams, happiness, romance, and fantasy.

After establishing their individual imaginary identities, Cosplay players seek to cultivate a stronger collective identity to confront the Confucian social system effectively. They utilize a shared identity rooted in clothing to express a form of group identity that neither undermines individualistic values nor detracts from the collectivist principles inherent in the Cosplay community (Peirson-Smith, 2013). Through a sense of belonging, rituals, traditions, and moral responsibilities associated with portraying characters, Cosplay players form tribes and communities. The bond created among members symbolizes their commitment to challenging the traditional social order represented by Cosplay. A Fu, a freshman Cosplay player from Chengdu, attested to this point:

"I started participating in cosplay in high school. At that time, I was just curious and didn't know how

to connect my interests with others in the community. As a result, the characters I portrayed were of low quality. As I have grown older and more mature, I hope to communicate better with others through my roles. This has led me to have higher and more detailed expectations for my performances, and I sometimes even require a specific makeup routine to achieve the desired effect."

The author contends that Afu's enhancement of Cosplay costumes and makeup serves two primary functions. First, this transformation distinguishes A Fu from non-Cosplayers; as she noted, she feels completely separated from the real world when engaging in two-dimensional activities. Second, this process reinforces A Fu's group identity as a member of a new style tribe that embraces unconventional attire. This dynamic reflects a convergence of personal choice and collective self-awareness. Cosplayers like Afu, along with other documented subjects of subcultural narratives, express their individual and collective identities, as well as their ideologies, through tangible changes in their appearance. Having successfully established their identity in opposition to the Confucian social order, they recognize that donning elaborate and unique costumes within a predominantly collectivist cultural framework invites social discrimination (Burke, 2022). As a result, they embody a structured commitment to the Cosplay culture through their physical expressions while leveraging the collective security offered by virtual environments, such as role-playing parties or conventions, to generate powerful counter-public narratives. This process allows the "docile body" of the Cosplay participants to effectively complete a cycle of resistance against established power structures, particularly those rooted in traditional Chinese Confucian ideals, which aligns with Foucault's theory.

4 COMPROMISES BETWEEN COSPLAY AND CHINESE SOCIAL ORDER

4.1 Compromise from the Chinese Social Order

The analysis above confirms an inherent tension between Cosplay culture and the structure of Chinese social order; however, it does not fully explain the active proliferation of Cosplay in contemporary

Chinese society. This confrontational dynamic of power regulation and influence does not preclude the possibility of compromise. In Foucault's view, a compromise between the regulator of power and the docile individual does not imply the eradication of power itself. Instead, the surveillance inherent in power positions individuals within a realm of visibility, subjecting them to objectification. This is similar to the concept of the circular prison, where each individual is under the watchful eye of a centralized, though unseen, observer, reinforcing the notion that they are perpetually monitored (Wehrle, 2016). Since the elimination of surveillance is not feasible, any concessions made by power in response to resistance must integrate the characteristics and effects of this relationship, accommodating new objectives and subjects within it. This phenomenon aligns with Foucault's idea of power normalization (Foucault, 1995). For a compromise to emerge in the tension between Cosplay and Chinese society, the Confucian social order must first extend its power over the Cosplay community, continuously reinforcing its authority within this newly defined context. Through this process, Confucian values may gradually permeate the grassroots of the Cosplay subculture, empowering individuals within this group to develop self-censorship mechanisms and prevent unnecessary conflict. A Ke, a Cosplay enthusiast on the verge of graduating from college and entering the workforce, exemplifies this with her personal experience:

"I believe the state's control over social media has helped increase public awareness of Cosplay. Before the COVID-19 outbreak, many people would view me as mentally unstable when I walked down the street. However, now passersby seem to understand our hobby better. This shift in perception might partly be due to many individuals using Cosplay as a means of gaining attention before, including sharing videos related to topics like sex addiction and borderline personality disorder online."

Although A Ke did not explicitly explain to the author how the Confucian social order has decentralized power to grassroots groups like hers, we can deduce its underlying logic from her response regarding the growing public recognition of Cosplay. A Ke argues that this shift in societal perception is partly attributable to enhancing social media-related content within the party-state system, which has filtered out aspects of Cosplay culture that may be uncomfortable for the general public. The method by which these elements were removed raises intriguing

questions. Additionally, considering A Ke's acknowledgment of the role of social media in promoting Cosplay culture, the author further inquired about her involvement in Cosplay on social media platforms:

"I believe that I am pursuing IPs. I create characters based on popular IPs and post them on my social media accounts. This approach aligns with mainstream trends, as I want to attract attention from others. To achieve this, I feel engaging with what is currently popular is necessary."

When examining A Ke's perspective on enhancing the public perception of Cosplay above, it becomes evident how the Confucian social system seeks to establish a foundation for compromise with Cosplay. First, grassroots Cosplay enthusiasts like A Ke are drawn to the promotion and commercialization of Cosplay on digital platforms regulated by the government, successfully creating accounts to engage as participants. These platforms include popular social media in mainland China, such as WeChat, TikTok, and Xiaohongshu. While these platforms operate under the influence of government ideology, their primary objectives are profit-driven and facilitate communication (Chen et al. 2023). Secondly, A Ke and other grassroots participants subconsciously embody the values of the Confucian social system, engaging in self-censorship and monitoring others during their participation. When individuals with mainstream social values evaluate Cosplay enthusiasts through the lens of traditional Confucian ideals, such as formal attire, etiquette, and order, the inherent aspects of Cosplay that promote freedom, self-expression, and individuality face suppression. Consequently, A Ke and fellow participants, as "docile bodies," leverage the authority of social order to impose self-regulation on social media. They aim to exclude content that could provoke scrutiny from mainstream values and increasingly align with the "mainstream trends that are more readily accepted by the public." This alignment is primarily achieved by adjusting makeup and clothing details to resemble mainstream intellectual properties within Chinese comics. At the same time, while gravitating towards mainstream aesthetics, they work to influence other players to adopt these same standards. Other participants likewise strive to adhere to these norms to avoid being marginalized by the majority. When self-censorship influenced by mainstream societal values coincides with the censorship imposed on others, it results in a dynamic where individuals serve as both the

enforcers of authority and the subjects of scrutiny. This situation reveals how the Confucian social order seeks to accommodate the identities of Cosplay enthusiasts, delegating the responsibility of monitoring their peers to them as much as possible. This approach not only alleviates the inherent tensions within the group but also transforms these individuals from grassroots rebels into allies who oversee other "docile bodies."

To broaden the reach of decentralized surveillance power, the compromise mentioned above is reflected in daily life by integrating Cosplay into China's cultural soft power, thus maximizing cultural consumption alongside grassroots participants whose influence has been decentralized. At its core, this approach seeks to expand self-censorship standards within popular culture, thereby reducing friction between the public, who uphold Confucian mainstream values, and the world of Cosplay. Addressing A Ke's reflections on his pursuit of mainstream intellectual property, the author examines explicitly how the current popular animation IP "Nezha" resonates within mainland China, and how enthusiasts of the two-dimensional culture promote the diffusion of mainstream values while retaining the distinctive traits of Cosplay. As a pivotal figure in Chinese mythology, Nezha's image not only embodies the parent-child dynamic of "kindness from above and filial piety from below" through the subtle expression of love but also represents the courage to challenge injustice through the pursuit of an independent personality and individual opinions within the Confucian framework of self-cultivation (Li, 2019). As Cosplay players blend their interests and skills into the mainstream cultural IP, the general public is more likely to appreciate their self-censorship standards and accept the unique makeup and costumes influenced by Chinese Confucianism. At the 7th COMIC UP Creation Exchange Exhibition in Guangzhou, characters from the film "Nezha," including Nezha, Ao Bing, and Shen Gongbao, drew a significant number of visitors eager to take photos and engage with the characters. The film's plot and the cultural meanings embedded in these characters fostered connections between many Cosplayers and everyday people (China Daily, 2025). Similarly, in Ningbo, Zhejiang, various tourist attractions hosted a carnival dedicated to Nezha culture, featuring activities such as stamp collecting and dance performances. This innovative blend of "anime IP + local culture" has effectively encouraged tourists to explore local attractions (Sohu, 2025). The cultural

consumption of enhanced Cosplay content serves to package Confucian mainstream ideology into a standardized lens for popular culture. While Cosplay participants remain under the influence of established power structures, grassroots participants have gradually taken control of the mechanisms behind censorship standards, skillfully aligning their identity with social and cultural soft power. This evolution is rooted in the Confucian value of sharing power and bringing others into the fold.

4.2 Compromise from Cosplay

Under those, as mentioned above, hidden panoramic surveillance, Cosplayers are increasingly categorized and subject to open, real-time oversight based on enhanced censorship standards. Throughout this process, these players rely on multiple influences, including the enforced narratives of the state system, the expectations and demands of Cosplay audiences, and the editorial management and compensatory mechanisms (such as tips, rewards, likes, and attention) dictated by social media platforms. Consequently, they must navigate the delicate task of refining their presentations without compromising their personal identities concerning the Confucian value system. Specifically, they are tasked with transforming their "docile bodies" into representations that are ambitious, positive, yet tinged with a sense of decadence and hedonistic defiance. This does not imply that players are relinquishing their dissent from Confucian ideals or capitulating to the pressures of surveillance. Instead, they must strategically curate their public personas to present themselves as desirable or appealing while concealing their personal interests, thereby maintaining a careful balance between their restrained desires and their professionalism and reputation in the public eye (Fang, 2023). This balancing act can be divided into two key components. First, players must adhere to censorship standards, demonstrating more expressive models even if praised by society, using these norms to foster the growth of cosplay culture. Second, they must also address their needs alongside the pre-existing subversive demands of the Confucian value system, embracing a form of identity that resonates with a "hedonic" reinterpretation.

Cosplayers navigate two conflicting expectations stemming from varying power dynamics. On one hand, they are pressured to adopt behaviors and attitudes that align with mainstream cultural norms,

as the influence of the Confucian social order is heightened by governmental authority and accompanying measures of punishment and education. This reinforces their positioning as compliant individuals within the context of self-representation. On the other hand, they encounter the expectation to meet the demands of their fellow cosplayers, who may or may not conform to the same power dynamics, as well as the need to cater to these community needs (de Mello et al. 2021). Within social media platforms, peers prompt cosplayers to adhere to industry standards through immediate, close-knit virtual engagement and validation, promoting cosplay culture appealingly and desirably to the public. Consequently, cosplayers' compliance stems from both involuntary and voluntary adherence to these dual media discourses. These narratives are considered ideal benchmarks of expertise, regulated and/or incentivized by the state, various platforms, and fans. Jiang Zhenshan, an adult cosplayer from Wuhan, Hubei, illustrated how she experienced these dual expectations from distinct power sources.

"My friend and I attended a comic convention where he intended to dress as a character from 'Call of Duty'. However, his costume was hindered by security due to the weapon-like props he was carrying. In that moment, I recognized that despite my desire to dress up as a character I admired, the prevailing social atmosphere might not be conducive to it. Consequently, even if I were to go ahead and wear a costume, it wouldn't have the desired impact."

Jiang's statements vividly illustrate the stringent regulations governing acceptable performances and desirable behaviors within the covert panoptic effect. This effect is maintained through the coercive power of the government, along with Confucian social etiquette norms, psychological needs, and the immediate participatory experiences dictated by cosplayers. Comic exhibitions themselves function as a form of power that can restrict the bodies of cosplayers. For instance, characters from "Call of Duty" cannot be accommodated within the rule-abiding and hierarchical structure of the mainstream societal value system due to their association with weaponry. Likewise, they clash with the values of freedom and equality that underpin cosplay culture, which is endorsed by other participants at comic exhibitions. When these two forces dictate terms of engagement, including content policies and review systems, it necessitates that players comply with the platform's rules, regulations, and functionalities, adapting their content accordingly. This may involve

creating material that adheres to aesthetic standards or appeals to targeted audience segments. To delve deeper into this research, the author inquired of Jiang how to strike a balance between the surveillance and influence of these two powers:

"I often think about how to integrate myself into this environment. One possible approach is to adopt "grouping" behavior on platforms with less favorable atmospheres. My characters may be different from those of other players, but all of our characters meet the requirements for the comic exhibition. We take photos together and check in with each other to boost the popularity of various characters, and everyone is quite satisfied with this arrangement. I believe that communication plays a crucial role for other players as well. We all portray relatively positive characters and can serve as role models for others. New players can see us on social media and connect with the same characters. This positive atmosphere can enhance public recognition of us to some extent."

Jiang's further analysis reveals how Cosplay participants navigate the expectations of differing influences while actively promoting the spread of Cosplay culture through their normative performances. First, Jiang and her peers strive to remain relevant to mainstream Cosplay genres, themes, and scenes, effectively presenting themselves as commercialized embodiments intended to demonstrate their belonging to an in-group characterized by pioneering, innovative, and ambitious discourse. Jiang appreciates the rationality behind Cosplay's "grouping" behavior, recognizing it as essential for communicating their identities and the connotations of their roles to one another. This sense of community fosters a pragmatic mentality and solidarity among participants. In the public space of comic exhibitions—where the gaze of authority is ever-present—players collectively dress up and openly showcase visual representations that defy traditional Confucian norms, expressing a positive attitude towards Cosplay while striving to meet societal expectations. This act serves as a tempting offering of "diversity costumes" to the public. Aware that their acceptance could be fleeting due to external pressures, observers and peers are inclined to embrace this "bait," ultimately validating the successful performances of these players involved in and advocating for Cosplay (Yang, 2022). Secondly, Jiang acknowledges that cosplay performance serves as a means of fulfilling the demands of authority. The process of obtaining authorization and recognition becomes a conscious gesture, strategy, or deliberate

attempt by the subculture to express a willingness to be integrated into or accepted by mainstream culture. Thus, Jiang and other participants intentionally align with the expectations of the traditional social system for the Chinese public through social media. By cultivating a positive role image, they promote socialist core values rooted in Confucianism as a positive example, thereby fostering an uplifting societal atmosphere in a visually impactful manner. According to Foucault's definition, the fundamental basis for individuals' admiration of the "good life" lies in labor and discipline—comprising a set of knowledge and rules to be adhered to (Crossley, 1996). Consequently, cosplayers "voluntarily" strive to meet these norms, believing in the necessity of continuous self-improvement and full engagement within an environment marked by ongoing commercialization and reification.

Cosplay culture is often regarded as "deviant," "heretical," and "obscure." As a result, participants must navigate compromises not only to meet the expectations of various authorities but also to make limited concessions regarding the core purpose of their costumes: to challenge the Confucian social system's stringent values and advocate for personal autonomy. This understanding among participants reinforces the prevalent discourse surrounding childish or pure desires in cosplay. Such discourse reinterprets elaborate costumes and heavy makeup as expressions of "pure" hedonism, devoid of political or critical intentions. For instance, when interviewing Miranda, a cosplayer from Qingdao International High School, her conservative response clearly illustrates this perspective:

"I don't think too deeply about my interest in cosplay. It's just a hobby of mine, and I don't feel the need to elevate it beyond that. Much like music, where some people prefer rock and others enjoy classical, it's simply a way for me to relax. Even my mother helps me with it."

Interestingly, when the author inadvertently explored Miranda's social media, due to the interview via WeChat, a popular social app in mainland China, she discovered a stark contrast between her depth of participation in Cosplay in her daily life and the restraint she exhibited during the interview. Miranda passionately engages in discussions about gender identity and the legitimacy of various players' sexual behaviors on her private account. She shares her dialogues with users from overseas local area networks, including Instagram, which is banned in mainland China, on these topics. Occasionally, she

employs comic characters to craft profound narratives that reflect on the shortcomings of her character's sexual performance in her costume. These striking contrasts underscore that Miranda's joyful, gentle, and non-confrontational demeanor may serve as a subconscious avoidance of the patriarchal constraints inherent in Confucian values. If she were to make inappropriate remarks during her public interview with the author, she would likely face backlash from the government and scrutiny from other users and censorship bodies (Xu & Zheng, 2025). Undoubtedly, her social media content challenges Confucian ethics and traditional gender norms; however, she rationalizes this risky interest as "her hobby and way of relaxing," effectively sidestepping the politicization of her Cosplay experience by both the Confucian value system and the broader public. Instead, in her public-facing persona, she presents a model devoid of political or critical ambitions, particularly in the presence of strangers like the author. This strategy allows her to maintain a supportive private network for her romantic fantasies and taboo subjects while remaining aligned with the social changes driven by Chinese Confucianism. Ultimately, this behavior reflects Miranda's exploration of alienation as it is transformed and concealed through ritualistic, superficial, and opportunistic role-playing.

5 CONCLUSION

This article explores the coexistence of Cosplay with traditional Chinese Confucian social values. As a distinctive expression in Chinese society, Cosplay symbolically transforms participants' identities, enabling them to present themselves anew through role-playing. However, due to the influence of Confucian appearance politics, a fundamental clash between Cosplay and the traditional Confucian social order is inevitable and significant. Chinese society, grounded in traditional values, carefully nurtures and monitors Cosplay and its practitioners to ensure alignment with the development of Confucian appearance politics. Amidst the confusion and pursuit of individuality among Chinese Generation Z youth, Cosplay challenges the conservative value system of traditional Confucian society by fostering unique personal and group identities. In this dynamic between authority and those being monitored, the Confucian value system and Cosplay strive to find common ground to mitigate the adverse effects of

their conflict. Recognizing that clothing is an expression of identity, Chinese Confucian society seeks to enhance cultural consumption by empowering grassroots Cosplay communities to embrace their identities. In doing so, Cosplay participants subtly conceal the political ambitions tied to their distinctive identities while promoting Cosplay culture within the framework of mainstream censorship standards.

In the context of Confucian appearance politics and the personal identity expressed through clothing and appearance, the interaction between Cosplay and the traditional social value system can find a basis for mutual compromise, even as it confronts these established norms. This dynamic can help mitigate friction between the two perspectives to a manageable level, all while navigating the conditions of power monitoring and being monitored. Throughout this process, the power dynamics inherent in the Confucian social system influence and shape the essence of Cosplay, creating a "complex strategic situation" and a "diversity of power relations" that is both "intentional" and "non-subjective." Consequently, the Confucian social order is maintained through the expression of various "resistance points," and the myriad forms of resistance represented by Cosplay should not be oversimplified as mere acts of revolution or betrayal in a singular context. This allows for analyzing the tension and compromise between the two from a micro-dynamic perspective. Due to constraints related to time and the author's resources, the sample chosen for this article is somewhat limited and may not fully capture the intricate dynamic between Cosplay and China's Confucian social system. Future research could explore two key directions using more extensive sample data: investigating why Cosplay cannot be entirely localized within the framework of Confucian culture, and conducting a comparative analysis of how participants in Cosplay and other subcultures establish effective identity recognition.

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