



Emerald cosplaying as Tamamo no Mae. Photo: Fiathriel (Rachel Lewis).

CREATING FOX SPIRIT COSPLAY

Emerald L King

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Tamamo no Mae is a fox spirit or *kitsune*, remembered in Japanese folklore as one of the three worst evils to befall Japan. Her tale can be traced to China, where she is associated with the fox demon *Daji*, before shifting to an Indian kingdom, back to China and eventually to Japan. It is one that is symbolic of the movement of ideas and people along trade routes. It is also one that represents my own journey between Australia and Japan.

There are several versions of Tamamo's story. One version, penned during the ghost story boom of the Tokugawa period, goes like this: Tamamo appears in the court of Emperor Toba and soon rises to be his favourite (Tamamo means most precious jewel). The longer the emperor spends in her

presence, the more his health fails. Eventually a magician of the Abe tribe exposes Tamamo's true form and 700 men pursue her into the plains of Nasu. She is sealed inside a large stone known as the *Sessho-seki* (killing stone). In some versions, this stone kills anyone who touches it. In others, a young priest carves the stone into the shape of a Buddha and takes away Tamamo's last vestige of power. The poet Basho visits the stone in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*.

This version of her robe is part of a costume I created based on the design for KOEI's 2011 game *Warrior's Orochi 3* (Musō OROCHI). The robe is a modified *meisen kimono* from the Taisho or early Showa period. I adjusted the length so it sits like a long *haori* (jacket



The *haori* from Emerald's cosplay on display at the OBJECTively symposium in 2019. Photo: Yanhong Ouyang.

for a *kimono*), and widened the arm span to cover my long limbs. The discoloured white silk lining was replaced with a *ro* summer *kimono* from the 1970s or 1980s; unpicked and resewn into its new form. To the outside of the gown I added motifs of autumn leaves swirling on a river in gold foil that was hand cut and then ironed into place. The long boa of faux fox fur hanging from the collar hints at Tamamo's otherworldly true form.

The gown itself symbolises a continuous journey between Japan, Australia and New Zealand. The *kimono* were bought from a second hand store in Nara. They were unpicked in Hobart and stitched together in hotels in Sendai, Yokohama and Tokyo as I university-hopped giving public talks one snowy January. The newly constructed *uchikake* (outer robe) was embellished with gold foil in a mouldy flat in Wellington. The whole costume debuted at an anime event,

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AiCon, in Tasmania in 2015, where it won Best Technical, and was re-worn at events in New Zealand. It has been displayed at the University of Tasmania, Tokai University, and at the National Museum of Australia for the OBJECTively symposium.

As a cosplay costume, Tamamo no Mae's gown further hints at the shift of ideas and people on a much larger scale. Most English language studies of cosplay still start with a brief history of the term 'cosplay' as a portmanteaux of the words 'costume' and 'play' as coined by a Japanese commentator reporting on what he saw at Star Trek conventions in the United States in the 1980s.

The story of cosplay in Australia starts in the late 1990s as Japanese rock music and fashion were adopted in the goth scene. At the same time, SBS started screening cult classics such as *Akira* and *Ghost in the Shell*, while

series like *Neon Genesis* and *Sailor Moon* were playing regularly on commercial television. One of the first cosplay events took place in Melbourne at a barbecue held by three anime societies and would later grow into the Manifest convention, which ran from 2001 until 2013. In the late 1990s and early 2000s cosplay in Australia solely referred to dressing up as Japanese characters. For many young Australians who could not afford to travel to Japan, cosplay and anime events allowed young fans to experience their own piece of Japan at home in Australia.

More recently, cosplay has taken its place on the global stage. Australia has just celebrated its tenth anniversary as members and competitors in the World Cosplay Summit (WCS). The WCS has been held annually in Nagoya since 2004. In 2019 the competition hosted over forty countries and was held in Nagoya and Tokyo. It was the first time Australia won and the first time a

predominately English-speaking nation has won the event.

Australian representatives in the Global Crown Championships of Cosplay (billed as 'the biggest competition in the world') held at the Chicago Comic and Entertainment Expo have placed first (2016), second (2018) and third (2019) since the event began in 2016.

The idea of 'cosplay' for most practitioners has shifted from being a niche Japanese activity, to a global social activity firmly cemented in the American Marvel/DC pop culture media worlds. It is a hobby that brings together fans from a wide range of backgrounds regardless of age, economic status and language.



Emerald L King is a lecturer in Japanese at La Trobe University, Australia. She studied in Australia and Japan before receiving her PhD in Japanese literature from the University of Tasmania in 2012. She worked at Victoria University of Wellington from 2013 to 2018 and was appointed head of Japanese in 2016. Her research is divided between women in Japanese literature from the late 1960s to the early 2000s, and reading costumes as text. Her recent work on cosplay focuses on costume construction as an act of fan translation. As part of her cosplay research she is also an award winning cosplayer, judge and MC.