



Girls' "Metamorphosis" : Anime and Gender in Japan
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【001】 Hello Everyone. I am KIRIHARA Kenshin, Professor in the Department of Japanese Culture. I specialize in the cultural and intellectual history of modern and contemporary Japan.

【004】 Today, we will think about metamorphosis of girls in Japanese manga and anime and what this can tell us about changes in gender representation in Japanese society. "Henshin" or "Metamorphosis" means becoming someone different from who you are now. In other words, through metamorphosis, a person can become the self they hope to be. In that sense, the form a character takes after metamorphosis can be seen as an ideal image for girls of that time. Today, we will explore how these ideal images have changed over time.

Japan in the 1950s

【020】 We will begin with the 1950s. What was the ideal image of Japanese girls at that time?

【021】 Girls fought actively—just like this.

【022】

【023】 あたしの見る夢は 秘密なの だれにも言わない 秘密なの／赤いマント ヒラヒラ 馬をとばす
王女 それがあたし／リボンの騎士は ほんとは ほんとは あたしなのさあ

【024】 My dream is a secret that I do not talk about. A princess riding a horse, wearing a fluttering red cape. The Ribbon Knight is me in truth!

【025】 This is *Ribbon no Kishi*, or *Princess Knight*, written and illustrated by Tezuka Osamu. He is widely known as "Manga no Kamisama," the "Patron Saint of Japanese Manga," for pioneering the modern style of story-driven manga. Please remember his name: Tezuka Osamu. The anime you have just watched was released in 1967, but the original manga began in 1953.

【026】 Incidentally, *Ribbon no Kishi* will be renamed *The Ribbon Hero* and released on Netflix this summer. If you have a Netflix subscription, please watch it.

【027】 This is Princess Sapphire. She is a girl, but she was born with both a female and a male soul due to an angel's mischief. Therefore, she removes her dress and metamorphoses into a prince and a knight to fight evil when necessary. This can be understood as a girl's desire to act like a boy, transcending gender boundaries.

【028】 Why did girls want to be like a boy?

【029】 Because Boy is freedom. Boys are often given a pass even if they are a little rowdy. But it is different for girls. They are constantly told to act more like girls and that girls should not behave in

such ways. For those girls,

【030】 Sapphire, who dressed as a man, became a symbol of freedom. That is why she was so popular among Japanese girls.

【031】 However, in the end, this is how *Princess Knight* concludes.

【032】 In the end, Sapphire marries the prince of a neighboring country, and the story concludes with a happy ending.

【033】 In the 1950s, Tezuka's conclusion seems to have been that marriage is a woman's happiness. This was the ideal image of women at that time. It is called "ryōsai kenbo" in Japanese, or the ideal of the "Good Wife and Wise Mother," devoted to the home. Please remember this term: "Good Wife, Wise Mother." We will encounter it many times today.

Japan in the 1960s

【034】 This is what the 1960s were like.

【035】

【036】 ①そいつの前では女の子／つーんとおすまし それはなに／それは鏡 鏡の中から ツンツンツン／シンデレラ姫が あらわれた ツンツンツン {それはだあれ それはひみつ／ひみつひみつ ひみつのアッコちゃん} ②朝から晩までまねばかり／ひとまねじょうず それはなに／それは鏡 鏡の中から エッへへ／いたずらぼうずがとびだした エッへへ {*}

【037】 In front of that Guy, a little girl / acts all prim and proper. What is that? / It's a mirror. From inside the mirror / Tsun-tsun-tsun / Princess Cinderella appeared. Tsun-tsun-tsun / Who is that? It's a secret. Secret, secret. The Secret of Akko-chan! From morning till night, nothing but imitations / She's so good at imitating / What is that? / It's a mirror / From inside the mirror / He-he-he / A mischievous little boy jumped out / He-he-he / Who is that? / It's a secret. Secret, secret. The Secret of Akko-chan!

【038】 This is *Himitsu no Akko-chan* or *The Secret of Akko-chan*, written by Akatsuka Fujio, who is known as a pioneer of comedy manga and is often referred to as the "King of Gag Manga."

【040】 One day, Akko-chan received a magical compact. By casting a spell in front of its mirror, she could metamorphose into anyone she wanted to become. This reflects girls' wishes, particularly their desire to become someone other than themselves.

【041】 According to the opening theme of *The Secret of Akko-chan*, we can see what she wanted to become. First, "Princess Cinderella," and second, "a mischievous little boy."

【042】 Here, we can see the limits of Akko-chan's magic. Cinderella is a grown woman, while the mischievous boy is a free male. For Akko-chan and the girl viewers, these were ideals beyond their reach. In this sense, Akko-chan's metamorphosis had a distinctly escapist aspect. In the 1960s, when

girls were expected to be well-behaved, they dreamed of becoming either an adult woman or a boy through this anime.

【043】 That is to say, girls dreamed of freedom.

Japan in the 1970s

【044】 However, by the 1970s, girls were no longer content to simply live in a dream world.

【045】

【046】 草むらに名も知れず／咲いている花ならば／ただ風を受けながら／そよいでいけば いいけれど／私はバラのさだめに生まれた／華やかに激しく生きろと生まれた／バラはバラは 気高く咲いて／バラはバラは美しく散る

【047】 If I were just a nameless flower / blooming in the grass, I could simply sway in the breeze, and that would be enough. But I was born to be a rose, born to live a life of splendor and passion. A rose, a rose, blooms with dignity; a rose, a rose, falls with beauty.

【048】 This is *Versailles no Bara* or *The Rose of Versailles*, written by Ikeda Riyoko, one of the first generation of female manga artists.

【049】 The story is set around the time of the French Revolution. The main character is a woman, but she was given a male name, Oscar, and raised as a boy. Her father was a general who had hoped for a son to succeed him. However, since he had only daughters, he raised Oscar as a boy with the intention of making her a military officer. As a result, she wore a men's military uniform and served as an officer at the Palace of Versailles, attending figures such as Marie Antoinette. She was also involved in a love triangle with the two men shown in this image.

【050】 Yes, a love triangle. At first glance, you might think this is simply a romance story. However, that is not the main point. This becomes clear in the final moments of Oscar.

【051】 Oscar joined the revolutionary army and fought against the royal army to which she had once belonged. During the Battle of the Bastille, she was shot and killed while crying out, "Vive la France!" She rejected "a woman's happiness," as represented by Princess Sapphire in *Princess Knight*. Instead of choosing love with her sweetheart, she chose a mission for society. Her male attire was not a dreamy metamorphosis like Akko-chan's, but rather a literal combat uniform that allowed her to fight in society on an equal footing with men. The 1970s was the age of Women's liberation movement. For example, in 1972, the first mass meeting for women's lib in Japan was held. In this context, Oscar, who fought in male attire, became a symbol of women's participation in society.

【052】 Exactly, male attire became a symbol of women's liberation!

【053】 The 1970s was a time when women were permitted to participate in society. However, on

the other hand, this also meant that girls were forced to face a difficult choice between two alternatives: love or participation in society. If they chose love, they had to abandon social activity and become housewives, fulfilling the role of the “Good Wife, Wise Mother.” On the other hand, if they chose to participate in society, they had to give up love with their own sweethearts. Of course, it can be said that their position was better than that of girls in earlier periods, since they were given the right to choose between these two options. However, this was still a harsh reality. When women sought to participate in society, they often had to behave like men, as Oscar did in her male attire. This meant that women had to fight alone in a male dominated society. They could not expect support from other women, since they had chosen to act in a masculine way.

【054】 This can be described as a form of “splendid isolation,” but it was also a very harsh and lonely path. So, did this form of isolation change in the 1980s?

Japan in the 1980s

【055】 In the 1980s, the ideal form of metamorphosis for Japanese girls was as follows:

【056】

【057】 {Love Love ミンキーモモ お願いきいて}×2 魔法のプリンセス / キラキラ光る 何かが手招き きっとしてるわ 時よまわれ 夢の冒険 どんな私になれるのかしら [大人になったら 何になる]×2 Dreaming 夢が きっと叶うわ {*}

【058】 Love, love, Minky Momo, make my wish come true! Love, love, Minky Momo, make my wish come true! Magical Princess—something sparkling and shining is waving at me, surely waiting for me. Time, turn! An adventure in a dream— I wonder what kind of person I will become When I grow up, what will I be? When I grow up, what will I be? Dreaming —my dreams will surely come true. Love, love, Minky Momo, make my wish come true!

【059】 This is an opening theme of *Magical Princess Minky Momo*. She is a Princess Momo from the Magic Kingdom, and she solved problems through magical metamorphosis. When you hear the phrase “magical metamorphosis,” you probably think of Akko-chan. However, that is not the case.

【060】 What did Momo metamorphose into?

【061】 Please read the lyrics of the opening theme again. We can find that the phrase “When I grow up, what will I be?” is repeated in it.

【062】 Like this. Otona ni nattara nan’ni naru (when I grow up, what will I be?) However, this “grow up” meant not simply being adult. Unlike Akko-chan, Momo did not dream of becoming Princess Cinderella. Of course, Momo is already a princess, but that is not the important point. She metamorphoses not into a temporary ideal figure, but into a more concrete and pragmatic one.

【063】 For example, She metamorphoses into a nurse.

【064】 At other times, she metamorphoses into a cabin attendant.

【065】 Momo does not metamorphose into dreamlike figures such as Cinderella, but into working women.

【066】 However, she does not simply become “a working woman”; rather, she becomes a professional who works actively in society and solves various problems. In this sense, we can see the influence of the so-called “career woman” in Momo’s story. Furthermore, Momo affirms femininity; therefore, she no longer needs to adopt male attire like Oscar.

【068】 The 1980s in Japan were a time when significant progress was made toward gender equality. Enrollment rates in higher education became nearly equal for men and women, reaching the high 30% range. CEDAW (the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women) entered into force in 1981. In 1985, the Equal Employment Opportunity Law was enacted by the Japanese Diet.

【069】 Of course, this equality existed only within the legal framework; in reality, gender discrimination still persisted. If a woman wished to succeed as a “career woman,” she had to behave as someone capable of working like a man. However, doing so also required her to demonstrate greater ability and effort than the average man. While she was certainly an independent woman, she was also engaged in a severe and often isolated struggle.

【070】 However, many women were able to overcome such difficulties. At the time, Japan was experiencing an economic boom—the so-called “bubble economy”—and there was a social climate that enabled women to thrive.

Japan in the 1990s

【071】 However, in the 1990s, Japanese society changed drastically. It marked the end of the “bubble economy” and the beginning of the so-called “Lost Decade.”

【072】 It marked the end of the “bubble economy” and the beginning of the so-called “Lost Decades.” During such difficult times, the ideal form of girls’ metamorphosis changed as follows:

【073】

【074】 ゴメンね 素直じゃなくて 夢の中なら 云える 思考回路はショート寸前 今すぐ会いたいよ 泣きたくなるような moonlight 電話も出来ない midnight だって 純情 どうしよう ハートは 万華鏡 月の光に 導かれ 何度も 巡り会う 星座の瞬き数え 占う恋の行方 同じ地球に生まれたの ミラクル・ロマンス 信じているの ミラクル・ロマンス

【075】 I'm sorry for not being honest / I could say it if I were in a dream / My mind is on the verge

of short-circuiting / I want to see you right now / Moonlight that makes me want to cry / Midnight when I can't even call / Because I'm so innocent, what should I do? / My heart is a kaleidoscope / Guided by the moonlight / We meet again and again / Counting the twinkling stars, I predict the future of our love / We were born on the same Earth—a miracle romance / I believe in it—a miracle romance

【076】 This is *Pretty Soldier Sailor Moon*, which was serialized in a magazine from 1992 to 1997 and adapted into a TV anime during the same period. In recent years, it has been remade and was further adapted into a film in 2023.

【077】 Even after metamorphosis, they do not undergo a drastic change in appearance. They do not become adults or boys; the girls remain girls. Moreover, the outfits they wear are attractive costumes for girls. Of course, sailor uniforms were originally worn by naval soldiers and could be considered male attire. In Japan, however, they have historically been regarded as school uniforms for girls. In the past, female warriors such as Sapphire and Oscar typically dressed in male attire. Unlike earlier heroines, *Sailor Moon* allows girls to gain power without abandoning their femininity. In contrast, these girls wear school uniforms and fight together as members of a superhero team. This is what made *Sailor Moon* so groundbreaking.

【078】 In the 1990s, following the end of the bubble economy, young girls began to feel a vague sense of anxiety about the future. In the 1980s, Momo sang, “When I grow up, what will I be?” This song presented a bright and hopeful vision of the future awaiting them in adulthood. However, in the 1990s, the future became uncertain. It shifted to something closer to “Even if I grow up, what will I be?” This was a difficult time for both men and women, and for girls, becoming an adult was no longer an appealing goal. Instead, they began to embrace their girlhood, rejecting both the expectation to behave like men and the desire to grow up. In this sense, we can observe a tendency toward escapism.

【079】 However, the image of Sailor Moon—remaining fourteen years old while fighting evil in a school uniform—was embraced by many girls as a completely new form of “metamorphosis.” Another important aspect is that she fights as part of a team. This marked a clear departure from earlier girl heroes, who typically fought in isolation. However, some things remained unchanged.

【080】 In this theme song, we can find phrases such as “I predict the future of our love” and “miracle romance.”

【081】 True to the spirit of girls' manga, *Sailor Moon* is also a love story. The main character is Sailor Moon, and this man is her partner. He is called Tuxedo Mask because he wears a tuxedo, which is a rather straightforward name. When Sailor Moon faces a crisis, he comes to her aid. In this sense, the central theme of the story can be described as “the future of our love.” While rejecting traditional

male attire and the idea of growing up, girls continued to embrace romance.

【082】 At this point, you might be wondering what happened to male attire. The answer is this.

【083】

【084】 潔よくカッコ良く生きて行こう... たとえ2人離ればなれになっても...Take my revolution 光差す校庭 手を取り合い誓い合ったなぐさめ合った もう恋は二度としないよって 頬を寄せあって うつる写真の笑顔に 少しの淋しさつめ込んで 夢を見て 涙して 傷ついても 現実はがむしゃらに来るし 自分の居場所 存在価値を見つけたい 今日までの自分を 潔よく脱ぎ捨てる 裸になる 自由を舞う薔薇のように たとえ2人離ればなれになっても 私は世界を変える

【085】 Let's live with dignity and style... / Even if we end up apart... Take my revolution / In the garden bathed in sunlight / We held hands, made vows, and comforted each other / Saying, "I'll never fall in love again" / Pressing our cheeks together / I packed a little loneliness into the smiles in the photo / Dreaming, crying, getting hurt / Reality still comes at us relentlessly / I want to find my place, my reason for being / I'll shed my past self up to today / Strip it all away, bare myself / Like a rose dancing in freedom / Even if we're torn apart / I'll change the world

【086】 This is Revolutionary Girl Utena, directed by Ikuhara Kunihiko. The character on the right, with pink hair, is Tenjō Utena—a girl who, having been saved by a prince in her childhood, longs to become a prince herself. On the left is Himemiya Anthy, known as the “Rose Bride.” It is said that whoever is engaged to her will gain the “power to revolutionize the world.”

【087】 In this opening theme, she sings, “I'll never fall in love again” or “I want to find my place, my reason for being.” Yes, girls no longer wanted to fall in love or simply grow up as adults expected them to.

【088】 In this story, the central relationships are not between boys and girls, but between girls. These girls reject romantic relationships with boys.

【089】 Although Utena wears male attire, she does not desire to become male. Her attire is the result of her own choice, unlike Sapphire or Oscar, who were compelled to assume male roles as part of an unavoidable destiny. And then, although she wears male attire, it has a distinctly feminine design. This marks the end of the girl hero in male attire. After Utena, the figure of the girl hero in male attire largely disappears from girls' anime and manga.

【090】 At the end of the twentieth century, girls came to reject both adulthood and romantic love.

Japan in the 2000s

【091】 At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the ideal form of girls' metamorphosis had changed in this way.

【092】

【093】 プリキュア×4 プリティでキュアキュア ふたりは プリッキュア〜! 一難去って、また一難 ぶつちやけありえない!! 制服着ててもふたりは むちゃくちゃタフだし! お互いピンチを乗り越えるたび 強く近くなるね☆ your best! my best! 生きてるんだから 失敗なんてメじゃない! 笑う門に福来るでしよ! ネガティブだって ブッ飛ぶう〜! 生命の花 咲かせて! 思いっきり〜 もっとバリバリ!! プリキュア×4 プリティでキュアキュア ふたりは プリッキュア〜!

【094】 PreCure×4 / Pretty and Cure, Cure—we're PreCure~! / One crisis after another— seriously, this is crazy!! / Even in our uniforms, we're super tough, you know / Every time we overcome a crisis together, we grow stronger and closer☆ / Your best! My best! / Since we're alive, failure is nothing! / Good things come to those who laugh, right? Even negativity gets blown away~! / Let the flower of life bloom! Go all out~ Even more fiercely!! / PreCure ×4, / Pretty and Cure Cure, the two of us are PreCure~!

【095】 This is *Futari wa PreCure*, the first installment of the PreCure series, which began in 2004. Its story structure closely follows that of *Sailor Moon*, with girls metamorphoses into legendary warriors to fight evil.

【096】 However, there is one crucial difference between the PreCure series and *Sailor Moon*. While *Sailor Moon* relies primarily on magical attacks, the PreCure characters fight through direct physical combat, using punches and kicks. That is why they sometimes end up beaten up like this.

【097】 The reason for these differences lies in the key concept of PreCure: “On’nanoko datte abaretai!”—“Girls want to fight, too!”

【098】 There are still other differences between PreCure and *Sailor Moon*. Their transformed costumes are very pretty, featuring ribbons and heart motifs. Furthermore, their costumes are not uniforms, unlike those of *Sailor Moon*. This reflects an emphasis on individuality. They can wear attire that they like and that suits them best.

【099】 In addition, PreCure is not a love story, unlike *Sailor Moon*. Its central theme is friendship between girls, or “sisterhood”; therefore, romantic love is no longer necessary. The world of PreCure exists only for girls.

【100】 Like this: “Motto bari-bari”—“Even more fiercely.” In this world, girls exist independently of boys.

【101】 It highlights three key elements: toughness, sisterhood, and non-romantic relationships.

【102】 *PreCure* in 2004 emphasizes girls empowering themselves.

【103】 In the 1990s–2000s, there was an emphasis on sisterhood and a rejection of romantic love, men, and adulthood. However, in the 2010s, this situation shifted. Girls did not remain in this girl-

centered world.

Japan in the 2010s

【104】 They began to enter society and started to desire growing up. Like this:

【105】

【106】 イエイ！ HUG っと GOOD プリキュア！ お仕事うんと盛りだくさん！ 空をびゅびゅんとパイロット キャビンアテンダント パン屋さん 本屋さん まだまだキュンと恋したい？ 誰かと一緒に LIFE！ 無・限・大！ きっかけは目の前に いっぱい溢れて ええと、どうしよっかな ファイト 1.2.3！ ピカピカ光るような ヒント集めて になりたい自分 見つけちゃおう ファッションリーダー Show time！ アイドル ON ステージ！ 音楽に芸術+イラストレーター デザイナー ウェイトレス メイクアップ レッツダンス ノリノリで Hey カモン！ 世界中トラベラー 超テンション社長 Yes！ 色んな道へのトビラ 開いてみたら 夢見る ドリーミーなハート描いて 飛び出そうよ グッとくる 好きのチカラ信じて いつかぎゅっと 抱きしめたくなるんだ そんな未来を HUG っと！ プリキュア はーい！ 先生どうぞ ほかには？ エンジニア 研究者 お花屋さん 看護師さん 無・限・大！ イェーイ！

【107】 Yay! HUGtto GOOD PreCure! So many jobs to do! Flying through the sky as a pilot Cabin attendant Baker, bookstore owner, still want to experience a fluttering romance? Life with someone! Limitless! Opportunities abound right before our eyes Hmm, what should I do? Fight 1, 2, 3! Gather sparkling hints Let's find the person we want to be Fashion leader Show time! Idol on stage! Music, art + illustrator, designer Waitress, makeup artist, let's dance Get into the groove, hey, come on! World traveler Super-energy CEO Yes! Open the doors to all sorts of paths Draw a dreamy heart and take off Believe in the power of love that touches your heart Someday, you'll want to hold it tight, that kind of future HUGtto! PreCure Yes! Teacher, please, anything else? Engineers, researchers, florists, nurses... Infinite! Yay!

【108】 This is an ending theme of *HUGtto! PreCure* (also known as *Hug! PreCure*), released in 2018 to commemorate the 15th anniversary of the PreCure series. Its central themes are raising children and work in society. The phrase “raising children” may seem to reinforce the idea that women should become mothers and remain in the home. But this is not entirely correct. “Raising children” is just one of many possible choices. In this song, these PreCures present a wide variety of choices for girls, as follows:

【109】 Pilot, Cabin Attendant, Baker, Bookstore Owner, Still want to experience a fluttering romance? Life with someone! Fashion Leader, Idol, Music, Art, Illustrator, Designer, Waitress, Makeup Artist, Dance, World Traveler, Super-energy CEO, Teacher, Engineers, Researchers, Florists, Nurses, etc. They present a wide variety of choices.

【110】 Please pay attention to the phrase, “Much more want to experience a fluttering romance?” This suggests that love is not rejected but is instead presented as one of many possible choices in the future.

【111】 The following phrase, “Life with someone!”, is also important. The term “someone” can be a man, a woman, or anyone else.

【112】 In fact, it does not even have to be a human being. Cure Amour, on the right, is an android rather than a human, and Aizaki Emiru, the human on the left, chooses to live with her. It truly represents “life with someone.”

【113】 In this way, *HUGtto! PreCure* reflects a shift toward an attitude that no longer rejects growing up, entering the workforce, or falling in love and getting married. It marks a transition from a uniform “ideal image of women” to a diverse and pluralistic understanding of female identities. Furthermore, rather than withdrawing from society and remaining within the bonds of sisterhood, the characters actively aspire to a more realistic adult life. Their metamorphosis represents their future-oriented determination.

【114】 These shifts have become even more pronounced in recent years. This is *Hirogaru Sky! PreCure*, released in 2023 to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the PreCure series. The setting of this story is unprecedented: the theme color of the main PreCure is blue, unlike most previous main characters, who wore pink. She is free from the stereotype that “girls must like pink.” She is not the only PreCure who breaks the mold. The orange PreCure is a boy, and the yellow one is an adult. They have shattered the stereotype that PreCures are teenage girls. In this way, today’s anime for girls presents an image of women who, through bonds that transcend gender and age, continually strive toward self-realization as they explore who they want to become.

Conclusion

【115】

【116】 In the 1950s and 1960s, metamorphosis represented a dream of becoming someone else. Characters such as Sapphire and Akko-chan expressed a desire to escape reality, often denying their own situation as girls.

【117】 In the 1970s and 1980s, metamorphosis came to reflect a growing desire for participation in society like Oscar and Momo. In order to succeed, they often behaved like men or tried to establish themselves as independent career women. However, this pursuit frequently resulted in a state of splendid isolation, as they struggled within a male-dominated society.

【118】 In the 1990s, metamorphosis came to reflect a rejection of adulthood and male centered

norms like Sailor Moon and Utena. They no longer desire to become adults or imitate men. Instead, they chose to remain in girlhood, emphasizing their identity as girls. At the same time, strong bonds of sisterhood became central. Rather than pursuing romantic relationships or integration into adult society, these characters formed close relationships with other girls, creating a self-contained world based on mutual support and emotional connection. In the post-bubble era, they could no longer find dreams in real society.

【119】 Since the 2000s, and especially in the 2010s, metamorphosis has come to represent self-affirmation and the exploration of diverse life choices. Rather than escaping reality or imitating others, girls are now depicted as actively shaping their own futures.

【120】 Yes, Girls now look toward the future.

【121】 Finally, gender equality in Japan remains insufficient. According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2025, Japan ranks 118th out of 148 countries. Incidentally, Uzbekistan ranks 110th, placing it above Japan. Japan's score in politics is particularly low.

【122】 In the twentieth century, girls were often portrayed as escaping from reality, adopting male roles or remaining within sisterhood. However, in the twenty-first century, girls were no longer content with such a complacent situation. As seen in PreCure, girls empower themselves to achieve their own goals, balancing future aspirations with living in the present. Girls have moved from escaping reality to actively. I would like to conclude this lecture by pointing out that Japanese girls are also undergoing this kind of metamorphosis.