

# Female Cross-Dressing as Subversive of the Gendered Division of Labour in the Nineteenth Century Japanese Household

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## Abstract

In 1830s Japan, magistrates of the military government sentenced a woman self-named Takejirō for dressing and behaving like a man, finding the defendant guilty of corrupting the “customs” (*fūzoku*) and “disrupting the human community” (*jinrin o midashi*). Existing research argues that, in the judges’ opinion, Takejirō’s adoption of male attire and gendered conduct threatened to break down two supporting pillars of the socio-cultural order: the binary opposition between femininity and masculinity and the *ie*, the patriarchal household. However, available scholarship has not fully investigated the fact that the authorities saw in Takejirō’s cross-dressing a further way this practice might have blurred the polarity between femininity and masculinity and posed a risk to the survival and perpetuation of the *ie*: in fact, Takejirō refused to do “women’s work” (*onna no shogyō*), i.e. domestic activities such as weaving and child rearing, and instead chose to do “men’s work” (*otoko no shogyō*), i.e. extra-domestic activities such as a career in a public office. By reading Neo-Confucian essays that posited the gendered division of labour as a cornerstone of the household and the whole society and culture, examining the verdicts passed against Takejirō, and analysing a sumptuary law enacted in 1843 to forbid parents from clothing young girls in boys’ guises, this paper aims at better understanding an additional aspect of the complex social, political, and cultural reasons why the military magistracy fought against female cross-dressing as an ostensible menace to the socio-cultural order.

**Keywords:** anti-gender variance legislation; *ie* patriarchal household in early modern Japan; law and literature; Neo-Confucian ideology in early modern Japan; work and society in early modern Japan