

# NERD NATION OTAKU

## and Youth Subcultures in Contemporary Japan

By William M. Tsutsui

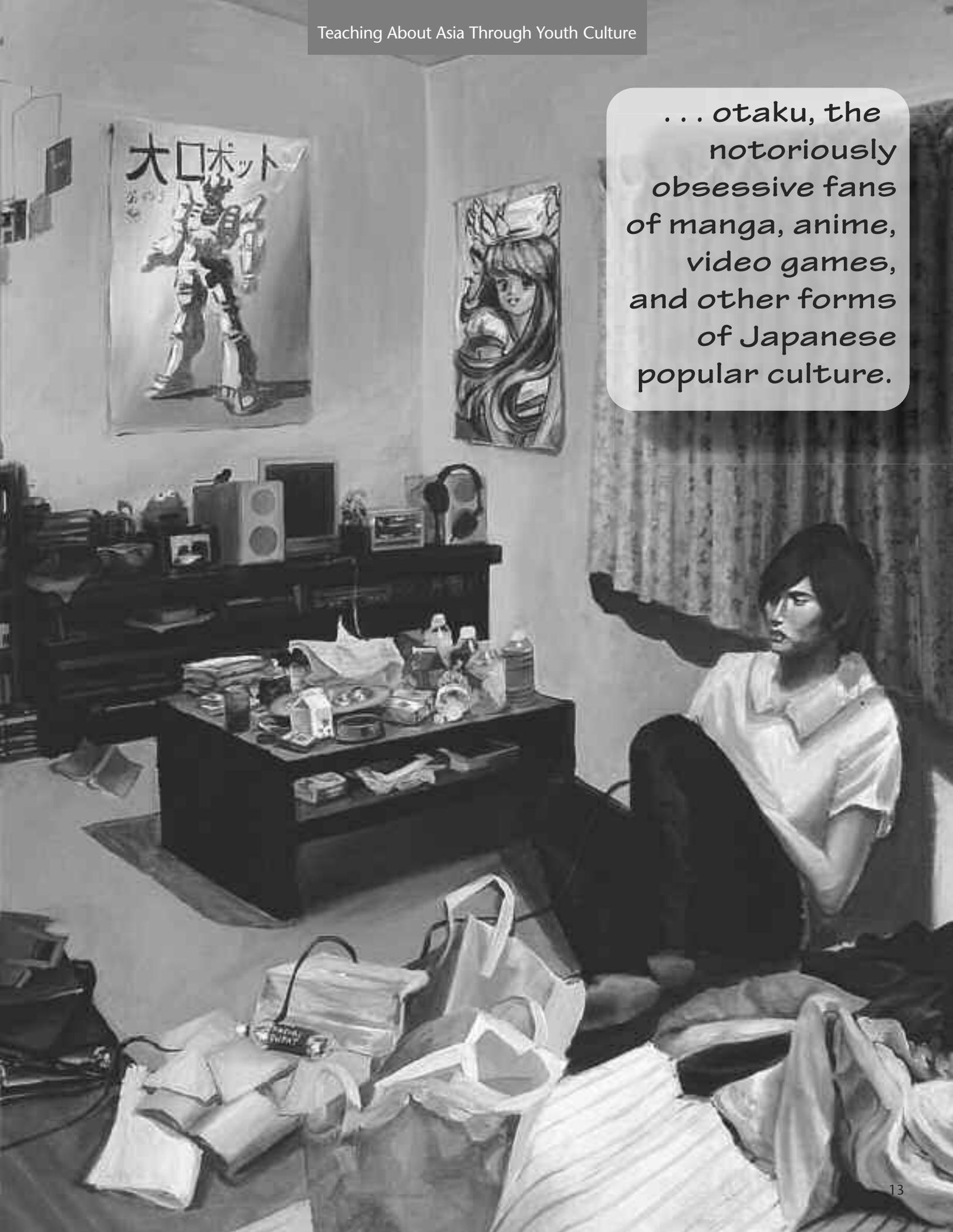
**A** wide variety of youth subcultures have appeared in Japan since World War II, many of them shocking polite sensibilities and subverting mainstream society with behaviors considered hedonistic, self-centered, and deviant. Among the subcultures that attract the most attention, both among the public and in academic circles, is the *otaku*, the notoriously obsessive fans of *manga*, *anime*, video games, and other forms of Japanese popular culture. Generally styled as “nerds” or “geeks,” *otaku* are pictured in Japan’s collective imagination as socially maladjusted young men, physically unattractive (usually gawky or overweight), dressed unstylishly (often sporting backpacks and anoraks), and unnaturally fixated on some narrow corner of mass culture. *Otaku* are, according to one commentator, “socially inept loners . . . fanatically knowledgeable in one abstruse field, be it Godzilla movies or the history of sumo wrestling”; they are “chronically shy,” “sickly pale,” and “socially inept, but often brilliant technological shut-ins.”<sup>1</sup> An *otaku*, the journalist Tsuzuki Kyoichi concluded, is “someone who doesn’t look good, who has no girlfriend, who is collecting silly things, and . . . who is into something useless.”<sup>2</sup> In the more evenhanded words of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which added a definition of *otaku* in March 2008,

*Originally in Japan: a person extremely knowledgeable about the minute details of a particular hobby (esp. a solitary or minority hobby); . . . one who is skilled in the use of computer technology and is considered by some to be poor at interacting with others.*<sup>3</sup>



Illustration entitled *Hikikomori*,  
by Kendra Scarlavai.  
<http://www.kendrascarlavai.com>.

... otaku, the notoriously obsessive fans of manga, anime, video games, and other forms of Japanese popular culture.



Understanding the world of the otaku can provide insights into the impact of affluence, technology, and the media on young Japanese . . .

Since their emergence in the 1970s and 1980s, otaku have become a major social phenomenon, engendering fear, disapproval, and misunderstanding, as well as widespread fascination. The rise of an otaku identity in Japan has inspired books, films, and art movements that both celebrate and demonize fervent fan subcultures. Around the world, admirers of Japanese pop culture (above all, anime and manga) proudly embrace the label otaku and emulate the practices of Japan's intense fanatics. Meanwhile, the prominence of otaku culture has spurred handwringing among the Japanese public, contributing to longstanding concerns over the degeneracy and self-absorption of Japan's youth. Understanding the world of the otaku can provide insights into the impact of affluence, technology, and the media on young Japanese, the globalization of Japan's vibrant youth culture, and the diverse social challenges confronting millennial Japan.

## ORIGINS

Otaku is a polite, almost stiffly formal way of saying "you" in Japanese. Combining the honorific prefix *o-* with *taku*, meaning "house," it literally translates as "your house" and carries connotations of impersonality and detachment. In English, the equivalent might be referring to someone as "sir," "ma'am," or "thee." How this word, generally associated in postwar Japan with the kind of scrupulously polite language housewives would use with neighbors and acquaintances, came to describe obsessive, introverted young fans of popular culture is uncertain and continues to be the subject of much speculation and debate. The origins of the term are often traced to the critic Nakamori Akio, who wrote a series of columns in the obscure magazine *Manga burikko* in 1983 entitled "Otaku no kenkyū" ("Studies of Otaku"). Nevertheless, the word was apparently used with regularity among groups of manga, anime, and science fiction fans at least since the 1970s and, according to some commentators, even starting from the late 1960s.

The celebrated pop artist Murakami Takashi (whose work has been inspired by fan subcultures) suggests that the term was first adopted among small cliques of science fiction writers and illustrators and especially the staff at Studio Nue, a pioneering producer of anime in the 1970s. According to Murakami, the founders of Studio Nue, who established the firm while still students at Tokyo's prestigious Keio University, often used the formal pronoun otaku—perhaps in a parodic manner, perhaps out of a sense of refined elitism—in everyday conversation. This practice then spread to other intense anime and manga fans and reached even larger audiences when one of the characters in the studio's popular 1982 animated series *Chōjīkū yōsai Macross* (*Super Dimension Fortress Macross*) invariably used otaku over more casual forms of "you."<sup>4</sup> Other chroniclers of otaku culture have suggested alternate origins for the term. Some, for example, argue that the use of the word "otaku" arose among socially maladjusted pop culture fans who felt ill at ease using informal language when addressing their fellow aficionados and preferred more impersonal, distant forms of speech.

Whatever its roots, the term otaku went from subculture slang to mainstream buzzword in 1989 with the arrest of Miyazaki Tsutomu, a serial killer later tagged the "otaku murderer." Miyazaki, a twenty-six-year-old printer's apprentice, was responsible for molesting, murdering, and mutilating four young girls in the suburbs of Tokyo. On entering his apartment, police investigators found it filled from floor to ceiling with pornographic and pedophilic anime as well as manga intended for young female readers. In what one scholar has called the subsequent "panic," the Japanese media vilified obsessive, introverted fans as "dangerous, psychologically disturbed perverts."<sup>5</sup> This impression was only confirmed in the wake of the 1995 sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo subway by the Aum *Shinrikyō* doomsday cult. Many Aum members, including leader Asahara Shōkō, fit the profile of otaku, with longstanding interests in science fiction and a particular fascination with apocalyptic manga and anime. Thus otaku culture, associated strongly with antisocial habits and fantasies both sexually perverted and violent, became a lightning rod in intense and often histrionic public debates over social decay and the deteriorating values of Japanese youth.

## SHIFTING IDENTITIES

While bewailing otaku deviance and the crimes of Miyazaki and Aum was easy for journalists, social critics, and scholars, defining what exactly constituted an otaku and identifying the features of postwar Japanese society that had given rise to otaku identity proved more difficult. From the start, what seemed to characterize otaku, beyond their apparent social ineptitude and isolation, was the compulsion to amass huge amounts of trivial information on obscure, narrow, and often juvenile subjects, from animated television series to pop music idols to tropical fish. What set otaku apart from previous generations of

devoted fans, whether sci-fi buffs (like Trekkies, or avid Star Trek fans) or trainspotters, was the power and connectivity afforded by the Internet. It provided new means for collecting information and sharing it with like-minded enthusiasts. What was also striking about this new social formation of highly wired, technologically adept, and data-driven fans was its sheer size: from the 1980s on, Japan was said to have a population of at least 100,000 (and perhaps as many as one million) hard-core otaku.

Many psychologists and cultural critics have argued that the roots of otaku behavior lay within Japan's highly structured, even oppressive, educational and social systems. They have suggested that the information fetishism of otaku stems from the rigid routines of Japanese schooling, which emphasize rote learning and the memorization of vast quantities of fragmented facts. The social awkwardness and reclusive tendencies of otaku, meanwhile, were widely understood to be reactions against the pressure for conformity, emphasis on the group, and elaborate standards of decorum that characterize Japanese society. And while some commentators have insisted that otaku are, in fact, remarkably sociable (especially with fellow enthusiasts), other scholars have argued compellingly that otaku tend to form impersonal networks rather than convivial communities.<sup>6</sup> As journalist Karl Taro Greenfeld memorably described it,

*The otaku came of age way back in the eighties with Paleolithic 186 computers and Neanderthal Atari Pac-Men as playmates. They were brought up on junk food and educated to memorize reams of contextless information in preparation for multiple-choice high school and college entrance examinations. They unwound with ultraviolent slasher comic books or equally violent computer games. And then they discovered that by interacting with computers instead of people, they could avoid Japanese society's dauntingly complex Confucian web of social obligations and loyalties. The result: a generation of Japanese youth too uptight to talk to a telephone operator but who can go hell-for-leather on the deck of a personal computer. . . .<sup>7</sup>*

Since Japan's otaku subculture began to attract public attention in the 1980s, it has evolved in a variety of new directions. While many early otaku were particularly fixated on science fiction (whether the Godzilla movies or television series like *Ultraman*), the imaginative and visually rich realms of manga and anime soon became the most widespread obsession. By the start of the new millennium, otaku interests became more overtly sexualized. There was a proliferation of *gyaru-ge* ("girl games," dating simulation software) and female fantasy characters introduced in anime, manga, or as collectible plastic models. The characters are generally depicted as cute, vulnerable, and sexually alluring. Otaku adopted the almost indefinable term *moe* (reputedly derived from two homophonic verbs meaning "to bud" and "to burn") to describe a kind of profound infatuation—perhaps platonic, perhaps rooted in frustrated sexual desire—for these fictional female creations. As many analysts have suggested, the long-term transition in otaku tastes, from sci-fi and animation to pursuits viewed by the larger society as perverted, pornographic,



Promotional poster for *Spirited Away*.  
©Walt Disney Pictures.

Many psychologists and cultural critics argue that the roots of otaku behavior lay within Japan's highly structured, even oppressive, educational and social systems.



Plastic toy of Haruhi Suzumiya from the Japanese TV series anime, *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya*.  
Image source: Figurenews Blog at [http://www.figurenews.com/2008/02/test\\_24.html](http://www.figurenews.com/2008/02/test_24.html).

## ANIME

*Anime* (pronounced AH-knee-may), derived from the English word "animation," is the term used for cartoons in Japan. Although profoundly influenced by Western models, including the work of Walt Disney, Japanese animation has developed a distinctive visual style and a range—dramatic, artistic, and in subject matter—unparalleled globally. The first Japanese cartoons were produced in the early twentieth century, but anime only took off as a creative form after World War II, and especially in the 1960s, when animation became a mainstay in the young

medium of television. Today, anime is widely available in Japan on TV, as feature films, and through OVA (original video animation), productions released directly to DVD and on the Internet. Although often stereotyped abroad as violent and sexually explicit, anime (like manga) is a diverse genre encompassing humorous children's fare, sci-fi robot epics, and thoughtful, imaginative creations like Miyazaki Hayao's *Princess Mononoke* and the Oscar-winning *Spirited Away*. Japanese animation has long been exported, with generations of Americans growing up with series like *Speed Racer*, but only over the past twenty years has anime become an international pop culture phenomenon.

A kind of twenty-first-century nerd *Pygmalion*,  
*Densha otoko* sensitively humanized otaku  
 marginalization in Japanese society. . . .



Promotional photo for *Densha otoko* (*Train Man*).  
 © 2005 Toho Co., Ltd./Fuji Television Network, Inc./SDP,  
 Inc./Hakuhodo DY, Media Partners Inc.



*Astro Boy* poster.  
 Image source: www.manga.com.

anime, otaku felt compelled to move on to more outrageous and offensive obsessions in order to maintain their distance from polite society and their resistance to its niceties. As one scholar has observed, “Today’s subculture chooses videogame wars over street-riot opposition, deviance over activism. . . . erotic fantasy over sexual freedom, and hollow identity over existential angst.”<sup>8</sup>

Today, the image of otaku in the Japanese media is generally quite consistent. In addition to the longstanding impression of the subculture as anti-social, Internet savvy, information hungry, and active consumers and collectors (whether of anime DVDs, volumes of manga, plastic models, or character figures), otaku are now closely associated with a range of places and customs. The Akihabara district of Tokyo, once known as “electric town” for its high concentration of stores selling household appliances, has become a well-known otaku destination since the late 1990s. Akihabara now has hundreds of businesses, including “maid cafés” (where young female waitresses costumed as servants or anime characters wait on customers), which cater to fan obsessions. In addition, otaku congregate at Comiket (Comic Market), a vast, twice-yearly convention held in Tokyo that regularly attracts over 500,000 people. Comiket is particularly noted as a venue for the sales of *dōjinshi*, amateur manga fanzines created by circles of otaku and privately published. Otaku are also often linked in the public imagination with *hikikomori* (reclusive shut-ins), chronically unemployed NEETs (“not in employment, education, or training”), and “freeters” (youth floating between dead-end, part-time jobs). All are groups stigmatized in public discourse as symbols of the alienation and drift of Japan’s younger generation today.

Although the term “otaku” continues to have negative connotations in Japan, and fanatics remain cautious in using it to describe themselves, mainstream society seems to have grown increasingly accepting of otaku culture over the past decade. For example, Okada Toshio, one of the founders of the successful anime studio Gainax, has become a recognized media expert on otaku and lectured for five years at elite Tokyo University on “otakuology.” The 2005 NHK documentary *Akihabara Geeks* provided a very sympathetic perspective on obsessive fans, showing them with hopes, fears, and social lives similar to those of the general population. Perhaps most influential in changing attitudes was the phenomenally successful 2004 book *Densha otoko* (*Train Man*) and the film, television series, manga, and stage play that it inspired. Supposedly based on a true story, *Densha otoko* engagingly detailed how a shy otaku, supported by the online community of an Internet bulletin board, came out of his shell to win the love of a beautiful and seemingly unattainable young woman. A kind of twenty-first-century nerd *Pygmalion*, *Densha otoko* sensitively humanized otaku marginalization in Japanese society but, at the same time, suggested that the only way a hard-core fanatic could win the girl was by abandoning childish hobbies, wearing more stylish clothes, and joining the conventional majority. In the wake of *Densha otoko*, the image of otaku in the public eye may have softened, but the preconception of obsessive fans as deviants in need of remaking as “normal” people has remained strong in Japan.

## MANGA

*Manga* (pronounced MAHN-guh) is usually translated in English as “comics” or “graphic novels,” though such words cannot fully capture the richness and diversity of the genre in Japan. Manga have a long history, and their origins stretch back at least to the Tokugawa period (1600–1868) when illustrated books and the sophisticated graphics of Japan’s woodblock prints attracted both elite and mass audiences. In the twentieth century, and especially after World War II, manga flourished in Japan, drawing inspiration from American comics (like

*Superman* and *Blondie*) and tapping the creative talents of artists like Tezuka Osamu, the legendary creator of *Astro Boy* (*Tetsuwan Atomu*). Today, manga are popular among all age groups in Japan, from young schoolgirls to aging corporate executives, and span a remarkable range of subjects, including action, romance, science fiction, sports, food, erotica, and history. According to some sources, comics make up over forty percent of the books published in Japan and constitute a \$4 billion industry, with numerous weekly and monthly magazines catering to the nation’s manga-loving public.

and often pedophilic, was driven by the mainstreaming of manga and anime in the 1990s. As the Japanese public came to accept forms like

The otaku lifestyle—wired, networked, information-driven, flexible, imaginative, narcissistic, and playful . . .

## GLOBAL OTAKU

Over the past twenty-five years, the swelling of what journalist Douglas McGray has called Japan's "gross national cool" has been driven by the rapid spread of Japanese popular culture—manga and anime, video games, character goods like *Hello Kitty*—in markets worldwide. Among the Japanese pop phenomena embraced globally is otaku culture. Beginning in the 1990s, dedicated American fans, especially of anime, began referring to themselves as "otaku." They have done so with pride, as the term does not carry the same disturbing implications—of perversion, criminality, and maladjustment—abroad as it does in Japan. Thus, one of America's oldest and largest anime and manga fan conventions is Otakon, which proclaims itself "the convention of the otaku generation." *Otaku*

*USA* is a glossy magazine for followers of many aspects of contemporary Japanese pop culture, and the 2004 documentary *Otaku Unite!* was a rousing celebration of American anime fandom. Communities of self-proclaimed otaku have also sprouted in other countries, including Great Britain, Russia, South Africa, and South Korea.<sup>9</sup>

Overseas otaku share many characteristics with their Japanese counterparts—an obsession with the fantasy worlds of anime and manga, a reputation as nerds and outsiders—but their subcultures have sometimes evolved in distinctive directions. American otaku, for instance, have not shared Japanese fanatics' recent enthusiasm for moe, while cosplay ("costume play," dressing and performing as manga and anime characters) is apparently more central to otaku identity in the United States than in Japan. Another notable aspect of American fandom is the prevalence of female enthusiasts of manga, anime, and video games. Through the 1990s, men appeared to outnumber women among American otaku, but fan conventions today suggest a more even gender balance. In Japan, too, the general perception of otaku is of young men, although hard-core female fanatics have been a long-term presence in the subculture. Women were said to have dominated the early years of Comiket and women sustain, both as creators and consumers, the popular genre of *yaoi* (manga depicting male homosexual relationships). In a global context, then, otaku culture is fluid and its parameters and characteristics are growing increasingly broad and varied.

## CONCLUSIONS

William Gibson, the famed cyberpunk novelist and inventor of the term "cyberspace," has observed that "Japan is the global imagination's default setting for the future."<sup>10</sup> If so, the world might well be looking forward to ever-larger populations of otaku, fixated on obscure hobbies, estranged from traditional models of sociability, tied by the Internet and a shared love of data to like-minded enthusiasts. In Japan, where social structures and expectations are restrictive and rigid, the subculture of fanatics has been tolerated, but disparaged. Branded deviants by the media, and singled out as the latest and lowest stage in the postwar degeneration of Japanese youth, otaku have been publicly demonized for rejecting the collective good in favor of narrow selfish interests, refusing to shoulder the burdens of responsible adulthood in favor of childish obsessions, and choosing seclusion and perversion over a conventional life-course of career and family. Otaku, in many ways, seem to have symbolized the fragmentation, drift, disaffection, and withdrawal characteristic of Japanese society as a whole since the collapse of the "bubble economy" and the onset of Japan's "great recession" in the 1990s.

But approaching otaku culture simply as a social pathology is to overlook its obvious creativity, dynamism, and spirit of resistance to mainstream social mores. The otaku lifestyle—wired, networked, information-driven, flexible, imaginative, narcissistic, and playful—may well prove the prototype for



DVD package for *Otaku Unite!*  
Directed and produced by Eric Bresler.  
© 2008 Eric Bresler.

twenty-first-century youth cultures around the world. As William Gibson, writing for a London newspaper, concluded,

*The otaku, the passionate obsessive, the information age's embodiment of the connoisseur, more concerned with the accumulation of data than of objects, seems a natural crossover figure in today's interface of British and Japanese cultures. I see it in the eyes of [London antique] dealers, and in the eyes of the Japanese collectors: a perfectly calm trainspotter frenzy, murderous and sublime. Understanding otaku-hood, I think, is one of the keys to understanding the culture of the web. There is something profoundly post-national about it, extra-geographic. We are all curators, in the postmodern world, whether we want to be or not.*<sup>11</sup> ■

## NOTES

1. Mark Shilling, *The Encyclopedia of Japanese Pop Culture* (New York: Weatherhill, 1997), 323; Karl Taro Greenfeld, "The Incredibly Strange Mutant Creatures Who Rule the Universe of Alienated Japanese Zombie Computer Nerds (Otaku to You)," *Wired* 1.01 (March-April 2003) at [http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/1.01/otaku\\_pr.html](http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/1.01/otaku_pr.html). Accessed July 8, 2008.
2. Quoted in Volker Grassmuck, "I'm Alone, but Not Lonely": Japanese Otaku-Kids Colonize the Realm of Information and Media" (1990) at <http://waste.informatik.hu-berlin.de/grassmuck/texts/otaku.e.html>. Accessed July 30, 2008.
3. "Otaku," *Oxford English Dictionary Online* at <http://www.oed.com>. Accessed July 3, 2008.
4. Murakami Takashi, "Impotence Culture—Anime" in *My Reality: Contemporary Art and the Culture of Japanese Animation* (Des Moines, Iowa: Des Moines Art Center, 2001), 62.
5. Sharon Kinsella, "Japanese Subculture in the 1990s: Otaku and the Amateur Manga Movement," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 24:2 (1998), 310.
6. See Volker Grassmuck, "Man, Nation and Machine: The Otaku Answer to Pressing Problems of the Media Society" (2000) at [http://waste.informatik.hu-berlin.de/grassmuck/Texts/otaku00\\_e.html](http://waste.informatik.hu-berlin.de/grassmuck/Texts/otaku00_e.html). Accessed August 14, 2008.
7. Karl Taro Greenfeld, *Speed Tribes: Days and Nights with Japan's Next Generation* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 174–75.
8. Alexandra Munro, "Introducing Little Boy" in *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture*, ed. Murakami Takashi (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 256.
9. An excellent source on otaku in the United States is Lawrence Eng, "Otaku Engagements: Subcultural Appropriation of Science and Technology" (PhD diss., Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, 2006).
10. William Gibson, "Modern Boys and Mobile Girls," *The Observer*, April 1, 2001.
11. Ibid, online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/apr/01/sciencefictionfantasyandhorror.features>.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Books

Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). This is an enlightening study of Japanese "youth products"—from the television series *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* to the *Pokémon* phenomenon—and the reasons for their global appeal.

Patrick Macias and Machiyama Tomohiro, *Cruising the Anime City: An Otaku Guide to Neo Tokyo* (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 2004). This is an informative guide to the favorite Tokyo hangouts of otaku, from movie theaters and video game arcades to Akihabara and Comiket.

Nakano Hitori, *Train Man*, Translated by Bonnie Elliott (London: Constable and Robinson, 2006). A translation of the book that started the *Densha otoko* (*Train Man*) phenomenon in Japan, this allegedly true story of an otaku and his unlikely girlfriend is told through a long series of posts to an Internet bulletin board.

Nakano Hitori and Watanabe Wataru, *Densha Otoko*, 3 vols. Translated by Sheldon Drzka (La Jolla, Calif.: CMX, 2006). One of several Japanese manga inspired by the *Train Man* story, this is an accessible, well-translated version suitable for classroom use.

Susan Napier, *From Impressionism to Anime: Japan as Fantasy and Fan Cult in the Mind of the West* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). This is a sweeping survey of America's fascination with Japanese culture from the nineteenth century to the present, with special attention to anime and manga fandom.

*Otaku: Persona=Space=City* (Tokyo: Gentosha, 2004). The trilingual (English-Japanese-Italian) catalog of an exhibition focusing on otaku culture held in the Japanese Pavilion at the 2004 Venice Biennale, a leading international festival of art and architecture.

### Anime, Documentaries, and Films

*Akihabara Geeks*, DVD, Directed by Kobayashi Satoshi and Nagashima Kohei, 2005 (New York: AnimeWorks/Media Blasters, 2006). A forty-three-minute documentary made by NHK, Japan's public television broadcaster, that profiles a range of personalities in Akihabara, Tokyo's otaku-friendly neighborhood.

*Train Man: Densha Otoko*, DVD. Directed by Murakami Shosuke, 2005 (San Francisco: VIZ Media, 2007). The humorous and touching feature film version of the *Train Man* story.

*Otaku no Video*, DVD, Directed by Mori Takeshi, 1982 (Wilmington, NC: AnimEigo, 2001). This video is an animated "mockumentary" exploring the roots of Japan's otaku culture through a thinly fictionalized history of Gainax, one of Japan's most successful anime studios.

*Otaku Unite!* DVD, Directed by Eric Bresler, 2004 (New York: Central Park Media, 2005). This is a fast-paced and amusing seventy minute documentary on anime fandom in the United States, with a focus on cosplay (costume play) at fan conventions.

**WILLIAM M. TSUTSUI** is Professor of History and Associate Dean for International Studies in the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences at the University of Kansas. A specialist in the business, environmental, and cultural history of twentieth-century Japan, his most recent book is *Godzilla on My Mind: Fifty Years of the King of Monsters* (2004). He is currently conducting research on the environmental history of wartime Japan and the cultural significance of Japanese monster movies. He is also completing a booklet for the AAS series *Key Issues in Asian Studies* on Japanese pop culture and globalization.