The Otaku in Transition

Renato RIVERA

Introduction

This paper discusses the recent shifts in trends within the otaku subculture, such as the diffusion of the otaku into smaller, sub-categories, and the effect this is having on mainstream Japanese society as well as within the subcultures themselves. It also provides an expansion with more up-to-date information on the situation I presented in my previous paper last year concerning the rigidity of these otaku subcultures and their refusal to merge with the mainstream within Japan. I wish to stress the importance of the theme of mutual pressure between the subculture and mainstream territories in Japanese society, while also venturing further to explain how what once was regarded children’s media has evolved into an art form for the West (regardless of critique), and trying to map that phenomenon onto the actual situation within Japan, because I feel we are at a crucial stage where this transition is becoming key in predicting where the future for Japan’s contents industry will take it.

1: The Otaku in Transition: The new generation

Toshio Okada, the prominent writer on otaku studies today, having been active inside the otaku industry for decades, describes the otaku as individuals who have chosen for themselves a life less ordinary, that is to say, they are a sort of counter-culture to the average consumer.

This in itself can conjure up an image of a citizen who strives to avoid the ever-evolving consumer culture of our modern times, yet the image the otaku themselves tend to propagate is that of a super-consumer, one who is willing to put other financial investments aside to fulfill their wishes. It is in this sense that Okada claims a sort of revolutionary essence within the hearts of the otaku – the refusal to subscribe to trends or to surrender to forms of peer pressure, and that is in which he believes the otaku ought to feel the most pride. Perhaps unfortunately, “average” people
do not – nor particularly want to – understand these qualities and thus tend to ostracize the otaku from mainstream society by looking down on them or considering them strange. Recent trends, however, have complicated the situation further.

Okada’s arguments often take a turn for the subjective, presented as *de facto*. One interesting example is his description of his appearance on the NHK TV show “Shinken 10-dai Shaberiba” featuring young otaku discussing various themes, in which one 18-year-old boy said he wanted to hide the fact he was an otaku in order to be better accepted within society. Okada goes on to describe the way this young man blamed society for his problems, and how society ought to accept otaku instead of looking down on them. His reasoning was that he did not want to be thought of as strange or be bullied, so he had to keep his hobby a secret. Basically, he seemed to be saying that one cannot be an individual in this type of society where everyone judges each other. Okada dismisses this way of thinking as paranoia, adding that it is equivalent to saying “everyone should watch anime!” and “I do not want to be discriminated against just because I watch anime!”, but he does not really elaborate much more on this. Instead, he describes, and sides with, the reactions of the other guests on the show, who told the young man that “since you did not tell everyone you watched anime we would not have discriminated against you”, and “today is the first time you have said it, so telling us not to discriminate against you is problematic” (2008: 23).

The guests’ comments and Okada’s support of them appear to sustain a belief in – if not, at the very least a subconscious acknowledgement of – a rigid, segregated society which is comprised of various small subcultures, with a seemingly impermeable mainstream mass at its centre. I have described such a model of society in terms of popular culture consumption before (Rivera 2008), and it can be said that this is another example. More importantly, it may even show evidence for a transition within types of subcultures which are willing to not only merge with the mainstream even if only partially, but perhaps change it also, into a more accepting, diverse entity.

Okada uses this event to highlight his point that “otaku recently have become strange”. Leaving aside the issue of whether or not otaku are strange by nature, this kind of statement says more about Okada’s own stance on recent developments in subculture society that it does about those developments themselves. That is to say, Okada’s explanations of the first-, second- and third-generation of otaku, which have evolved through the decades from the science-fiction fans of the
1960s and onwards, clearly show a steady sense of development of fandom within Japanese subculture, yet, as if to protect his own personal authoritative position within the field (which he is not afraid to highlight intermittently, in such expressions such as “I have been called the ‘Otaking’ before”), he laments the development of the otaku as something which he feels he can no longer relate to.

In terms of the NHK incident, it is fair to say that the instance in which the boy expressed his anger at society can also be explained by a willingness to “share”. As I will explain in further detail later, content primarily consumed by otaku is often otaku-oriented to begin with, so from a marketing point of view there is one specific target audience. This is part of the problem of why there is little intergration into the mainstream, and also why there is resistance from the mainstream towards the subculture, manifested here within the other young people’s reactions to the boy’s so-called “unfair” outbursts. While the boy is seeking a form of acceptance, the rest, including Okada, are basically trying to maintain the status quo that otaku will never be accepted in mainstream society, so one should expect to be discriminated against, as if to say “that is simply the way it is”. Okada’s lamenting of the downfall of the otaku as a sharing, mutually contributing community and its transition into a scattered batch of smaller communities – recalling the extinction of the hard-core science-fiction fan in Japan due to the influx of only-slightly interested, lighter fans fuelled by the excitement the Star Wars craze brought about during the 1970s (Okada 2008: 114-118) – is, while accurate and understandable when considering his point of view, merely a one-sided conjecture. What matters here the most is the bigger picture, that of the society as a whole and how this slowly growing transition can bring about a great change not only in the way that popular culture as a whole is consumed by society, but also for interactions between people of totally different backgrounds. Seen from this perspective, to say that “otaku will always be discriminated against so deal with it” is counter-productive and shows a strong resistance to move forward to contribute to a more interactive society.

This is not to say that I feel that mainstream Japanese society is ready to, willing to, or even ought to, accept “moe” or “bishojo”-style animation or computer games, as Okada paraphrases the young man’s sentiments to be. I personally have no intent to champion one form of otaku culture over another, nor am I attempting to put forward an argument to the effect that everyone should become an otaku, rather, I sense that there are possibilites within the extensive variety of popular
culture within Japan today which are not being implemented to their full potential, and are being relegated to the areas of either children’s or otaku markets. Very recently, trends have been seen that have started a shift towards mainstream migration (the commercial success of *Densha Otoko* is one example of this), generating acceptance within the general public, stimulating interest for further works. However, resistance from various parties, including Okada as described above make for any significant change a long stretch still. Add to this the not-all-together-positive image of the *moe* trend overall, plus the recent stabbing incident in Akihabara, closely following the implementation of more police officers on the streets of the Electric Town after several extreme cases of *tousatsu*, such as photographing the underside of cosplayers’ skirts as they pose for the cameras. Watching the national news alone recently seems to paint as bleak a picture of the otaku as ever, Tsutomu Miyazaki notwithstanding.

2: Understanding *moe* and its significance within and outside of, the otaku realm

It is understandable that Okada would want to distance himself from the current *moe* trend, and his explanation of the evermore erotic nature of otaku-oriented content (that he exemplified with the phenomenon of manga magazines increasing sales by putting photographs of young girls in bikinis on the cover during the late 1970s, which exponentially expanded with many more magazines doing the same, prompting the author to wonder how strangely the Japanese must be viewed by other countries (2008: 89-93)) does indeed fit with the “oversexualized” image of Akihabara and Nipponbashi that is apparent once one actually visits there – though it does not stand out so much when these towns are being reported on: it is much more a back-door revelation. Besides the ubiquitous *dojinshi* shops, which deal with mostly sexual content by nature, many of the stores there are actually pornography shops.

How did it get to this level? On the one hand, the rise in “light users” as opposed to hardcore otaku appear to be promoting the otaku industry – if only slightly for the time being – to the general populace, but on the other, the hardcore otaku and its obsession with *moe* and *bishojo* characters seem to be betraying that by pushing it back out into deep subculture territory. I shall now go on to explain these circumstances in greater detail.
Takuro Morinaga writes that *moe* actually spawned from the idea of the “weak man” (“焚男”), someone who is neither rich nor good-looking, and his inability to get a girlfriend (2007: 11-12). It comes as no surprise that this is one stereotypical characteristic of the average otaku, but more importantly, that it is thus difficult to relate to for “average” members of the public. Yet the “weak man” concept is not only applicable to the situation in Japan, it may be becoming universal, as a trend in itself, currently being popularized by none other than Hollywood. Christopher Goodwin had this to say on the subject for Entertainment Times Online:

“Films such as Forgetting Sarah Marshall, Knocked Up and Superbad […] show that the young male box-office stars of today’s romantic comedies are goofy schlubs and nerds. As unlikely as it seems, actors such as [Jason] Segel ([Forgetting] Sarah Marshall), Seth Rogen (Knocked Up) and Michael Cera and Jonah Hill (Superbad) now define the paradigm of a Hollywood romantic lead. Cary Grant they are not. They’re not even Hugh Grant. They may know the appeal of sex, but they have no sex appeal.”

He goes on to say that “They represent a kind of wish fulfilment for most men, who can’t imagine scoring so high.” Obviously this is in contrast to the “classic” Hollywood notion of the leading man being strong and powerful, which did serve its purpose as a role model to adult men and young boys alike. Children all around the world wanted to be Superman. But these days, even Bryan Singer’s version of Superman has become an angst-ridden outcast, struggling to find his place in the world. In Hollywood’s case, it is the “weak man” himself which is the focus of the experience, not the females who may or may not be there to comfort him. Seeing how the male lead develops (though not necessarily into a “strong man”) in these movies and how he deals with the situations he has to overcome is the main point here. While the notion of “the ideal to strive for” has been reduced somewhat (some may argue “destroyed”), it does pave the way for more realistic scenarios. Seeing how Hollywood movies often define the universal standard of the contemporary mainstream acceptance of themes and qualities, leading “weak men” does not seem to be something so removed from the general public’s mindset in current society, at least overseas.

Here in Japan, the situation is reversed, however. It is the *girls* in these games and/or anime who are the protagonists, and they are the ones who sell the product, with the “weak man” being the user himself. Morinaga states that these two-dimensional characters “would never betray” the
man, as would a real-life woman seeking only a handsome or rich man. His arguments are backed by analyses of the relationship between income and marriage statistics in data from the 2002 “Basic Survey of Work Structure” published by the Labour Policies Induction Organization, in which he looks at the figures for men in their late-twenties and concludes that three in four men with 10 million yen yearly income are married (72.5 percent), while of those with income ranging from 2 to 2.49 million yen the figure is only 15.3 percent, that is one in four. Lastly, he calculated that within those with yearly incomes in the 1-1.49 million yen range, less than one in six are married (15.3 percent). He states, “this, more than anything, is proof that men with little money are avoiding marriage”. It is not such a stretch to stipulate that a lot of people prefer to get married when they have money. To purport, as he seems to do, that good-looking men are also taking all the women by going out with many at once, leaving hardly any for the rest (Morinaga 2007: 11), is frankly unsettling. His conclusion that the answer is, therefore, a virtual character and that this thus brought about the moe movement is worrisome precisely because it is most likely accurate.

I hardly doubt that Morinaga is wrong in believing that many otaku feel that they prefer a fictional girl to a real one, (Okada appears to be of the same opinion up to that point) but I have queries regarding his reasoning – that of the “weak man”, which sounds almost like paranoia, more so than what Okada was referring to as such when describing the NHK incident.

So how much money do otaku spend on their hobbies? The Otaku Industry Report 2008 provides extensive figures, and within them we find the following data, illustrated in Figure 1. It shows that a great share of the patrons of otaku-oriented shops have over 50,000 yen spending money a month, much of which they spend on otaku items.

![Figure 1: Three charts showing data from otaku consumers in the 23-30 age range, collected at Akihabara and specialist anime/manga/hobby shops around the country. From left to right: monthly spending money in yen; monthly expenditure on otaku-oriented items in yen; and the consumption breakdown by genre, with anime, comics, games, figures, dojinshi and cosplay being the six categories, displayed left to right. From the Otaku Industry Report 2008 (2007: 110).](image-url)
So they do have some money. What is interesting is that this data, which seems to contradict part of Morinaga’s argument, can actually be found in the very same publication as his own essay.

Okada’s sense of pride as the “Otaking” no doubt leads him to claim that the otaku never did care for mainstream society and never wanted to be average, thus subscribing to the norms of love and relationships was out of the question. They were very much accustomed to being “discriminated” against by the general public, but did not mind: they did not care about the World Cup, romance or Christmas, but rather about things like the Comic Market event and they certainly did not care that they did not have a girlfriend (Okada 2008: 33-35). This goes right against Morinaga’s reasoning, who believes their longing for a girlfriend is part of the reason the moe concept was formed. However, if Morinaga is correct, Okada’s statement about not understanding moe and the younger generation of otaku can easily be regarded as simply a case of him losing touch with the new trends.

3: Art and Otaku: an on-off relationship

I would like to now introduce another side of this issue of where the otaku are headed to, and that is the evolution and acceptance of otaku culture into art, as seen mainly overseas. For a few years now, Takashi Murakami has been causing quite a stir among the art world. He has been touted as the Japanese Andy Warhol, and he has even made a few nods in his honour such as featuring bananas in some of his works to reference Warhol’s classic cover of the Velvet Underground’s debut album. His art can be regarded as pop-art, but unlike Warhol’s works, which seem to promote the notion that pop can be art, Murakami’s style offers a slightly different concept, which is that art can be pop. It is said that Murakami is attempting to show art as merchandise (Cruz et al. 2000: 17), that he believes that an accurate copy of the artwork is as important as the artwork itself, and wishes for his art to be accessible to everybody regardless of whether they are interested in art, outside of the gallery in the form of T-shirts and toy figures (Phoenix 2006: 82). His collaborations with toy maker Takara and legendary figure-maker Kaiyodo made this “art as merchandise” concept a reality. The “toys” were in fact miniature renditions of some of Murakami’s famous works, although Murakami insists that this is not some form of advertising, by saying that “the consumer groups are distinctly separate”, plus “some of my larger sculptures actually had their toy forms first” (Phoenix 2000: 84). Indeed, the sculptures are actually created by Bome (sometimes
spelled "Boeme"), a sculptor working for Kaiyodo, thus blurring the line between consumer commodities and fine art even further.

What makes a commission to a toy sculptor by a respected artist give rise to a total change of status for the object in question? Let us consider for a moment how the current situation in the toy figure market has been developing for the last few years.

As Patrick Macias points out, “Japanese toys from the ‘60s onward were truly amazing things to behold” (2004: 38). In terms of engineering, design, innovation and aesthetics, the quality was indeed outstanding enough to have overseas distribution to Europe and America. In Japan, the current market evolved from demand deeply rooted in nostalgia, so strong being the passion for the glorious craftsmanship of the items from the ‘70s and ‘80s. Adults wanted to reminisce their childhoods through these antique items and thus eventually realized that actually there was a collectors market for them (Macias 2004: 39). Still, the figure market we see in today’s Japan evolved due to a series of other factors, a lot of them being overseas sources, like in the case of toy giant Bandai’s Soul of Chogokin toyline. This line basically creates new renditions of old classic anime robot designs, such as Mazinger Z and Tetsujin 28, utilising new technology in toy engineering without compromising the nostalgic feel of die-cast construction, a major characteristic of Japanese toys from the ‘70s-‘80s period. The line started in 1999, and has been going strong ever since, plus, with the rapid advances in technology, Bandai have even returned to some of their earlier Soul designs and sold even newer, resculpted versions of them (called “Renewal Versions”). It is said that Todd McFarlane, comic book artist on Spider-Man and creator of the cult dark American comic book hero Spawn, in 1994 established McFarlance Toys in the US in order to accurately represent his Spawn characters in action figure form, and in so doing created a realisation within Japan that adults could also enjoy toys. While for generations model kit building around the world had been an adult hobby with toys reserved for children, the gradual evolution of the Bandai kits for the Gundam franchise into the Master Grade and later Perfect Grade lines of kits with intricate detailing (and a high price command), combined with the aforementioned McFarlane creations (which were less action figures than they were statues, almost, to be placed on a shelf and admired) paved the way for a full-fledged environment ripe for adult consumers of toys, and a new market for manufacturers to tap, no longer simply centred on vintage items. The arrival of this new market also brought about eventual recognition for the actual figure sculptors themselves,
and this can almost be seen as a form of celebrity status among the industry. Names like Katsuhisa Yamaguchi, who is famed for his unique and innovative concepts in the placing of joints (highlighted as “Yamaguchi Style” on the packaging) for his figures in order to achieve far more dynamic levels of articulation than any toy hitherto, and Yuki Ohshima, who is both a sculpt designer and an illustrator and has works ranging from dioramas of *moe*-style girls to giant robots and has had his works displayed in a special exhibition for 2004’s Venice Biennale (actually being labelled as an “artist” there).

In fact, actual art exhibitions of comic art, action figure sculpts and suchlike “otaku” contents are hardly rare. Comic art galleries exist where illustrators like Haruhiko Mikimoto often have exhibitions, and – to once again bring up the prime example in the previous paper of overseas geek culture proliferating into the mainstream – even the *Transformers* have very recently featured in their own first exhibition at the Art Center Ongoing in Kichijoji, Tokyo. Plus there is the very existence of the Kyoto International Manga Museum, always emphasizing the importance of Japan’s popular contents industry as a cultural export.

Thus, the issue begs the question: the adult-oriented figure collecting industry, the comic industry and the “otaku industry” as a whole is virtually advanced enough to have its works be considered art forms and even the designers and sculptors are highly talented, so what is Murakami doing that is so different? Perhaps, the fact that he is embracing this concept is different enough. Here, another dilemma arises for the otaku. While the West has for the last few years been interested in Japanese subculture contents to the extent that Japanese pop-culture exports are now exceeding that of its other industries (Allison 2006: 13), and even the international art world has hailed Japan’s unique pop style, Murakami – himself the embodiment of this style as far as the connoisseurs are concerned – is actually willing to distance himself so far that one gets the impression he sees himself as an elite member among plebeians when discussing the otaku culture. Here is an excerpt from Index Magazine:

MIDORI: But you used to be called an otaku artist.

TAKASHI: I am not an otaku. Otakus are pure dilettantes. They never create anything, but they know the minutest detail about strange animation films, comics, and game softs [sic]. And they can only critique them with the language of anime or comics. But I still thought it was
great that they had a system of criticism made up entirely from the language of their media. So I wanted to participate in their events, listen to them talk, and pick up on what looked really strange to me — the things that seemed to reveal the deepest mystery of the *otaku* mind.

The context of this quote concerns a sculpture of a girl with oversized breasts, squeezing milk out of her nipples. He goes on a little later:

**TAKASHI:** That figure of the girl with the big breasts was based on a drawing I bought at a comic market. I was astounded by the fact that the guy who drew the image had completely confused the object of his desire — the girl — and his own sexual drive — milk spurting from her breasts. It was a rebus of the *otaku* sexuality. So in order to understand it better, I made the sculpture.

The inconsistency is clear-cut. What if the original illustrator, likely a *dojinshi* artist (an "otaku" who "never creates anything"), had promoted his work as "art"? Even Okada would interject here, as his stance is that otaku are creators traditionally. He lectures that the younger generation of otaku do not understand that to be an otaku means to take an active role and be creative in many fields, including organizing events and the like, instead of being passive and merely "support" your idols, or be "a fan" (Okada 2008: 16-19), as Murakami appears to suggest is the norm with his "dillettante" image of otaku. Here is the other side of the dilemma: otaku, in particular *dojinshi* artists, rarely care for recognition within the art world. Some *dojinshi* artists do not even want to become professional manga artists, saying that if that happens, they lose. Again, we find a mutual pressure from one side to another, which is almost invisible viewed from the West.

As far as otaku sexuality is concerned, Tamaki Saito’s extensive writing on the subject shows much more complex forces at work than perhaps Murakami realises, namely that “being an otaku is a matter of possession rather than perversion”, and that “since the desire to fictionalize a thing is ultimately the desire to own it, and stops there”. He even goes as far as acknowledging the “otaku as creator”, bemoaning the “tired refrain telling the ‘otaku to grow up and face reality’” (almost a carbon-copy of Murakami’s sentiments), and even that, “from one perspective the otaku’s knowledge is much more globally relevant than what is taught in our universities. The fact that
Japanese anime clubs exist at almost every American university can only bolster this impression” (Saito 2007: 237-238).

Conclusion

“Art” in all but name, has existed within the otaku culture for a long time now, but many otaku themselves are unwilling, or rather, strictly opposed to the idea of promoting it as such. The “art” merchandise is marketed towards otaku and only otaku, not the mainstream market. Yet Takashi Murakami’s name recognition is ironically tying them together overseas. This, along with the moe, maid café and other such “incomprehensible” trends, signals a turning point for otaku culture and representation thereof which urgently needs to be addressed.

When we consider the problem thus, we see a disconnection between Murakami and the otaku world within Japan, which rather than highlighting Murakami’s own desires and strategies, actually helps to better understand the otaku mindset and their view on the world. On the one hand, their refusal to subscribe to the norms of society and to conserve, in a sense, the essence of their hobby by not allowing it to enter the hands of high culture nor the general public, echoes Okada’s claim that the otaku ought to be a unified community which not only does not mind being pushed into the outer realms of society, rather, it benefits from this sort of outcasting. Okada’s stance is, again, understandable, and while his strongly conservative reaction to the idea of otaku being bothered by discrimination shows a kind of surrendered spirit in him as he claims he no longer understands today’s otaku, we still get a feeling of hope from him, first of all in the fact he is writing the book at all, and secondly in that he still makes public appearances in various otaku- and science-fiction-oriented events, most recently the Daicon 7 / 47th Annual Japan Science Fiction Fair in Osaka. On the other hand, Okada’s other claim to not understand moe is at odds with the arguments thus far in the sense that these moe fans are now the hardcore otaku (which Okada used to represent) that are delving deeper into the subculture realm, hardly accessible to the “average” outsider, save for a few features on TV and in the news, which is hardly always a positive image.

The situation can be summed up as follows: One group of otaku, we shall call them the moe fans (often also referred to as Akiba-kei, because they are often seen in the mainstream media hanging around in the Akihabara district), are now beginning to represent the whole of the otaku
community in the eyes of the mainstream media, for better or worse. We have established, with particular help from Morinaga’s data analysis that this group is indeed quite separate from the mainstream populace. Other groups of otaku are slowly entering the mainstream, and still other groups from the mainstream are entering what was once otaku territory, but not as hardcore as before. This is occurring almost unnoticed because the moe image gets all of the attention. These groups can be considered to be the rising “light users” or “light otaku” seen in the Otaku Industry Report 2008 (Wada 2007: 70). While this does indeed signal the end of the otaku in a sense, as Okada laments, it may herald the birth of something entirely unprecedented: there is hope for a new exchange of ideals and the spread of new media, new art, new concepts and a meeting of minds within this novel interactive, creative space. The possibility of this no doubt comes at a price for the still-active hardcore otaku of previous generations, who have to live with seeing their dominion eradicated almost beyond recognition as the die-hard science-fiction fans did thirty years ago, but the merits it will provide for society as a whole ought to transform the culture into something even more worth holding on to, and worth taking part in for everyone, not just a removed minority.

References


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Okada 2008: 7: Okada is known overseas as the King of Otaku, thus the “Otaking”.

2 Entertainment Times Online: http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/film/article 3805205.ece Last accessed 28th September 2008

3 This is despite Amada Cruz, director of the Center for Curatorial Studies Museum, virtually contradicting this within the official art book for Murakami’s “The Meaning of the Nonsense of the Meaning” exhibition held there in 1999, with the statement that “Although he hails from the world of marketing, DOB [a character Murakami created who appears in many of his works] does not promote any product, except perhaps Murakami” (Cruz et al. 2000: 17). It can be said that Murakami and/or his own coined term for his art-style, Superflat, can be considered to be a form of brands.

4 This gave them the name Chogokin at the time, thus “Soul of Chogokin” refers to these new interpretations still carrying the spirit of the originals.

5 “Figure Oh” Magazine, volume 116, 2007: 30

