



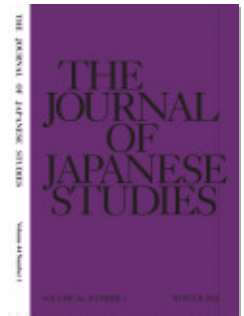
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Debating Otaku in Contemporary Japan: Historical Perspectives and New Horizons ed. by Patrick W. Galbraith, Thiam Huat Kam, Björn-Ole Kamm (review)

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the legacy of bachelor Japanism is, and Reed has it right, that “the idea of Japan as antipode queers fundamental Western hierarchies of truth, propriety, and representation” (p. 294), then that important job has been taken over by the current culture-wide assault on gender and sexual canards by movements both in and outside Japanophilic circles, indeed everywhere, including state legislatures debating admission to public restrooms. There is no need now for bachelors to superintend our reception of things Japanese, which is a good thing because there are no more bachelors. We are called other names now.

There are things in this book, of course, that I wish Reed had done better, or not at all. I would like to think there might have been a way to get around the problem of inconsistent Japanese names and terms other than leaving them the way Reed inherited them. I not am sure his criticism of Isabella Stewart Gardner and her “Buddha Room” gallery is necessary, especially after he had had his go at the MFA. Reed’s impatience with “‘Bachelor’ sister” Amy Lowell’s 1917 prose poem “Guns as Keys: And the Great Gate Swings” seems a bit gratuitous. His concluding pages, which introduce the new idea of how sexual identity is presently modeled as an ethnicity, is on target but out of place. But these faults are minor and all are trumped by Reed’s relentless and welcome redress of stubborn, long-lived errors in art historiography. Even more valuable is his sober reflection from a distance on what bachelor Japanism did in making the messy, intertwined history of aesthetics and sexuality in the West messier still, sometimes to the good and sometimes not. This book is pertinent reading in the field of Japan studies for exactly that. We Japanists today, bachelor or not (the correct answer is “not”), continue to discover and invent an exceptional Japan, and our still occasionally errant selves, at the same time.

Debating Otaku in Contemporary Japan: Historical Perspectives and New Horizons. Edited by Patrick W. Galbraith, Thiam Huat Kam, and Björn-Ole Kamm. Bloomsbury, London, 2015. xxxii, 199 pages. \$114.00, cloth; \$39.95, paper; \$30.99, E-book.

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Editors Patrick W. Galbraith, Thiam Huat Kam, and Björn-Ole Kamm’s *Debating Otaku in Contemporary Japan: Historical Perspectives and New Horizons* is a welcome and highly useful edited volume that encourages readers to rethink the often taken for granted figure of the “otaku.” It begins

with the assumption that while the word “otaku” will likely be familiar to anyone with an interest in contemporary Japanese pop culture, there is little agreement over what the term signifies. To some, otaku are simply fans of Japanese manga (print comics), anime (animation), videogames, and related subcultures, both inside and outside Japan—a rough analogue for Western “nerds” or “geeks.” To others, otaku are extremely knowledgeable specialists who, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, are often thought to be “poor at interacting with others.”¹ At worst, they represent potentially violent youth with a dangerous inability to differentiate between fantasy and reality. That the figure of the otaku resists easy classification and analysis is a point that this volume capitalizes on beautifully, by clearly demonstrating how discourses about otaku have, since their inception, been the subject of debate and, furthermore, how these debates (both past and present) are central for understanding the critical stakes of the term.

A central aim of the volume is to “de-naturalize” otaku from its ubiquity in the Japanese pop cultural lexicon by reinscribing the word within key moments in contemporary Japan when it was under active debate (p. 1). Organizationally, the book’s ten essays are grouped by decade of significance (the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s), and a particular strength of the critical entries is that they are wide-ranging in content and represent varied methodological approaches, making them useful to scholars from different disciplines. For those in Japan studies, the numerous English-language translations of Japanese texts about otaku are a valuable inclusion, with highlights being the two selections by Okada Toshio, a well-known authority on otaku culture. This review briefly addresses each essay in order of appearance and concludes with some general comments about the volume as a whole.

The collection begins with a section dedicated to the 1980s and Patrick W. Galbraith’s “‘Otaku Research’ and Anxiety About Failed Men.” Galbraith discusses the beginnings of the otaku debate by examining the initial appearance of the term in four installments of “‘Otaku’ no kenkyū” (Otaku research), a column primarily written by manga and anime fan Nakamori Akio and published in 1983 in the niche magazine *Manga burikko*. Galbraith shows how Nakamori coined the term “otaku” first in critique of obsessive pop culture fans, only to later refine the term to refer to “failed men” who prefer fictional anime characters and are sexually uninterested in real women. The essay documents how an orientation toward fictional characters arose in the 1970s and 1980s from a more general desire for “cuteness” and “girl-ness” in two-dimensional images, which came to be reflected in girl characters that blended the visuality of *shōjo* manga with light eroticism (pp. 24–25). Galbraith briefly mentions a male manga artist

1. “otaku, n.” OED Online. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/view/Entry/246749?redirectedFrom=otaku&> (accessed May 30, 2017).

who visualizes his female characters from the viewpoint of a girl character within his manga (p. 26). This discussion of the messy layers of gendered identification with fictional characters proves insightful and more could be done to expand on this topic.

Yamanaka Tomomi's "Birth of 'Otaku': Centering on Discourse Dynamics in *Manga Burikko*" builds on Galbraith's entry to show a variety of reader responses in the aftermath of the "'Otaku' no kenkyū" columns, including outcry over the term and treatment of otaku as discriminatory, and readers' initial self-identification as otaku. Yamanaka suggests that the then editor of *Manga burikko*, Ōtsuka Eiji (who has written the volume's foreword), used the reader-submission section of the magazine as a vehicle for expressing his own opinions about "otaku" as a discriminatory word that insulted the magazine's readership.

Björn-Ole Kamm's "Opening the Black Box of the 1989 *Otaku* Discourse" offers a qualitative analysis of newspapers and articles to investigate how the term "otaku" gained mainstream traction after the "Miyazaki Incident" of 1988. This was an infamous criminal case involving the molestation and murder of four elementary schoolgirls between the ages of four and seven by a man named Miyazaki Tsutomu, whom the mass media would later label an otaku killer. Kamm's contention, one shared by Yamanaka, is that Ōtsuka Eiji and other cultural critics of the time played a key role in disseminating information about otaku by repeatedly engaging in public debates about the topic. Furthermore, it is suggested that this focus on refuting the negative perceptions of otaku may have inadvertently further entrenched these stereotypes. Read together, these first three essays elucidate the constructed nature of the image of the otaku and the ability of certain actors to shape the circulation and perception of otaku discourse.

Section 2 centers on the 1990s and begins with Lien Fan Shen's "Traversing *Otaku* Fantasy: Representation of the *Otaku* Subject, Gaze and Fantasy in *Otaku no Video*." It argues that Gainax's OVA (original video animation) *Otaku no video* from 1991 renders otaku visible as an object while also allowing viewers to perceive their own involvement in the culture. It does this through a unique format that intersperses animated segments with fake live-action interviews of otaku that encourage viewer identification. This dual positionality for the audience is very interesting and more could be done to discuss the politics of viewing. Likewise, while the medium of anime is championed for its ability to encourage self-reflexivity,² the specifics of why and how Japanese animation accomplishes this compared to other media is not sufficiently discussed.

2. This is an argument also put forth by Susan Napier in reference to the "fifth look" of anime. See Susan J. Napier, *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 242–43.

The first selection by Okada Toshio is an excerpt from his 1996 book *Otakugaku nyūmon* (Introduction to otaku-ology). Okada offers a nuanced intervention into the negative discussion around otaku that creates worthwhile distinctions between Western counterculture, subculture, and Japanese otaku culture. By positioning otaku as the logical evolution of Edo-period artisan culture, Okada emphasizes that otaku possess an eye toward sophistication, craftsmanship, and expertise that allows them to positively evaluate their works.

The final section on the 2000s begins with Aida Miho's "The Construction of Discourses on Otaku: The History of Subcultures from 1983 to 2005." This text would serve as a valuable literature review when introducing the topic of otaku studies in a classroom, as it provides a thorough overview of the various Japanese theorists writing about otaku: from perspectives citing otaku as a personality problem, to discussions of otaku and consumerism, to the intersections between otaku and pop art. Aida's is also one of the only essays in the volume that explicitly references female otaku and female theorists. While otaku are primarily seen as male, these female voices help to diversify the opinions in the volume and more would be welcome.

Alisa Freedman's "Train Man and the Gender Politics of Japanese 'Otaku' Culture: The Rise of New Media, Nerd Heroes and Consumer-Communities" offers the volume's primary analysis of a key text about otaku, the immensely popular *Densha otoko* (*Train Man*), a 2004 love story about a nerdy otaku and fashionable working woman. As Freedman deftly shows, the *Densha otoko* phenomenon helped to advocate for a greater acceptance of otaku by imagining a method for transcending otaku masculinity tied to making positive fashion and consumer choices. In an interesting counterpoint to the discourse around otaku as "failed men," Freedman's essay introduces 30- to 40-year-old women who have been labeled by essayist Sakai Junko as "loser dogs" for embracing career over marriage and childrearing (p. 141). Three essays in this section—Freedman's as well as subsequent chapters by Kikuchi Satoru and Thiam Huat Kam—attest to the fact that while positive narratives and perceptions about otaku do exist, they often still reinforce consumer capitalist structures and what Vera Mackie terms "reproductive heterosexuality" (quoted on p. 187).

"The Transformation and Diffusion of 'Otaku' Stereotypes and the Establishment of 'Akihabara' as a Place-brand" by Kikuchi Satoru presents response data from two surveys of Japanese university students conducted ten years apart (1998 and 2007) to chart changes in the social perception of otaku before and after the *Densha otoko* boom. Kikuchi's data hold some valuable insights, indicating that while negative impressions of otaku are still prevalent (41 per cent of respondents in 2007), positive impressions of otaku are on the rise as well (from 17 per cent in 1998 to 34 per cent in 2007; p. 155). Kikuchi's secondary argument about the ways in which the

Japanese government has co-opted otaku culture in an effort to capitalize on Akihabara (Tokyo's main electronics district) as a "place-brand" would benefit from deeper discussion.

Okada Toshio's second entry, "The Transition of Otaku and *Otaku*," stands out as a centerpiece of the volume. In attempting to distance himself from what he labels the "third generation" of otaku from the 2000s whose entry point into the culture is based largely on *moe* (a euphoric response to fantasy characters) and an uncritical eye toward pop culture consumption, Okada exposes fissures within otaku studies that are further explored in the various essays in this volume. These exist among otaku of older and younger generations, between scholars researching Japanese pop culture, and within Japanese and Western fan communities. What proves most enlightening is Okada's admission that it was the apparent lack of discrimination overseas toward manga and anime fans that inspired him to write *Otakugaku nyūmon*. This account forces readers to reevaluate the importance of international fandom in the formation of key otaku debates within Japan and works to upset Okada's proposed typology of *tsuyoi* (strong) otaku (p. 167) by foregrounding how otaku could be conceived as a more transnational category.

Thiam Huat Kam concludes the volume by illustrating how the label of "otaku" both responds to and creates the category. In "'Otaku' as Label: Concerns over Productive Capacities in Contemporary Capitalist Japan," Kam uses interviews with Japanese university students to illustrate how value judgments about sexual desire over two-dimensional characters and sexual excitement over nonerotic content inform otaku labeling. Kam extends this to a larger argument about otaku as figures who may challenge the capitalist structures integral to dating because they are able to conduct romance "within their minds" (p. 189).

Few faults can be found with the volume. There is a fair amount of background information repeated across works, and some readers may lament the lack of a clear through line to link the various sections. However, these are small criticisms for an otherwise stellar volume. An additional textual analysis showing how works beloved by otaku themselves (such as *Gundam* or *Evangelion*) fit into the discussion would have been welcome. Also, while several essays point to the broader implications of otaku culture transnationally, few entries move us outside Japan or beyond manga and anime as key media of interest, at a time when otaku culture encompasses so much more.

Upon completion, *Debating Otaku* inspires readers with new questions. For example, one wonders what precipitated this preference for two dimensionality that defines much of otaku discourse. Ōtsuka's foreword links the emergence of otaku-style behavior with failed political movements of the 1960s and 1970s, but this question of why the category of otaku emerged in

the first place remains highly contested. Similarly, certain authors discuss the constructed nature of the category of otaku (Yamanaka, Kamm, Kam), while others question the utility of concepts such as “reality” (Aida) altogether. These efforts necessarily clash with the received wisdom of Japanese scholars such as Ōtsuka and Okada, which the book presents as historically significant. While this tension is productive, it does leave readers wondering whether there is a clear history and evolution of otaku discourse, or whether the entire conversation needs to be called into question.

Taken as a whole, *Debating Otaku* sets a high bar for quality and is strongly recommended for grasping the historical evolution of the term, its perception in Japan, and the various discourses that shaped and continue to shape its legacy. With a wealth of Japanese-language material available for the first time in English and new scholarly texts, this volume’s significance lies not only in its new insights into a category many may take for granted, but also in the tensions and elisions it exposes within key theoretical works about otaku by scholars such as Ōtsuka Eiji, Azuma Hiroki, Morikawa Ka’ichirō, and Saito Tamaki. Read alongside these original works, *Debating Otaku* is a powerful companion that contributes to the growing body of scholarship about one of Japan’s most widely known yet still enigmatic figures.

Rashomon Effects: Kurosawa, Rashomon and Their Legacies. Edited by Blair Davis, Robert Anderson, and Jan Walls. Routledge, London, 2016. xx, 178 pages. \$148.00, cloth; \$54.95, E-book.

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Rashomon Effects: Kurosawa, Rashomon and Their Legacies is an anthology of essays by specialists with diverse scholarly and professional backgrounds, who discuss Kurosawa’s film *Rashomon* from a variety of critical perspectives. To understand this book, we need to pay attention to the overall conceptualization of and the fundamental rationale behind the anthology as a research project, the individual chapters as integral components of the book, and each chapter as an independent contribution to the scholarship on Kurosawa, the field of Japanese film studies, or other relevant disciplinary practices. Although these three structural layers are closely related, we should not automatically assume that they necessarily constitute a coherent totality. We can imagine many hypothetical cases of mismatch and contradiction between these different layers, such as an in-