

**Patrick W. Galbraith, *Otaku and the Struggle for Imagination in Japan***

Durham: Duke University Press, 2019. 335 pages, 95 illustrations. Paperback, \$27.95; cloth, \$104.95. ISBN 9781478006299 (paperback), 9781478005094 (cloth).

In this groundbreaking work, Patrick W. Galbraith offers a detailed analysis of the changing history and perception of manga/anime fans known as “*otaku*.” Galbraith purposefully keeps the term “*otaku*” in scare quotes as he is attempting to “draw attention to it as a label, which is to be interrogated in context rather than taken for granted at large” (6). He initially studies the early articulation of the concept in the context of 1980s Japan and problematizes the term’s more rigid understanding in the United States that it is only applicable to straight, male, Japanese, sexually repressed fans of *shōjo* (girl) manga. He then examines the tensions surrounding the concept in Japan at various key points in time to explain how and why *otaku* are perceived both as representatives of “Cool Japan” and as marginalized men prone to sexual excess and perversion.

The book follows a roughly chronological order, beginning in chapter 1 with the history of *bishōjo* (cute girl) manga art and its male consumers in 1970s Japan. Drawing on a variety of sources, including archival research and interviews with creators, Galbraith shows how predominantly male fans and authors of *shōjo* manga engaged with the genre as a form of escape from rigid societal gender expectations. These fans were able to cross gender and genre boundaries at the time but also “released fanzines featuring *shōjo* as object[s] of affection” (35), thus paving the way for perceptions of *otaku* as socially inept men attracted to cute manga girl characters. These perceptions are examined in chapter 2, which focuses on the 1980s. Early in the decade, Japanese popular media sources established a discourse around *otaku* as “socially and sexually immature” men who “had problems accepting and living in reality” (51). By 1989, however, in the aftermath of a number of gruesome murders associated with an *otaku* serial killer and child molester, this discourse quickly transformed into concerns about the inability of *otakus* to distinguish between reality and fiction. *Otakus* became associated with predatory impulses and even pedophilia, strong associations that remain ingrained in common perceptions to this day.

Chapter 3 examines the concept of *moe* (affection toward manga and anime characters) and particularly its development in the 1990s. Unlike the previous two chapters focused on telling a single story, this chapter consists of three different “perspectives [as] examples of the stories that manga/anime fans and critics tell about *moe*” (81). With this unusual approach, the chapter serves as a conclusion to the more historical first two chapters and as background for the last two. It is based on the author’s decade-long ethnographic field research in Tokyo that he began in 2004. These final chapters are the highlight of an already excellent manuscript. With its complex analysis of the Akihabara neighborhood as a centralized space created by and for *otaku* culture, chapter 4 is truly outstanding. At almost sixty pages, it is also by far the longest chapter and could potentially work as a stand-alone study. Here Galbraith is able to seamlessly interweave observations on history, politics, architecture, and performance in Akihabara in order to show how Japanese politicians have been able to recuperate what they consider “good *otaku*” subculture and infuse it into the national project of “Cool Japan,” while simultaneously marginalizing and policing “weird *otaku*” subculture (183). The final chapter, drawing on a premise that *otaku* culture is not that easily split into distinct “good” or “bad” subcultures, examines maid cafes in Akihabara as unique in-between

spaces where *otaku* can access the world of manga and anime through real-world human interactions.

More important than the chronological structure of the book is Galbraith's reliance on two abstract concepts that hold the text tightly together. The first is a strict distinction made in Japan between "two-dimensional" (that of manga/anime characters, even if they take the form of real-world objects, such as action figures) and "three-dimensional" (that of flesh-and-blood humans) realities. Galbraith returns to this distinction consistently, and it serves as a good grounding for all other ideas he brings in. The second concept is that of "imagination," seen not simply as the ability to envision new ideas and realities but as a transformative anti-hegemonic power. This view of imagination is the focal point of the book and is instrumental as a framework on which the author builds his argument.

The book is meticulously researched. Galbraith draws effortlessly on the work of theorists of media and cultural studies as varied as bell hooks, Edward Said, Henry Jenkins, and Scott McCloud. Yet he remains firmly grounded in the Japanese context of his field research and incorporates important and varied sources by Japanese scholars, artists, creators, and fans. The only minor weakness in Galbraith's writing is his tendency to repeat important points more than what is necessary for readers to follow his reasoning. In some extreme cases, sources are overquoted to the point of recycling (e.g., on page 216, the same quote by Honda Tōro is used in consecutive paragraphs to make a very similar argument). Yet this is hardly noticeable, as the author is typically able to articulate clearly and succinctly his research findings and his intimate familiarity with Japanese culture.

Numerous manga pages and photographs serve as helpful visualizations of what Galbraith discusses. Images are ordered purposefully within blank spaces and on occasion as panels creating a story by themselves outside of the text, a distinctive and successful strategy. The quality of the greyscale print is excellent and, with a few minor exceptions, the images are large enough to be clearly readable.

Thoroughly researched, focused, and well written, this book is a must-read for advanced media and cultural studies scholars as it provides a lot of information and a very distinct view of *otaku* fandom and Japanese popular culture more broadly. In addition, its tight structure and straightforward language, as well as the examples provided from a wide range of popular sources, make it accessible to wide audiences interested in the topic.

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