

Photos: Tony McNicol



Toy figures on sale at Mandarake hobby store in Nakano, Tokyo

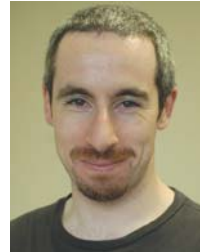
Elite Otaku

My wife tells me I'm an *otaku*, and I'm beginning to wonder if she might be right. If you are not familiar with the word, online encyclopedia *Wikipedia* defines it as: "a Japanese term used to refer to people with obsessive hobbies, most commonly *manga* or *anime*." It's a topic I've been working on a lot recently, since apart from anything, it is big business. The *otaku* "economy" of comics, DVDs, figures, games, etc. is said to be valued in the trillions of yen (tens of billions of dollars). The hardcore hobbyists themselves number in the hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions.

And maybe they include me? Not that it would be so surprising. You can probably find a bit of the *otaku* in most journalists: after all, we probably need it to get excited about chasing after all those fiddly facts and figures, immersing ourselves in research. Nor is being an *otaku* much to be ashamed of these days. Once, the name was a term of abuse directed at the geekiest kind of obsessive. Today it has mutated into a catch-all for any kind of keen hobbyist: not just *manga* and *anime otaku*, but jazz *otaku*, knitting *otaku* or *tofu otaku*. The word has even gained global currency to refer to fans of Japanese pop culture every-

Who Are You Calling "Otaku"?

By Tony McNicol



Author Tony McNicol



Resin dolls made by Kyoto-based Volks Inc. are popular with young women, and a few men too.

where. Suddenly, being an *otaku* is cool.

The stereotypical *otaku* was a geek barricaded into his (definitely his, not her) bedroom, maybe playing on a game console, probably surrounded by shelves of *manga*, and almost certainly logged onto some Internet discussion board. But it

didn't take much research before I realized that is often far from the truth. The first article I wrote was about an *otaku* test designed to select 100 elite *otaku* from all over Japan. When I interviewed one of the top scorers over a beer, I was bemused to find him an impeccably presented young *salaryman* from an eminently respectable Japanese corporation.

In fact, one of the weirdest *otaku*-type hobbies I've ever covered involved not 20-something men, but middle-aged women. I met them when I wrote a story on a kind of cuddly interactive doll originally targeted at lonely 20-something office ladies. To the maker's surprise it had become a hit with middle-aged and older women. I went to several packed events for "owners" at the manufacturer's HQ: birthday parties, excursions, even a kindergarten entrance day. The dolls evidently make fine grandchild-



Attending a birthday party for Primo Puel, and an interactive toy made by Bandai

Photos: Tony McNicol



Many owners hand-make clothes for their Volks dolls.

dren substitutes in low-birthrate Japan.

My most recent brush with *otaku* culture was again a kind of doll; this time slender 30 cm-high jointed figures made by a Kyoto toy manufacturer. I first came across the dolls in the *Akihabara* electronics and *otaku* district, so when I attended a convention for the dolls at Tokyo Big Site, I was expecting a small gathering of earnest male *otaku*. On the day, though, there were hundreds of doll owners and stalls. Many attendees were fashionably dressed young women who brought their dolls in velvet-lined violin cases.

Sailor Moon vs. Sushi

But here's the question: does this obsession with obsessive hobbyists really make me an *otaku* too? My wife points to my collection of old cameras (for work, I say), and my extensive collection of *manga*, which I excuse as Japanese study – and conveniently forget the *otaku*-like determination needed to learn Japan's fiendishly difficult writing system.

In any case, maybe it's natural that a little of the *otaku* mentality rubs off on long-term Japan residents like me? I've often wondered if the *otaku* character might not extend to more areas of Japanese culture than people usually admit. There is a word in Japanese, *kodawari*, that might be relevant here; it refers to a painstaking (some might say obsessive) attention to detail.

Take an article I just wrote on *sushi*. I learned that trainee *sushi* chefs spend the first few years of their 10-year apprenticeship just cooking rice. That way trainee *itamae* can get a feel for how different kinds of water affect the rice, and how the rice grains vary depending on the season. Now, if that's not *otaku* obsession, I don't know what is!



Otaku are prepared to pay hundreds of dollars for some plastic figures.



Hundreds of people attended a doll convention at Tokyo Big Site earlier this year.



Volks dolls can be customized to change eye color, hair style and even body parts.

Tony McNicol is a Tokyo-based freelance journalist and photographer. More of his work can be seen at www.tonymcnicol.com