

Japanese Pop Culture: Its Problems – & Its Enormous Potential

By **Roland KELTS**

By now, the images associated with Japan's global pop juggernaut are news to no one. The terms *anime* and *manga* are no longer explained in parentheses in the Western media; they have become as commonplace in English as the words *spaghetti* and *pizza*. Original *anime* titles are now broadcast in over 70 countries, comprising over 60% of animation programs worldwide. And the combined size of the global *anime* and *anime*-related merchandising market is estimated to be worth over \$30 billion, with the US market alone accounting for more than \$6 billion – a figure exceeding the value of Japanese steel exports to the United States.

In the 21st century, Japan's pop culture industry faces two enormous challenges: a declining consumer and producer base at home; and a mystifying market, driven largely by the technologies of the so-called "new media" (the Internet, cell phones, et cetera), as its products, ideas and images breach international boundaries at record speed.

■ The Next Generation

The combined effect of Japan's assault on the global consciousness is a vision of a contemporary nation bursting with energy, inventiveness, color and light, and giddy with newfound success – qualities we generally ascribe to youthfulness: being young, or at least perpetually feeling that way. Many foreigners see in today's Japan the face of the future.

But inside Japan, specters of darker hues shadow the horizons: an aging population and a declining or stagnant birthrate; an expanding class of young, part-time workers (*freeters*) with checkered resumes and scant skills; and so-called NEETs ("Not in Employment, Education or Training"), with their CVs and skill sets suspended in mid-youth. Stories of pathological young shut-ins (*hikikomori*), who withdraw into their bedrooms and virtual worlds to avoid the real ones, and Internet suicide pacts,

through which young loners meet one another online in order to kill themselves together in the bricks-and-mortar world offline, have begun haunting headlines at home and abroad.

"There doesn't seem to be much optimism," says veteran professor, translator and author Shibata Motoyuki of his students at the University of Tokyo, one of Japan's most prestigious and best-known academic institutions. His current classes contain what he calls "the first generation in modern Japan to grow up without the sense that things would get better."

"We're the risk-averse generation," a 20-year-old female student at the University of Tokyo explained to me. "We grew up too comfortable to take risks."

While conducting research for my book *Japanamerica*, I found that the social ills afflicting Japan's younger generations and the pessimism they betray began to form a narrative nexus, tying an increasingly anemic youth culture to the anxieties felt by many in the *anime*, *manga*, toy, game and other pop cultural industries about their economic futures.

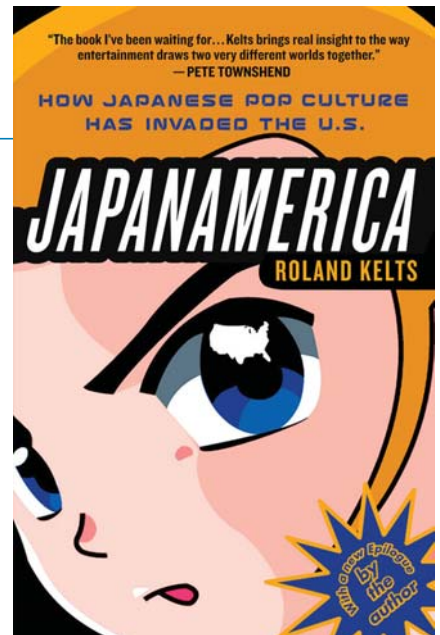
■ Pessimism about Pessimists

It's not hard to find pessimism about the young pessimists. Michael Arias, the Japan-based American director of the recent *anime* feature *Tekkonkinkreet*, illustrates his concern by reciting the names of several professional *anime* artists and directors in their 40s and older: his industry and craft may be finding audiences abroad just as they are dying in Japan.

"Making *Tekkonkinkreet*, I was fortunate enough to work with some of the best talents in the field here in Japan," Arias says. "And I heard over and over from the veterans on my staff how depleted the ranks have become in the last 10 years or so."

According to the Japanese government, the percentage of Japanese 14 and

Photo: ©Getty Images



Author's book "Japanamerica"

younger fell from 35.4% in 1950 to 13.6% in 2006. Practically speaking, the steep drop means that there simply aren't that many young talents available to the pop industry today. Economically speaking, it means that Japan's pop industry faces an employee's market – their workers can demand better conditions and wages or work elsewhere. And spiritually? "It means I won't do this for hours on end for the next 20 years," one young artist told me, "unless I get paid for it, and paid well."

What to make of the apparent disparity between the image of a vibrant "cool Japan" – and a domestic youth culture that is shrinking in size, hope and ambition?

■ Outsourcing the Japanese Genius

The Japanese pop industry is seeking to sustain its profit margins by outsourcing their labor, especially in nearby Asian countries. *Anime* giants like Tezuka Productions, official producers of the now-deceased father of the form, Tezuka Osamu, boast of their Beijing factory, and next-generation auteurs like *Appleseed* auteur Aramaki Shinji admit that "we are teaching our competition to create Japanese originals."

Among those working the front lines

Photo: ©2006 Taiyo Matsumoto / Shogakukan, Aniplex, Asmik Ace, Beyond C., Dentsu, TOKYO MX



"Tekkonkinkreet"

are young Chinese and Koreans studying the fan-artist (*doujinshi* or coterie magazine) phenomena in their respective countries – and whose pop cultural outputs threaten to eclipse Japan's in the coming years. Numerous cultural producers in Japan, from toy, *anime*, *manga* and video game companies to fashion designers and others, are now outsourcing their manual labor to their Asian neighbors. Even as executives bemoan the dwindling talent and opportunities for younger Japanese at home, they are willing to go to Asia to widen the talent pool.

Real Cool? Real Money?

San Francisco-based Frederik L. Schodt, the author of the recently published *Astro Boy Essays* and a translator and interpreter for Tezuka in the 1970s, envisions Japan's continental counterparts as the next frontier. "In the United States, the Japanese version of comics and animation is going to be challenged soon by competing products from Korea and China," he says, noting that many importers and publishers are now actively seeking and cultivating artists from both nations. "Also, young Americans who are enamored of *manga* and have been raised on them will eventually start creating their own, as some already are."

The J-Pop appeal "might soon be coded as China or Singapore in the future," agrees American professor and author Anne Allison. "But after that, I don't even think it will be assigned to countries anymore."

The so-called "gross national cool" of Japan's "soft power," so memorably introduced by American journalist Douglas McGray in 2002, may be giving way to the failure of Japanese creators to control and master their own output.

Predictions of an increasingly pan-Asian production of pop culture terrify Japanese in the industry and many government officials, who have begun to speak of a "crisis" of confidence in Japan, even while their pop icons loom over New York City.

New Media

Since *Japanamerica's* publication, bookstore and lecture hall audiences, journalists and social critics, professors and students, *otaku* fanatics and interested readers alike have embraced the Mobius Strip as a way of understanding a bicultural relationship of increasing intimacy and mutual awareness. And if you can imagine the strip in motion – whirling through the winds of the Pacific and DSL, cable and satellite TV

Photo: ©Imagi Studios



"ASTRO BOY"

Photo: ©2007 Shirov Masamune / Seishinsha-Ex Machina Film Partners



"Appleseed: Ex Machina"

signals, criss-crossing the 50 states and beyond – you will get a clearer picture of what is happening now: It is tying the two countries even closer together.

The father of *anime* and *manga*, Tezuka, idolized and imitated American artists Walt Disney and Max Fleischer some 60 years ago. As I write, the first

Photo: ©Imagi Studios



"GATCHAMAN"

major exhibition of Tezuka's protean illustrations is on display at San Francisco's Asian Art Museum – installed simultaneously with an exhibit of master Yoshimoto Taisho's Edo- and Meiji-era woodblock (*ukiyo*e) prints just down the hall. So-called "high" and "low" Japanese arts are colliding under one American roof, and Tezuka, long considered a genius and cultural icon in Japan, is suddenly and finally making headlines in a country whose artists first inspired him, and whose bombs helped shape his dedication to peace.

Some 350 miles to the south, in the heart of Los Angeles, the crack animators and computer graphics artists of Imagi Animation Studios International, with offices in LA, Tokyo and Hong Kong, are crafting a feature-length film of Astro Boy, Tezuka's signature creation, for release in American and Japanese cinemas in 2009.

The very same studio, Imagi, is hard at work on another American feature film, *Gatchaman*, the very title that kicks off *Japanamerica* via an interview with Sandy Frank – the NBC producer who brought *anime* to America in the late 1970s, when he purchased and radically redrafted *Gatchaman* into the now retro-classic, *Battle of the Planets*. Imagi plans to release *Gatchaman* in 2008. A sign of

the Mobius strip: They will not title their film *Battle of the Planets*. They will use the original Japanese title, *Gatchaman*, because that is what it is called, and that is what Americans want today – the original Japan, raw, unfiltered, unaltered, un-hyped.

Hollywood Hopefuls

James Cameron's vote of approval for a remake of *Battle Angel* has transformed the relationship between Hollywood and *anime/manga*, according to Hayashi Yoko, president and founder of Artwoods, a company devoted to connecting Tinseltown with Tokyo. Her partner in Los Angeles was responsible for turning Mr. Titanic into a *manga* maven, and Hayashi is hoping more such transformations are in store.

"The Cameron decision was a big thing for Hollywood," she says. "If Cameron was pleased, Hollywood producers thought, then we all suddenly want *manga*. And when they learn that *manga* are already a big hit in international markets, they become even more enthusiastic."

But not everything in Japan can be exported so successfully – partly because of conditions in both countries. Trans-cultural titles such as *Afro Samurai* and *Tekkonkinkreet*, whose creative evolutions are chronicled in my book, had mixed critical and commercial receptions, both in the United States and in Japan. Americans – particularly older generations – remain wary of foreign-looking images, animated or live action, and their general assumption that 'cartoons are for kids' is tough to crack.

"The big challenge is turning a great *manga*, which is essentially a beautiful and very detailed illustration, into live action," Hayashi says, noting that it's the integration of superior art, design and storytelling that makes the *manga*. "But in America," she adds, "live action is what makes money."

Cameron is attempting to circumvent this obstacle via technology. While his *Battle Angel* will technically be a live action movie, it will be shot using a combination of computer graphic animation and three-dimensional film technologies developed by Cameron – who is banking on the existence of 1,000 the-

Photo: ©Takashi Okazaki, "GONZO"



"AFRO SAMURAI," the joint US-Japan production

aters across North America equipped with 3D digital projectors capable of actually showing *Battle Angel* upon its release in the summer of 2009.

Titanic, indeed.

Japan's IP Challenge

Harnessing intellectual property (IP) is a problem for anyone in the creative or content-producing industries worldwide. The writer's guild in America is on strike as I write this, protesting the lack of remuneration as their wares go online, and numerous American TV shows (IP content) are suffering.

But the challenge is particularly vexing for Japan's producers of popular culture, who possess neither the resources nor the wherewithal to even begin to tackle it. The dazzlingly incestuous relationship of creative exchange between the *doujinshi*, or fan-artists, and professionals has helped cultivate wave upon wave of fresh new art, while leaving most in the industry virtually clueless about copyright law.

As one young Japanese reader told me upon finishing my book, "I think the reason we can't protect our intellectual property in places like Asia or the United States is that we never really did it at home. We don't even understand

how to do it.”

The Internet only exacerbates the scenario. *YouTube*, the video file-sharing site that is now as commonplace as cable TV, came into being while I was conducting research and interviews in 2005. Today, if you type into its search box the letters “AMV,” you will discover thousands of so-called “*Anime Music Videos*,” consisting of a fan’s favorite *anime* clips re-edited and woven together, then set to a soundtrack that is usually a favorite hip hop or pop song of the day. Add that to the legions of fan sites offering streaming and/or downloadable *anime* videos, often subtitled by the sites’ owners, and the “scanlations,” scanned texts of complete *manga* titles, and you have a global *doujinshi* phenomenon – without a yen of profit.

Inside Japan, concerns about the nation’s youth are keen enough to prompt a member of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to repeat the word “crisis” over an otherwise leisurely lunch with me near his office. The rise of creative competitors in Asia, particularly China, has motivated ministry officials to establish *manga* award programs and international youth exchange initiatives under the unlikely rubric, “*manga* diplomacy,” all in an effort to keep the focus on Japan – and to light a spark under what many feel is a pathologically apathetic, conservative and pessimistic younger generation.

Demand?

“Even though demand for animated films continues to rise,” says Arias, the Japan-based American director of *Tekkonkinkreet*, “at home and outside of Japan, *anime* remains a business that needs to nurture and protect its talent. More of the artists with animator potential pursue work in computer graphics, web design, and other 21st-century fields.”

“Young people don’t have the perseverance anymore,” adds Hayashi. “They’re such good boys and girls, but they’re not hungry. They’re content.”

And so a final note of irony: The challenge to the industry in Japan is finding enough young people willing and able to create and export Japan’s products of popular culture, while the

challenge in America is creating an audience that will continue to consume those products as it ages.

J-Pop as Diplomacy

Carl Horn, a veteran editor of *manga* in America and currently at Dark Horse Comics, a 20-year-old US publisher, is optimistic that the current generation of American fans will “age up,” in the words of TokyoPop’s Stuart Levy, and continue to provide demand for the medium in their later years. The recent explosions in *manga*’s popularity happened, he notes, “at the same time US publishers embraced, rather than attempted to change or conceal, the native differences between Japanese and US comics.” Horn is referring to the industry-wide decision to no longer ‘flip’ the right-to-left reading direction of Japanese *manga* originals – and to leave intact the lines of *katakana* and *hiragana* embedded in the illustrations – made in the early years of the 21st century.

Horn also believes that America’s larger and expanding population, younger median age, public library system (American librarians have largely supported the arrival of *manga* titles, which have helped draw kids back to their shelves), and ethnic diversity – providing a greater chance for a variety of narrative genres to appeal to America’s subcultures and ethnic enclaves – all point to enormous potential opportunities.

The Anime Companion author Gilles Poitras, whose series of educational guidebooks target parents and their children, agrees with Horn, pointing to the fiscal need (and possible payoffs) in cultivating an audience that appreciates *manga* and *anime* into adulthood. Younger fans don’t have the same amounts of disposable income held by their elders, notes Poitras. Even as *anime*’s popularity has bloomed among the US teen and twenty-something demographic, “the amount of money spent per fan has dropped,” he says, “and they don’t spend as much as *anime*-obsessed adults do.”

Still, unlike their counterparts across the Pacific, American youth do seem hungry for illustrations and animations currently inspiring their imaginations courtesy of Japan. Since the publication

of *Japanamerica*, I have received several requests for information from adult American readers whose nephews or nieces, neighbors’ kids or their own sons and daughters were bitten by the *anime/manga* bug, have begun studying Japanese and hope to live and attend universities in the land that produced Tezuka, Miyazaki and *Pokemon*. The kids I met on my US book tour possessed such a deep and through knowledge of the various subgenres and arcane titles that I often found myself encouraging them to pen books of their own.

“Young people are now seeking out niches,” says Steve Alpert of Miyazaki’s *Studio Ghibli*. “In a way that’s a good sign, because it requires effort, thinking, evaluation. And maybe it will lead them to appreciate the differences” between the attitudes, ideas and aesthetics that constitute the two sides of the Mobius strip. Author and professor Susan Napier proposes that this appreciation and embrace of otherness “could be Japanese pop culture’s most important legacy.”

A 20-year-old American student currently enrolled in the University of Tokyo’s Department of International Studies tells me she is learning “everything I can about this country – the history, the people, the language and the arts. I want to learn it all.” She doesn’t have much time to talk to me because of her soon-to-start *aikido* lessons, teachings of a traditional Japanese martial art that combines philosophy and spirituality with physical techniques.

She has bypassed the Internet and flown across the seas to pursue her hunger for Japan to its very shores. But why? I ask. What first inspired her to travel so far from home?

“*Dragonball Z*.”

And maybe that’s the ultimate truth of the J-Pop explosion. We might learn to appreciate our differences and pursue ‘the other.’ We might get closer to the world. **JS**

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