

Subculture in East Asia — an Overview

By Takumasa Senno



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What's Up in Asia?

There have been confrontations between China, Korea and Japan in recent years in East Asia over territorial and historical issues. The South China Sea has also seen rising confrontations between China and Southeast Asian nations. In these countries the governments have not yet held summit meetings with each other, some hate speeches have been seen among their citizens, and it can be said that the situation has gradually become more serious. It looks as if Asia has fallen into a cauldron of strife.

Turn your eyes to youth culture, though, and a completely different Asia comes into focus. Take a look at this photo collage (*Photo 1*). These are images of young people in Asia on the streets in 10 locations — Tokyo, Shanghai, Beijing, Taipei, Hong Kong, Seoul, Singapore, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, and Ho Chi Minh. Do you see any way of telling which photo belongs where? Each country, each region may have different historical, social and cultural backgrounds, but you can see that the consumption lifestyles of urban youths in Asia are showing a surprising degree of increasing convergence.

The incredible similarities go beyond cultural lifestyles, reaching into their cultural orientation, particularly when it comes to subculture. Can you tell what the following titles are? Just a few years ago, they enjoyed the ardent support of urban youths in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and elsewhere in East Asia: ① *Ming Zhen Tan Ke Nan*, ② *Guan Lan Gao Shou*, ③ *Xin Shi Ji Fu Yin Zhan Shi*, ④ *Dai Bu Ling*, ⑤ *Shi Hun*, and ⑥ *Xin Tiao Hui Yi*.

PHOTO 1

Photo: Subculture & Young People's Thinking in East Asia (Bensei Publications), ed. Takumasa Senno



Where are these young people?

In case you haven't guessed, they are: ① *Detective Conan*, ② *Slam Dunk*, ③ *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, ④ *You're Under Arrest*, ⑤ *Samurai Spirits*, and ⑥ *Tokimeki Memorial*. The first two started out as manga and the next two as anime, while the last two began life as computer games. Since then, these titles have spread throughout the manga, anime and computer game genres and beyond, including figures and novelizations, captivating a broad swathe of youthful fans.

And all six originated in Japan. For it was Japanese anime, manga and computer games that had swept through China and elsewhere in Asia in the 1980s and 1990s. Few Asian youths today fail to recognize manga and anime such as *Qi Long Zhu* (*Dragon Ball*) and *Ji Qi Mao* (*Doraemon*). More recently, Japan has not been the only one to produce titles. There's Mashimaro, which began life as a popular character on the South Korean Internet. Dubbed *Liu Mang Tu* in China, where it became a smash hit, it has also gained plenty of fans in Southeast Asia. Creators are at work everywhere in East Asia, their creations transcending borders.

Visual and musical products in particular are transmitted and accepted in near real-time, thanks to the Internet. Anime aired today and uploaded the next day on Chinese websites complete with subtitles has become the norm, not the exception.

This phenomenon is not limited to anime, manga and/or games. Pop music, for instance, is now part of the cultural environment shared by Asian youths. Countless numbers of Asian youths are fans of Namie Amuro and Hikaru Utada. Here again, it's not just one-way traffic emanating from Japan. Nu Zi Shi Er Yue Fang (China), F4 and Fahrenheit (Taiwan), TVXQ! and Girls' Generation (South Korea) and other Asian musical acts are popular in Japan and elsewhere in Asia.

This cross-border phenomenon is even more evident on TV and in movie theaters.

As is widely known, the early 1990s saw *Tokyo Love Story* (*Dong Jing Ai Qing Gu Shi*) and other Japanese TV dramas becoming huge hits in the Asian market, while recent years have seen Japanese horror movies such as *Ring* (*Qi Ye Guai Tan*) blow up. And who could have missed the Korean Wave that has been sweeping Asia?

This is how closely East Asia's urban youth culture has converged.

Youth Culture in East Asia & Its Many Dimensions

Of particular interest in all this convergence are anime, manga, light novels, cosplay and other elements of subculture — and the *dojin* ecosphere. We have already looked at anime and manga.

The "light novel" — mainly targeting teenagers — emerged in Japan in the 1990s. It is published in paperback form with manga-

PHOTO 2

Photo: Kadokawa Corporation



A Japanese light novel, *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya*, by Nagaru Tanigawa

PHOTO 3

Photo: Subculture & Young People's Thinking in East Asia (Bensei Publications), ed. Takumasa Sanno



Guo Jingming's *Huan Cheng (City of Fantasy)*

style covers and illustrations inside. It is difficult to pigeonhole the format, as it covers a wide range of genres including science fiction and fantasy, as well as more idiosyncratic story conventions such as *sekai-kei* (literally, world-type), in which an odd event breaks out in the otherwise nondescript life of a youngster and drags him/her into a battle for the very existence of our planet or even universe, and *kuki-kei* (slice-of-life; also *nichijou-kei*), which depicts the everyday life of typical youths.

There are many imprints such as Kadokawa Sneaker Bunko and Dengeki Bunko, which have been producing many bestsellers such as Nagaru Tanigawa's *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya* (Photo 2). Not a few works gain wide public attention, with Tow Ubukata's *The Mardock Scramble* trilogy (Hayakawa Bunko JA, 2003) winning the 2003 Nihon SF Taisho Award, the Japanese equivalent of the Nebula Award.

Such novels are called *qing xiao shuo* (literally, light novel) across the rest of East Asia, gaining similarly wide readerships. Taiwan also produces plenty of original work, with its own Kadokawa Chinese Light Novel Award and other literary contests. In China, the *qing xiao shuo* moniker strongly suggests the Japanese light novel; the domestic version is usually called *qing chun xiao shuo* (youth novel) or *xiao yuan xiao shuo* (campus novel). Some, like Guo Jingming's *Huan Cheng (City of Fantasy)* (Photo 3), are science fiction or fantasy works similar to their Japanese counterparts, but many of them are coming-of-age ensemble stories bearing close resemblance to the teen novel. In Hong Kong and Singapore, the *qing xiao shuo* label is reserved almost exclusively for Japanese and Taiwanese light novels. Few such works are produced locally because of the small size of their domestic markets. Those that are published mainly consist of situational comedy and other young adult novels (Photos 4 & 5).

21st century Japan has seen the rise of the *keitai shosetu*, or the cellphone novel. Elsewhere in East Asia cities, though, Internet novels enjoy a popularity that dwarfs the Japanese phenomenon. They largely take the form of websites, which readers visit to read the stories that writers post there. Websites like Jin Jiang Wen Xue Cheng

(<http://www.jjwxc.net/>) have tens of thousands of novels listed at any time, and some of their writers, like Anni Baobei (Annie Baby) and Heikeke (Black Cocoa), garner enough fame to emerge as fulltime professional novelists. Their novels are being successively published in book form, and are even being adapted as manga.

These works are closely connected to the world of *dojin* activities, which fans of light novels, manga, anime and games get together to engage in. It's the same, whether in Japan or elsewhere in urban East Asia: these activities center around cosplay and creating their own anime, games and figures, in addition to the joint, self-published magazines that originally gave the *dojin* world its name. In China, enthusiasts actively provide subtitles, dubbing and sound effects for the original imported anime. The *dojin* magazines carry manga and light novels/*qing xiao shuo*/*qing chun xiao shuo*/*xiao yuan xiao shuo*. Some of the efforts are totally original, but the bulk of the contents are derivative works that borrow the writer's favorite characters and/or universe to elaborate their own stories.

The enthusiasts interact and sell their *dojin* works online and at comic markets and other exhibition/on-site sale fairs. In Japan, a major comic market is held twice a year in summer and winter at the Tokyo Big Sight, while many other smaller events are held elsewhere year-round. The venues throng with *dojin* members as well as fans dressed up in cosplay character, and attract a good number of their participants from overseas.

China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore each hold one or two major comic markets every year, while a host of smaller events dot the cultural landscape, all with the look and feel as well as the large crowds of their Japanese counterparts (Photos 6, 7 & 8).

What Are Youths Looking for in Subculture?

There is a distinctive characteristic that runs through all these subculture enthusiasts in the way that they engage with the works.

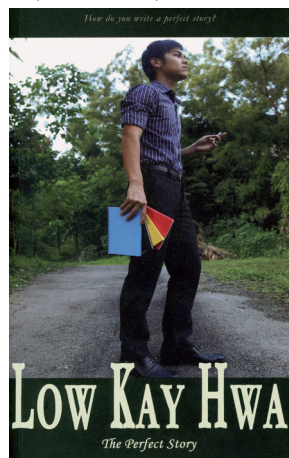
PHOTO 4

Photos: Subculture & Young People's Thinking in East Asia (Bensei Publications), ed. Takumasa Sanno



Chao Fan Xue Sheng 4 (*The Extraordinary Student 4*), a light novel from Hong Kong

PHOTO 5



Low Kay Hwa's *The Perfect Story*, a light novel from Singapore

PHOTO 6

Photo: Author



Comic market in Shanghai

They not only appreciate the storylines and literary styles but also immerse themselves in the characters. They dress themselves up in cosplay as their favorite characters in their favorite novels, and borrow their favorite characters to produce derivative works, new stories of their own.

That is not all. Many of them not only read the works for enjoyment, but also find happiness in participating in the creative process and interacting with their peers through their own work. The *dojin* activities and fandom get-togethers are part of this process. The fans connect with each other through the Internet and real-world clubs for heated debates on the characters and backgrounds, well-received opinions there having an instant, massive impact. The key here is to find your place in that world and feel a sense of fulfillment through this communicative process.

That is why the derivative works are valued highly. A piece of original work is an unknown for everyone else, so it may not secure the approval of the other *dojin* or fellow fans. Derivative works that borrow characters and the worldview do not have that problem, since they are being created using elements that everyone already knows

PHOTO 8

Photo: Author



Comic market in Singapore

PHOTO 7

Photo: Author



Comic market in Taipei

well.

Cosplay is also not a solitary act of dressing in character; the players are displaying their get-up for all to see at comic markets and cosplay contests. Skits and other performances can be staged, depending on the occasion, again for the joy of sharing the fun with everyone.

Enthusiasts generally do not confine themselves to the light novel, anime, manga or any other single genre. In fact, most of them enjoy themselves in multiple genres. Here again is a manifestation of their emphasis on engagement with their peers. For the broader the scope of their coverage, the more fun they can have within their circles. And crossing genres will not matter if they focus on the characters, for they can just take their favorite characters and give them full play in their favorite genres. It's not as if fans and friends in other genres do not know those characters.

Background to the Allure of Subculture

The interest that youths take in the characters and the shift in what they seek from the works appear to have as their background a mix of loneliness, emptiness and despair as well as social alienation (the lack of a sense of being a participatory member of society at large).

Karin Amamiya, the social critic, has the following to say about the predicament of youths today:

"Young people in the 2000s are 'in the hole' from square one, yet they do not know when they suffered the loss, or what it was. There is only the painful awareness of cards gone missing from their hands when they came to, the tactile sensation that living is extraordinarily hard though there's no way of knowing why. As the 1990s went by, with 'globalization' under progress, many youths were exposed to severe competition."

("The Cruel 'Reality' Facing Youths as Depicted in Manga", *Shosetsu Tripper* (Tripper Novels), autumn edition 2008)

Urban youths in the rest of East Asia are in a similar situation.

China has stayed true to its one-child policy since 1979, with the result that few Chinese in their teens and twenties today have siblings. For them, loneliness is a congenital condition. As they reach school age, cramming for eventual entrance exams begins, at school and at home. Failing to get into college is a literally life-changing catastrophe. And only 23% — one-third that of Japan — actually manage to matriculate (*Zhong Guo Jiao Yu Nian Jian* (Chinese Education Statistics Almanac) 2007, edited by Development and Planning Bureau, Ministry of Education, People's Education Press). This pressure is highly stressful for children.

Even if a Chinese youth manages to get into college, there is a job shortage waiting upon graduation. There are many young people who graduate but are not able to secure a regular job or can only find work under poor conditions. Called the “ant tribe” because they live bunched together in cramped quarters, they have become a social challenge that the government has also taken an interest in (described extensively in, among others, *Yi Zu: Da Xue Bi Ye Sheng Ju Ju Cun Shi Lu*, Lian Si, Guangxi Normal University Press, 2009).

That is not all. Someone lucky enough to find a job must now worry about buying housing. There is still strong social pressure to get married, but there is a need to buy housing for that. However, condominium prices are soaring as the economy grows, taking them out of the reach of the common man. Tang Xintian's best-seller *Luo Hun — 80 Hou de Xin Jie Hun Shi Dai* (No-frills Marriage — 80s Generation Newlyweds, Sino-Culture Press, 2009) depicts the lives of common folk in such circumstances. The novel tells the story of a couple and the younger sister of the wife whose lives are disrupted in an attempt to buy a home. It was adapted as a TV drama, drawing wide attention.

The backdrop may differ, but there is not much distance between the psychological circumstances of Chinese youths and those of the Japanese youths that Rin Amamiya depicts. Moreover, Chinese society offers fewer rights and opportunities to the common people to engage in resolving major social issues. It is no wonder then that they harbor a sense of hopelessness and feel alienated from society.

Cultural and social critic Tsunehiro Uno claims that there is a connection between these sentiments of the youths and their receptivity to subculture:

“The 2000s have seen the phenomenon of calling the image of a person that is shared in the classroom, office, school or other specific community a ‘character’ becoming a fixture in the Japanese social landscape. The establishment of this ‘Japanglish’ term indicates that a way of thinking that interprets the small communities (family, class, friendships and so on) in which we live our daily lives as ‘stories’ and the (relative) roles that we are given in them as their ‘characters’ is beginning to be broadly accepted.

... Just as stories have leading characters and supporting roles, heroes/heroines and villains, one's character = role determines everything there.

(*The Power of the Imagination in the 2000s*, Tsunehiro Uno, Hayakawa Shobo, 2008)

What we have seen so far gives us an insight into the reasons why some youths today love light novels and anime, manga and games, and pour so much of themselves into creating derivative works and engaging in cosplay and other *dojin* activities, and why they focus their reading on the characters and emphasis in addition to the depth of the works' interaction with their peers.

What Does the Future Hold for Us?

Readers of literary works have typically sought to find keys to the meaning of human existence, society and the world around us there, or at least believed that it was the role of great works to provide them for us. However, contemporary youths “read” light novels, anime, and manga through the characters, and seek to connect with their peers through exchanges with other fans. It is obvious that this “reading” is different from the act of “reading” modern literature.

This change indicates that modern literature is increasingly unable to fulfill the function that it has borne in the past. “Literature” — which had moved from the periphery to center stage of European culture by the early 19th century (late 19th century in Japan, early 20th century in China) — may now be quietly returning to the periphery. If this is so, and is moreover grounded in changes in the outlook on society and more broadly on life on the part of the readers, mainly the young, the problem for modern literature will persist.

There is hope here as well. Literature and other forms of modern and contemporary culture spawned in the 19th century achieved their function by morphing into mass culture, in other words by mobilizing the masses. People went to art museums, theaters and concert halls to see art and drama and listen to music. The 20th century growth of the mass media was a process of sophistication of mass mobilization. The defining feature of this mobilization was the separation of the mobilizer and the mobilized.

The immersion of contemporary youths in subculture as they themselves engage in the creative process and seek connections with their peers signifies a change in that mobilization process. The masses are no longer there just to be unilaterally mobilized.

Being confronted with the tensions between Japan and China or Korea, it seems to be difficult for the governments and mass media of both countries to give way to each other. But we need not follow them, because we no longer live in a world where we are to be passively mobilized. If we hope to realize detente and to make friendship with other countries, we are able to and have to raise our voices against the governments and mass media of both countries. About this citizens should be able to transcend borders to unite with each other. When we create public opinion that transcends borders, will there be a way for governments to make concessions to each other, and moderate political tension? This is not a dream. For the young, it may already be turning true, at least in subculture. **JS**

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