

Interview with Daisuke Horiguchi, CEO of Secret Sessions Pte. Ltd

A CG Deepens Ties with Southeast Asia & Promotes Japan's Growth

By Japan SPOTLIGHT

The Anime Festival Asia (AFA) Singapore 2025, Southeast Asia's largest anime event, was held on Nov. 28-30, 2025. We spoke with Daisuke Horiguchi, CEO of Secret Sessions Pte. Ltd, an influencer marketing support company based in Singapore that provided on-site support for this event, about the significance of the event and future expectations for ACG (Anime, Comics, Games) to deepen the bond between Japan and Southeast Asia.

Image: Secret Sessions Pte. Ltd.



Secret Sessions Pte. Ltd. logo

(Interviewed on Feb. 10, 2026)

Introduction

JS: First, could you please introduce your company, Secret Sessions Pte., and OTABASE?

Horiguchi: I'm Daisuke Horiguchi, CEO of Secret Sessions. Currently based in Singapore, we support overseas marketing for Japanese companies focused on Southeast Asia and assist creators with cross-border activities. Our core operation is running OTABASE, an influencer platform specializing in anime, game, and cosplay influencers in Southeast Asia. We also operate web media and platforms dedicated to otaku culture, anime, games, and ACG events like cosplay.

Beyond media operations, we also facilitate matchmaking between overseas creators and Japanese companies, support overseas cosplayers entering the Japanese market, assist Japanese cosplayers expanding overseas, and support companies wishing to exhibit at overseas events or expand internationally. To gain firsthand experience of local trends, I resided in Thailand from 2023 to 2025 and am currently based in Taiwan. I plan to return to Thailand in mid-2026 to advance ongoing projects primarily focused on Southeast Asia.

The impetus for starting this venture was the ASEAN market, the Southeast Asian market, which has a population of around 700 million. Even when simply compared to Japan's population, it's over five times larger. Furthermore, it shares high affinity with Japan, and there's tremendous enthusiasm for the anime, comics, and gaming events I mentioned earlier. It's truly a market poised for growth. As the birthplace of anime and games, we wondered if we could contribute to Japan's future role as a leader in this field, which led us to launch this business. However, event information is scattered, and regulations vary by country. OTABASE addresses this by systematically organizing event information for easy access. We also

support creators, companies, and cosplayers looking to enter Southeast Asia by accompanying them on site visits, assisting with event participation, and facilitating creator matching. This helps maximize the region's potential. We plan to release an official app in 2026. Through features like searching for events in various countries, schedule management, and participation logs, we envision more robustly supporting connections among "otaku around the world".

In the future, we plan to collaborate with event organizers to establish official login spots at venues, offer login rewards, and even explore systems like official attendance certification. We aim to create an ecosystem that preserves participants' real-world event experiences as lasting digital records.

Regarding regulations, for example in Japan, cosplaying while heading to the venue or changing into cosplay near the venue is generally prohibited, but at overseas events, such actions are not subject to restrictions.

Additionally, some countries have gun regulations, so bringing weapon replicas resembling firearms may be prohibited at events. Furthermore, depending on the religion, revealing attire may be banned. Therefore, it is necessary to understand and comply with these country-specific regulations and rules when participating or exhibiting. We provide information about these differing regulations.

JS: So, you're saying you're providing support from the sidelines to help them network, with the goal of seriously supporting connections between "otaku around the world"?

Horiguchi: Currently, event information across Southeast Asian countries is scattered across websites, social media like Facebook, Instagram, and X. So, we're now building a platform to organize this and enable cross-country event searches.

While many participants post individually on social media after events, there's no way to see what events they've attended before, what they did at those events, or what cosplay they wore – it's not recorded. Even if the person remembers, there was no way for others to visualize this information. If such details were easily accessible, cosplayers could more readily see what others wore to past events. We're currently developing an app specifically for this purpose. Through this, we aim to build an environment where cosplayers and creators from Southeast Asia, as well as those from Japan going overseas, can more easily integrate into the Southeast Asian market.

Assessment of AFA Singapore 2025

JS: Southeast Asia is a good friend to Japan, but we want to deepen our relationship and become even closer. When considering expanding this circle of friends to Africa and increasing our friends in Europe as well, how can the entertainment business better serve as a unifying force? How would you assess "AFA Singapore 2025" held last November in Singapore as an anime event in Asia compared to past events?

Horiguchi: Regarding AFA Singapore, it feels like it stands head and shoulders above other events in Southeast Asia. In Japan, you have events like Comic Market or Tokyo Game Show that are synonymous with their respective genres. Similarly, I feel AFA Singapore has grown into the position of being the "representative anime event for Southeast Asia".

Fundamentally, it's not just a one-off event in a single city; the AFA brand itself has become a symbol for ACG events across all of Southeast Asia. Looking at attendance trends, official data shows the inaugural event in 2008 drew 29,000 visitors, while 2023 saw over 130,000 attendees – representing three to four times growth over 15 years.

Regarding the number of exhibitor booths, in recent years there have been over 200 booths. It's not just about selling related merchandise: stage events featuring anime voice actors and singers are also held. With overseas attendees reaching 34%, it has become an "industry event" where you can enjoy everything comprehensively in one place. I feel it has grown into a major anime event in Asia.

JS: In November 2025, Kadokawa made Sozo the operator of AFA, a consolidated subsidiary (80% stake), marking the start of Japanese IP holders investing in AFA as a strategic base. What kind of companies are these Japanese IP holders?

Horiguchi: IP holders are companies that own characters and game titles, such as Shueisha, Kadokawa, and in gaming, Nintendo – each owning rights to iconic characters like Dragon Ball and Mario

respectively. These companies recognize the value in AFA. OTABASE also receives many inquiries from major corporations and organizations. When planning their first event in Southeast Asia, AFA is often the initial choice. Many envision starting there and then expanding into other countries as a derivative step.

AFA itself has a 17-year history. While various anime events have been held across Southeast Asia within the last 20 years, AFA has finally established its systems and achieved a level of organization comparable to Japan's anime events. This is likely why Kadokawa decided to use it as a base – it has the rights management and event rules in place.

JS: Regarding the position of Japanese anime in Asia, since AFA has been running for 17 years, it feels newer than the Japanese anime boom in Europe and America. Does that mean it developed later than in Europe and America, and that by the 2025 AFA event in Singapore it will have grown to a scale nearly on a par with those events?

Horiguchi: Comparing current anime events in Europe and America with those in Southeast Asia, the scale and passion are truly remarkable. In that sense, I believe Southeast Asia has gained momentum rivaling the West. Anime popularity in Europe and America is surging more than ever before, and simultaneously its popularity in Asia is also rising. So I feel both regions are experiencing tremendous growth. Considering the differences, in Southeast Asia, Japanese anime is recognized as "one of the central pillars of pop culture". While Western adoption is streaming-driven and mass-market, Southeast Asia feels more community-centric, fueled by "streaming + event enthusiasm". Asia isn't monolithic either: due to historical US influence, anime shops in the Philippines feature high dominance of the US IPs like DC and Marvel, while Japan IPs account for 70-80% in Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore. This clearly shows the impact of cultural distance and physical distribution.

Image: Secret Sessions Pte. Ltd.



OTABASE logo

JS: Speaking of very old matters in Asia, Japan did engage in colonial rule, so has the resistance to Japanese anime stemming from that backlash largely disappeared? Also, I've heard that during the high-growth period, there were instances where Japanese people interacted with locals in a somewhat arrogant manner.

Horiguchi: This is really based on my personal experience, but when people in Southeast Asia hear the word “Japan” what immediately comes to mind is anime or Japanese cuisine. So I get the impression that few people hold negative views. Furthermore, visiting local anime shops confirms this. While the specific shops vary by region, it's commonplace to see not just young people but people of all ages visiting anime shops to buy merchandise and watching anime on their smartphones.

Of course, some people do hold negative views. But I think there are countries that grew with ODA assistance, and even when you visit Southeast Asian nations, roads and bridges built with Japanese aid remain. I believe many people feel a sense of goodwill toward Japan because of this. Also, since Japanese anime has been regularly broadcast in Southeast Asia since the 1980s, many people grew up familiar with it. As adults, they started families, and their children also became interested in anime. Moreover, streaming services have developed significantly in recent years. Now, as long as you have Internet access, you can watch Japanese content anywhere. I feel this kind of ease of access has also had an impact.

In Southeast Asia, data shows that over half of Netflix viewers subscribe specifically to watch anime. While anime is available online, there are few places to buy merchandise. For example, Animate, a famous Japanese anime goods store, currently only has locations in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and Taiwan in Southeast Asia. In Japan, you can easily buy anime goods at online shops or physical anime stores. However, in Southeast Asia, places to buy official merchandise are limited. This leads many people to attend events specifically to buy goods, which I believe contributes to the passion for anime and the positive image of Japan.

JS: Do you think anime events in Asia have contributed significantly to the development of Japan's anime industry?

Horiguchi: Yes, I believe it contributes significantly. I think there are three main reasons for this: 1) Fan entry point: discovering works at events sparks interest in Japanese culture as a whole, creating a cycle of visits to Japan and merchandise purchases; 2) Corporate “on-site metrics”: directly gauging passion and reactions through cosplay, merchandise sales, and community activity – insights not visible in streaming data; and 3) Revenue diversification and IP longevity: extending a work's peak through merchandise, experiences, and collaborations, while Asia's fan-created culture nurtures the next generation of creators.

In particular, I feel that many people begin to take an interest in Japan through anime events. Through anime, they develop an interest in the Japanese language, leading them to learn Japanese or want to travel to Japan. As a result, more people develop a broader interest in Japan as a whole. This, in turn, increases the number of visitors to Japan and buyers of anime goods, significantly contributing to the growth of Japan's fanbase.

JS: Does this mean that through anime, affection for Japan is growing among the younger generation?

Horiguchi: While I get the impression that Japanese brands have declined significantly in Southeast Asia, the “Japan = anime” brand still remains very strong.

Challenges in the Overseas Expansion of Japan's Anime Business

JS: I'd like to ask about the challenges and countermeasures for further expanding Japanese anime overseas. It's often said that the biggest challenge is that many opportunities are being missed. What are your thoughts on this?

Horiguchi: Regarding the high number of missed opportunities, I feel that in some countries, legal frameworks and rules haven't kept pace with the development of anime popularity, and Japanese IP holders often overlook these areas. As a result, they're missing out on business opportunities, allowing third parties to reap the profits. Therefore, I think it's essential for IP holders and companies, as the true rights owners, to get serious about strengthening their efforts in establishing rules within those countries and enhancing product promotion.

For example, regarding fan creations, selling them at event venues is generally acceptable. However, when local anime shops sell comics or related goods without proper licensing, establishing clear rules for this and having official shops operate physical stores could help secure profits that were previously lost. This approach would also help protect brand value.

Currently, Chinese brand games and anime are on the rise. At event venues, Japanese anime characters were the mainstream cosplay choice until about five years ago, but in recent years Chinese anime and game characters, along with their cosplay and merchandise, have become popular. The reason for this is that they design their characters and brands with the global market in mind, successfully attracting users worldwide. In contrast, I don't think Japan is creating works consciously aimed at the global market.

The situation is that works created with the Japanese market in mind have ended up being directed globally and coincidentally achieved worldwide hits. As a countermeasure, rather than trying to cultivate a mindset of creating works specifically for the global market, I think it would be better to maintain the current desire to

create for the domestic market without changing it, while rigorously managing licensing. Then, package that and take it overseas – protecting the IP and delivering it internationally.

JS: Does that mean the government has a significant role to play? Like establishing a legal framework for licensing, or clearly defining the points companies must adhere to when entering into licenses, ensuring they establish proper contracts?

Horiguchi: Rather than government-led initiatives, I believe it's crucial for rights holders to carefully evaluate local partners in each country. They must consider how to promote their content within that nation, and how to expand its reach while safeguarding their rights.

JS: In that case, we'll need to provide substantial information about various local business practices and regulations.

Horiguchi: While the market size is highly attractive, Japanese products and content are susceptible to being affected by political situations and public sentiment. Taking that into account, I feel it's necessary to assess each country's situation when deciding on market entry, and to consider how to promote our offerings while also factoring in business practices and geopolitical risks.

JS: The potential growth of Japan's anime industry appears to be very high. Furthermore, if streaming services and other platforms are expanding access points, I believe we can leverage that. Are there any issues with streaming services?

Horiguchi: Looking at the global anime market, according to the Association of Japanese Animation's (AJA) announcement, the anime industry market in 2024 had sales of 3.84 trillion yen (AJA preliminary figures, announced October 2025; an increase from 3.3465 trillion yen in the previous year, 2023; overseas sales increased by 26% year-on-year). Within that, domestic sales were ¥1.67 trillion and overseas sales were ¥2.17 trillion, meaning over half of the profits came from overseas. I believe streaming likely contributed significantly to this.

Streaming has eliminated borders. The fact that anime can now be watched anywhere in the world with just a smartphone or PC is a major driver behind the growth of Japanese anime. To maximize its potential, building the foundation is more important than changing the content itself. Particularly regarding offline events, I think it's crucial to improve the surrounding environment. This includes visualizing the structure of official/unofficial, rights, and sponsorship arrangements, as well as collaborating with local organizers to enhance attendee data and flow management.

Another key challenge is the rise of Chinese games, alongside the

growing popularity of non-anime phenomena like V-tubers. Even at individual events, I notice that cosplay and exhibits popular among anime fans often feature Chinese games, Chinese anime, characters, or content.

Furthermore, over the past two to three years, we've seen an increase in cases where V-tubers appear on anime event stages solely via video feed as speakers, or are hired as judges for cosplay and anime events.

Therefore, in response to these trends, I think flexibility in adapting to various media mix developments – rather than relying solely on anime – will be crucial for overcoming future challenges.

The Future Potential of the Metaverse

JS: I would greatly appreciate hearing about the future potential of the metaverse as a new movement. Will it continue to grow significantly? What impact will it have on the economy and society?

Horiguchi: I think of the metaverse as a community where you create your own avatar in a virtual space – essentially a 3D version of Zoom – and interact with others through those avatars. Personally, I believe the potential of this metaverse is enormous.

Taking the Roblox metaverse platform as an example, recent Q4 2025 data shows daily users reaching 144 million (a 69% year-over-year increase). This makes it a massive platform where users logging in daily far exceed Japan's population. The vast majority of these users are overseas, making it a metaverse platform accessed daily by young people in their teens and twenties worldwide.

Young people used to make plans to meet up after school by saying, "Let's meet at such-and-such place." But today's youth routinely arrange to meet in virtual spaces, saying things like, "Let's meet in this Roblox game." Considering this, how today's children perceive the metaverse is crucial. The generation raised in the metaverse will become the primary customers for companies in 10 or 20 years. Keeping this in mind, and considering the strong compatibility with the ACG sector – where games using anime IPs are extensively developed within the metaverse – it's essential to advance the anime business with a medium-to-long-term vision. The focus should not be on "making money now" but rather on the fact that "the generation growing up in the metaverse environment will be the main customers in 10 years."

JS: What are the prospects for the metaverse in Asia going forward?

Horiguchi: I believe the metaverse holds tremendous potential in Asia as well. For example, in Japan, it's common for each person to have one smartphone, but overseas, it's not uncommon for people to own multiple devices. In Japan, children often borrow their parents' smartphones to play games, but in Southeast Asia, children have their own smartphones and have the infrastructure to constantly

access online spaces. It's an environment where they can log into the metaverse anytime.

In Southeast Asia, there are also areas where children can't go out freely. However, in the metaverse, they can play with friends without moving their bodies, as long as they have a smartphone. Additionally, when you visit malls in Southeast Asia, you frequently see elementary or middle school-aged children at food courts or similar places using their smartphones. Looking at their screens, you often see them playing virtual games like Roblox, which I mentioned earlier. Based on this firsthand experience, I believe the metaverse market in Asia is already quite mature.

Furthermore, it's fair to say there's significant room for development in this metaverse space, where restrictions on self-expression due to religious or cultural backgrounds are minimal. In Islamic regions like Indonesia and Malaysia, there are restrictions on skin exposure for women, but such constraints are removed in the metaverse. Looking at anime events, cosplay by women in Islamic regions tends to be more restrained, and Muslim women typically wear hijabs covering everything from the neck up. Consequently, they cannot freely change their hairstyles like other cosplayers. However, within the metaverse, using virtual avatars eliminates the need for a hijab. They can become their favorite anime characters and freely choose any hairstyle or clothing.

I believe one reason the metaverse is gaining traction among Southeast Asia's younger generation is precisely this ability to shed real-world constraints and freely express oneself virtually.

In fact, I feel that this factor – compensating for real-world self-expression constraints through the virtual realm – also underpins the widespread use of avatar-based platforms like ZEPETO in Indonesia (based on my on-the-ground observations). I believe this affinity between anime/cosplay culture and the metaverse is one reason it resonates particularly strongly in Asia.

JS: It seems that the metaverse and the spread of anime culture will increasingly deepen the bonds among Asian youth.

Horiguchi: Before online games and the metaverse existed, I think people would go to event venues to find friends who shared their favorite anime or common interests. Now, through the metaverse and online games, we have an environment where you can find friends who share your passions, even if it's not in person. Moreover, these metaverse platforms, like online games, often include chat translation features, breaking down language barriers for communication. That's why I think adoption has accelerated significantly in recent years.

Challenges for ACG Entrepreneurs

JS: I think there are a lot of young entrepreneurs in entertainment-related businesses like anime and games. How do you view the recent entrepreneurial

activity in these fields in Japan? Japan is often said to have few venture companies, but entertainment-related businesses have tremendous potential, so perhaps many young people want to enter this space. What are your thoughts on that?

Horiguchi: I think it's highly effective to launch startups targeting Southeast Asia with entertainment like anime as the core focus. I feel many companies are concentrating on how to bring Japanese content like anime and games overseas. After all, the domestic market is only shrinking, so it's crucial to look beyond Japan and figure out how to take it overseas.

While bringing popular Japanese or other foreign content to Southeast Asia and localizing it has been a common approach for a long time, content from other countries, like Chinese games, is also growing. I think it's extremely important to strategize how to compete with them.

We shouldn't choose countries based solely on market size. We also need to carefully consider how to deliver the content and market it, taking into account risks, culture, religion, and other factors. For example, in socialist countries, restrictions on creation mean we cannot focus primarily on fostering creators or merchandise sales like in Japan. Even if the consumer market is attractive, the difficulty of establishing it as a creative hub is separate. It's crucial to assess the overall picture, including political risks, regulations, social structures, and religion, to determine if a sustainable winning strategy can be devised.

JS: I think this is due to Japan's declining population. Would it be accurate to say that the number of startups launching with overseas expansion in mind – particularly targeting Asian markets as the most accessible – is definitely increasing?

Horiguchi: Regarding startups, many companies are creating content aimed at making it popular in Southeast Asia while initially ignoring the Japanese market. I think we'll see more of this reverse import pattern going forward – launching first in Southeast Asia and then bringing it back to Japan.

JS: Thank you very much.

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Written and translated by Naoyuki Haraoka, editor-in-chief of *Japan SPOTLIGHT*, with the cooperation of Tape Rewrite Co.