

Song Box Boom

By Susumu Takigawa

Japanese salaried workers typically like to relax by drinking *sake* or singing in *karaoke* bars before heading home after work. *Karaoke* means empty (*kara*) orchestra (*oke*), and is a recorded orchestral accompaniment without lyrics. In *karaoke* bars, people sing popular songs into a microphone to the accompaniment of taped orchestral music. Through the microphone, their voice is blended with the orchestral accompaniment.

Recently, discarded shipping containers, camping cars and prefabs have begun to be used as "karaoke boxes" where people can sing their favorite songs. New businesses which lease such karaoke boxes have sprung up in many places throughout Japan, and they are doing a roaring trade.

These boxes can be rented at any time during the day as well as in the evening. Thus they are used by elderly people, housewives and family groups as a gathering place during the daytime. They are patronized by a wide range of people of different age groups. Alcohol is usually not allowed.

The rental charge of a karaoke box in the daytime ranges from ¥500 to ¥800 (about \$3.5-\$5.7 at the rate of ¥140/\$) per hour. In the evenings, the charge is ¥1,500-¥2,000 per hour.

People rent the box by the hour, and they can enjoy to their heart's content singing their favorite songs to an orchestral accompaniment played on laser disks. In addition to the rental charge, customers have to put a ¥100 coin into a slot for each song they choose. The lyrics are displayed on a video screen, and the "performer" can sing along while looking at the lyrics.

There are 600 to 700 karaoke-box centers throughout Japan, providing close to 10,000 singing rooms. Dai-ichi Kosho, the biggest karaoke rental company, has a nationwide operation with its head office in Shinagawa Ward, Tokyo.

One of its karaoke-box centers is at a corner of a residential section in Adachi Ward, Tokyo, on a plot of land that looks like a car park. At the entrance to this plot stands a huge signboard reading "Big Echo." A reporter visiting the compound

found rows of prefab sheds, each measuring six meters long, 2.5 meters wide and 2.7 meters high. There were 21 sheds jam-packed into this compound.

When the door of one of the sheds was opened, a booming voice could be heard singing an *enka*, or popular ballad. An elderly man was singing before the karaoke machine with a microphone in his hand, while six men and women of about the same age as the singer applauded vigorously. They were members of an old people's singing group who rent a prefab once a week to enjoy karaoke singing. "This shed is somewhat small. But because we know each other very well, we can sing to our heart's content without any feeling of embarrassment," one of the women said.

A young housewife in her 20s with a small child was seen going into another prefab. "Because I have a small child, I cannot go to a karaoke bar at night. Instead, I work off my tension by singing here." So saying, she shut the door behind her. Singing can seldom be heard outside.

Ichiro Okuno of the Big Echo Business Division of Dai-ichi Kosho said, "On Saturdays and Sundays, many family groups come here to enjoy singing, while on weekdays a wide range of people from old people to junior and senior high school students on their way home from school use these karaoke boxes.

"They are inexpensive and provide a healthy diversion. The number of karaoke box patrons will increase greatly in the future," he added confidently.

It costs about ¥5 million (nearly \$35,700) to convert a shipping container into a karaoke box with the necessary equipment. Because the box requires no attendant, and the initial start-up cost can be recovered within a year in the present boom, it seems likely that the number of karaoke boxes will increase further in the future.

Some landowners in the suburbs of Tokyo and other big cities, where land prices have climbed sky-high, have purchased containers to start karaoke box rental businesses in order to put their land to profitable use. In city areas, many bowling alleys, sports arenas and pool bars equipped with billiard tables have set up



A song box center run by a leading karaoke rental company

capsule-type karaoke boxes in a corner of their premises.

One karaoke-box manufacturer has received inquiries from hospitals wishing to purchase a karaoke box on the theory that it may not only help eliminate stress but may also have psychological benefits encouraging a more speedy recovery of patients. One manufacturer even plans to advance overseas. Its spokesman said, "We want to construct a big leisure complex containing restaurants and other recreational facilities in the suburbs of Los Angeles and install karaoke boxes converted from camping cars to attract large numbers of people."

On the other hand, some people express apprehension that because activities taking place in karaoke boxes cannot be seen from outside, they may encourage juvenile delinquency. In fact, some karaoke boxes have been closed down and removed because of opposition from local residents. Local governments have begun studying the advisability of imposing restrictions on the karaoke boxes.

Karaoke box operators are taking measures to eliminate the closed-chamber image by fitting large windows so that people outside can see what is going on inside. Also, they are refusing to let juveniles use the boxes after dark.

Susumu Takigawa is a staff writer with Kyodo News Service.