

## The Electric Geisha:

### Exploring Japan's Popular Culture

*Edited by Atsushi Ueda; Translated by Miriam Eguchi; Kodansha International Ltd.*

The title of the book, *The Electric Geisha*, refers to karaoke, a key word in understanding Japanese popular culture. Karaoke is a machine which plays songs without the vocal part, that is left for the individual to perform. Initially, it was equipped with simple audio functions and installed in the corner of a bar as just another form of entertainment for customers. But as technology advanced, it evolved into a highly sophisticated multi-functional high-tech machine using laser disks or CD-ROMs.

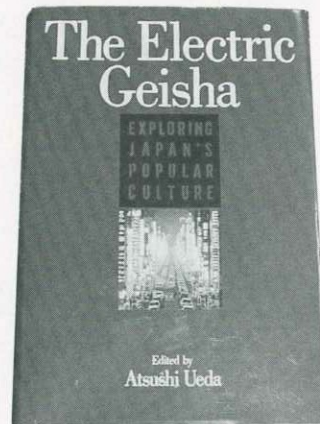
With the appearance of a karaoke-box, the primary purpose of which is to aid in the enjoyment of singing, karaoke has become not simply barroom entertainment, but entertainment for everybody regardless of age or sex, adding its name to the list of national popular culture.

Behind the development of karaoke there lies a traditional form of entertainment dating back to the Edo period, provided by geisha in restaurants. Geisha are professional entertainers highly skilled in a variety of traditional music and dance. Similarly, a karaoke machine—an electric geisha—has a variety of high-tech devices to entertain customers. Although karaoke machines cannot completely replace geisha as entertainers, the latest hi-tech type systems are able to adjust the pitch according to the singer's voice, such as a geisha would do, and, moreover, are even able to produce automatic ratings of player's singing skill.

Edited by Professor Atsushi Ueda, well-known architect and social commentator, the book is based on the findings of a research group which he headed on the relationship between Japanese popular culture, with cities as the background. The study divides Japanese popular culture into five chapters: "Leisure and Recreation;" "Lifestyle;" "Politics and Economics;" "Trends, Social Institutions, and Human Relations;" and "The Japanese City." Additionally, 26 social phenomena, with historical backgrounds, as well as their development to the present are described.

Listed among them are examples of typical Japanese popular culture such as karaoke, public bathing, training-based culture, wedding ceremonies and sexual mores, with a focus on the urban masses who created them, comparing the cities of the present with their counterparts in the Edo period, when their prototypes emerged. The most important observation of this book is that it was the urban masses, rather than the aristocracy, warriors or farmers in the Edo period, that created the prototypes of the various forms of current popular culture in Japan.

Introducing the notion of a "mass city" as the key to deciphering Japanese popular culture, Professor Ueda describes the common urban life features from throughout the Edo period (1600 to 1867) to present day, pointing out that the "mass city" created Japanese popular culture. The prototypes of the "mass city" were castle towns built approximately 400 years ago when the Tokugawa shogunate opened the Edo era. Those cities survive today as Tokyo, Osaka and other prefectural capitals, maintaining their basic structures as cities. Ueda defines the Japanese "mass city," vis-à-vis its Western counterpart, as distinctive in putting higher value on consumption rather than on assets, and



argues that it is a society emphasizing the vitality and efficiency of the economic aspect.

Because of its broad approach, covering various aspects of Japanese popular culture, the book seems in need of a slightly deeper analysis of each phenomenon. But in general, it successfully presents various professional viewpoints in a compact and simple manner. This book may also give the best introduction to the way in which Japanese popular culture and its underlying social values have developed, providing a historical overview of the formative process of urban popular culture since the Edo period. I hope the book will contribute to a deeper understanding of Japanese values and popular culture, thereby leading to the recognition that Japanese society is not totally different from the rest of the world.

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