

## Changes in Modern Japanese Social and Cultural Currents (9)

# What Lies behind Mega-hit Phenomena?

By Nakano Osamu

## 1. Meaning of Hit Phenomena

The Oscar-winning film "Titanic" drew 1.7 million spectators and earned ¥16 billion in Japan. Over 5 million copies of the video were also sold. "Gotai Fumanzoku (Unsatisfactory Limbs), a book authored by a university student without any limbs sold 3.87 million copies. CDs of "Dango Sankyodai (Three Dumpling Ball Brothers)," a TV hit song for children, sold 3 million copies. Pop singer Utada Hikaru's hit CD "First Love" sold 6.3 million copies. (All figures are as of June 1, 1999).

These hit phenomena show that Japanese doomsayers' predictions about Armageddon occurring in 1999 hardly affected Japanese society. I am probably not the only person to feel sarcastic about such euphoric phenomena.

What has caused such booms? When I examine the substance of the above-mentioned booms, I find myself at a loss for a satisfactory answer.

Some would say that such phenomena themselves are doomsday phenomena. The way I see it, these four booms all have something in common: they superficially affirm the present generation; the meaning of living in the present generation; remembrance; and the behavior of a genius.

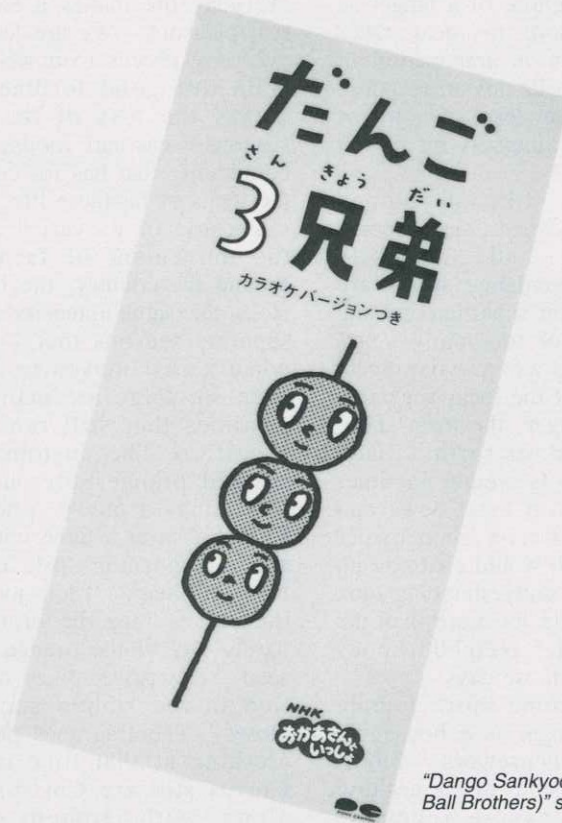
Taking them at face value, I am tempted to say that society is at peace and that people's minds are not as corrupt as is generally considered. The collapse of civilization, should it ever occur, is a long way off. Not a few opinion leaders assert that these booms symbolize a crisis in civilization and culture.

For girls in their early 20s fascinated by Utada's songs, talks of a crisis by opinion leaders are nothing but puzzling. They are completely in the dark as to what the opinion leaders

mean and why they talk about crises.

**Notes:** "Dango Sankyodai (Three Dumpling Ball Brothers)" was a hit song broadcast in an NHK TV program for children. It features three skewered dumpling balls (dango), which likened to three chummy brothers, dance to a tango. The song became so popular that its CD version was released.

"Gotai Fumanzoku (Unsatisfactory Limbs)" was authored by Ootake Hirotsada, a 23-year-old male student of Waseda University born completely limbless due to a congenital defect. He moves around on a special electric wheelchair and regularly attends



"Dango Sankyodai (Three Dumpling Ball Brothers)" sold 3 million copies

classes. In the book, he tells of his life and experiences.

Whenever booms occurred, like hula hoops; "Dakkochan" dolls; "Tottochan," an essay by a popular female TV personality recalling her childhood; the Beatles and other pop groups; computer software; "Tamagocchi" computer games, etc., opinion leaders pointed out of the crisis of civilization and culture brought about by the market economy, mass society, consumer society and information-oriented capitalism. Some even went out of their way to say that the crisis was worsening. If the crisis had continued to deepen over the 40 years, civilization and culture would have been long gone by now.



But the fact that opinion leaders constantly repeat their strange, mysterious chats symbolically shows that all the world is at peace. It is possible, at least theoretically, to assert that their crisis talks were all groundless.

The basic paradigm of the crisis talks is made up of words familiar for the past 40 years: the feeling of ennui prevailing over the present times; the standardization and equalization of culture and life; the standardization of consciousness and thought; immaturity of the young generation; the collapse of the family; the discontinuation of culture; the loss of the feeling of community; the individualization and isolation of, and readoption of primitiveness in lifestyle; conformity and imitation.

Unemployment rate has reached a postwar high, with only 70% of university students graduating next March having found positions. But all the world is at peace, so peaceful that not a single riot has taken place. Materialistic booms, all harmless to society, continue to come and go. Nevertheless, opinion leaders persist in talking about a crisis using the same paradigm unchanged over the past 40 years. Doesn't it show that nothing has changed?

The crisis talks themselves have become information products marketed at high prices. There are marketers (journalists) who realized the lucrative market value in the crisis talks and there are consumers willing to buy them and be satisfied with them. On the other end of the spectrum, there are sellers of the crisis talks (opinion leaders). Such a market structure has been maintained for many years. Crises are marketable.

Journalists who sell the crisis talks but call for versatility of culture are very self-contradictory. Do they really believe that culture can be consciously created?

I regard Utada's popularity as a social phenomenon. The Utada phenomenon consists of the booming sales of CDs (6.5 million copies)

frequent references to her in newspapers, magazines and TV programs; publication of books analyzing her; the predominance of her music (most university students are said to listen to Utada's music while driving), the young generation's tribute to Utada and her music; opinion leaders' reference to the Utada boom as a social crisis, etc. And, even minor episodes about Utada, like her background, her childhood, her study overseas, her daily life, and sometimes even scandalous stories, serve to boost the boom.

Such a boom is an excellent theme for sociology. As long as sociology deals with contemporary issues, every element of the Utada boom is worthy of sociological studies.

Why do opinion leaders talk about a social crisis in regard to Utada? (They would like to talk about the position of knowledge in society from historical viewpoints.) Why did as many as 6.3 million people buy her CD? How were they moved by her songs and how do they assess them? Is it possible to analyze the motives and emotions of the 6.3 million people as a total? Does such analysis have any meaning?

Not a few sociologists since the 19th century have attempted analyses of bubble phenomena and other large-scale social-cultural phenomena. They have achieved many results but they have not produced satisfactory answers.

The German sociologist Jimmel explained that a boom (mass) phenomenon occurs when two entirely different vectors — conformity and difference — work together. His explanation is quite convincing. Jimmel's theory is not on the same footing as the crisis talks by Japanese opinion leaders. Yet, it is doubtful to what extent Jimmel's theory succeeds in analyzing the essence of the phenomena.

As a sociologist focusing on the mass media, I am fascinated by such phenomena and would like to attempt some analysis of them. So, this part

of the series will deal with my thoughts on the phenomena, though I am not sure if my description will shed any light on them.

## 2. The Background of the Boom

When sales of "Tamagocchi," a pocket electronic game for children, were booming, I was frequently asked by officials of advertising agencies to explain why such a trifle was selling like hot cakes.

As I have already mentioned, as a sociologist I had to say, "I have no proper answer." It was possible to talk about, from crisis viewpoints, the relevance of nurturing babies on a game machine. But, as the advertising agency officials adequately admitted themselves, "Tamagocchi" was nothing but a trifle. Indeed, there was so little sociological meaning in the substance of "Tamagocchi" that I found it meaningless to discuss its relevance. So, after replying that I had no proper answer, I only added that the boom will promptly taper off. As I predicted, the boom soon ended after the product spread explosively and imitations hit the market.

The demise of "Tamagocchi" was apparently prompted by its reasonable price (which contributed to its spread), and the marketing of imitations. "Tamagocchi" contained all the structural elements that led booms to an early death.

**Note:** "Tamagocchi" is a virtual pet machine in which a cyber pet is hatched from an egg and nurtured.

Such a phenomenon is not new. It occurs almost inevitably under the following circumstances: 1) the urbanization of society has reached a certain stage; 2) population density in a given area increases; 3) members of society increasingly come into visible contact with each other; 4) members of society adopt an individualistic lifestyle and become isolated. These tendencies are the authentic products of modern times, which we choose to adopt, and so are not strange.



For example, during the pop group boom in the 1960s, mutual reactions among young girls helped expand the scale of the boom. However, in the boom in the early 1970s of the TV program "Arigato," which featured ghosts, mutual reactions among the fans were not so strong. Even so, the program enjoyed an audience rating of more than 50%. It is rather eerie to imagine as many as 50 million persons watched the same TV program at the same. The same can be said of "Kohaku Uta Gassen," the New Year's Eve song competition between the male and female teams of top professional singers.

Weak reactions mean there was no prearrangement among the TV audience to view the program. At a time when urbanization is picking up momentum in Japan, as I have pointed out, TV viewers independently decide whether to watch programs or not. However, their independent decisions quite often produce identical results. It is not clear whether the same decisions are made because urbanization produces such results. But, this rather comical phenomenon represents a phase of modern society. In other words, in a modern society, independent actions, not evil coercion, often produce the same results on a mass scale. In the case of "Tamagocchi," those who possessed the toy were keenly aware that other people possessed it too. They were not forced to buy it. Their decisions on whether or not to buy the product were made independently. The independent decisions which produced the same results apparently triggered such a big boom.

I stated that it is eerie to see a mass accumulation of same action. Which is more eerie to see? A mass decision made without prearrangement, or one with prearrangement? To me, the latter is more eerie, because the



A series of the virtual pet "Tamagocchi"

former includes a comical paradox inherent in modern society which we have accepted.

A mass bubble phenomenon often triggers a reaction fatal to society or the economy. This paradoxical nature, which I have pointed out, structurally supports modern society.

The bestseller "Gotai Fumanzoku (Unsatisfactory Limbs)" has contributed to a certain extent to the cycle of the market economy and physically and spiritually satisfied a large number of people. The book would have made nobody unhappy. The same can be said of a number of other mega-booms in recent memory.

People are free to attempt to read some meaning in a boom. In fact, a boom may have some social, cultural or historical significance. However, we must be aware that booms are structurally inherent in modern society and contribute to the maintenance and survival of modern society.

As the speed of information flowing inside society accelerates with the growing quantity of information and information technology, the life-cycle of booms definitely becomes shorter. It is almost impossible to see mega-booms continually occur. A mega-boom, like the sales of 6 million CDs, seldom occurs. But semi-booms or mini-booms, like the sale of 1 million

or so CDs, frequently occur. This is not limited to music. The same can be said of motion pictures, plays, TV programs and fashion.

In fact, semi-booms and mini-booms have become noticeable since around 1980. We have witnessed various phenomena which can only be explained with such a paradigm. Booms that become the talk of the town these days are mostly semi-booms or mini-booms. But once in a few years, a semi-boom or mini-boom suddenly swells into a mega-boom. Due to its rapid development, such a boom is referred to as an "instant mega-boom." It seems to me that all such phenomena happen in accordance with some rule or principle.

### 3. The Utada Hikaru Phenomenon

Not all of Utada's songs are originals. Some of them are cover versions. This is not surprising, because art is the history of imitation. But Utada's songs still differ from other contemporary songs, many of which are violent and unnatural in rhythm and too strained in tempo. The words of her songs are nostalgic (songs may essentially be nostalgic) and the melodies are heavy and dense. Utada sings firmly and tenaciously. The melodies of her songs cannot be easily hummed. They hardly fit sing-along music. Her music may be strongly supported by a small circle of people but cannot become popular. One would only hum these songs while driving a car. In other words, judging from conventional wisdom, her songs are not supposed to become mega-hits.

But, as sale of her records took off, Utada prevailed. The public lavished praise on her songs, written and composed by herself; the words and melodies representing her personality; her refined expression and the communicability of her way of

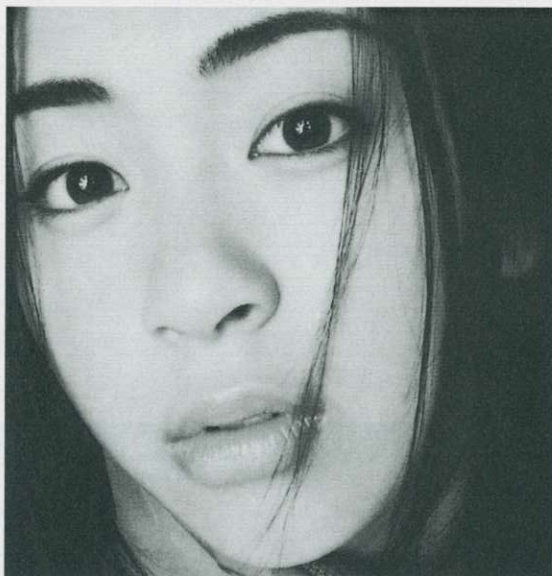


singing; and her achievement as a consummate artist at the age of 15. The boom expanded and sales of her CDs further increased.

It is often pointed out, and even Utada's admirers admit, that the words of Utada's songs are divided into syllables and placed on melodies in an artistically unreasonable way. This is a considerably serious problem from the viewpoint of the artistic function of songs.

Some unorthodox musicians hailed her songs as "epochal" in that they "disintegrated" the Japanese language. Such praise only further fueled the boom. The issue of syllables is just one example of "problems" with her songs. Her songs totally ignore the rhythm and intonation of Japanese speech. When she sings, Utada forces them to fit a rhythm and intonation of separately made melodies. It seems that normative rhythms and melodies in her songs are not disintegrated and reorganized by the necessity of expression, as with ordinary songs. She is not used to the format of daily Japanese conversation. Nor is she familiar with the meaning of Japanese words. Her songs may be more naturally placed on the melodies, rhythms and tempos of English songs.

Apart from the public's praise of her, the extraordinariness and freshness of her pronunciation of Japanese words have also contributed to her boom. In other words, Utada sprang onto the music scene with several surprises the Japanese public had hardly encountered for nearly 10 years. My first impression of her songs, most of which may be described as slow ballads, was that they are extraordinarily gloomy. Yet, despite the incomprehensible nature of the lyrics, her songs convey definite messages. This is rare among contemporary songs, most of which are lispy, lack clear messages, and are mechanically rapid. We can understand her songs as songs.



Utada Hikaru : she will survive as an artist

Her songs sounded very fresh, as we look back over the past 10 years. We listen to songs in our daily lives. They do not necessarily need to be artistically innovative. Songs will satisfy if they project fresh feelings and create a new atmosphere. Utada's songs meet these requirements. This is no doubt one of the factors that contributed to making her songs mega-hits. Nevertheless, such factors alone could not trigger a mega-boom. Freshness of that kind exists in other artists' songs as well. This leads me to think that a superb strategy of experienced and skillful marketers was at work somewhere. They capitalized on everything about her: the background of her parents; her life in New York; the prestigious elementary school and the international school in Tokyo she attends; her outstanding school records; the musical atmosphere of the Utada family; her versatility as a song writer and composer (personally I have a little doubt about the originality of the songs written or composed by her); her restricted appearances on TV programs; and her performance in and production of radio programs; the excellent timing of the release of her records; her tribute to the mass media

for its distributive power.

It would not be wrong to suggest that those who bought Utada's CDs were manipulated. But if we make an issue of manipulation or high-pressured salesmanship, we then have to prove that we were manipulated and forced to buy sub-standard products that we were disappointed with. A large number of people are satisfied with and accept Utada's songs. Such satisfaction and acceptance fully outweigh the evil of manipulation.

While not all of Utada's CDs will be million sellers, she will not disappear as a song writer and singer overnight. She will survive and will continue to be supported by her admirers, who are as solid as the quality of

Utada's songs. Naturally, the Utada boom will quickly die, but Utada will survive as an artist. That is what Utada's songs are.

Yet, I still don't understand why one of Utada's titles sold as many as 6 million copies. I cannot specify even an indirect casual relationship between the number and the elements which make Utada's songs so immensely popular. There is no way of explaining this, not even sociologically. Yet, it is possible to musicologically analyze the social and cultural meaning of Utada's existence and her songs. Results of the analysis will naturally be different from what opinion leaders express in their crisis talks. I am quite sure the sociological explanation I gave in this article is, and future musicological analyses will be, more productive and meaningful than such crisis discussions.

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