

Book Review: Otaku and the Struggle for Imagination in Japan by Patrick Galbraith

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Galbraith, Patrick. *Otaku and the Struggle for Imagination in Japan*. Duke University Press, 2019. ix + 327 pages. Hardcover, \$104.95.

Patrick Galbraith's *Otaku and the Struggle for Imagination in Japan* is an engaging addition to both his own body of work and the larger body of existing research into *otaku* culture and consumption. *Otaku* is the term for people with an all-consuming interest in anime and manga. Galbraith, a lecturer at Senshu University, has spent over a decade engaging in participant observation in Akihabara among those typically identified by outsiders as *otaku* and within the innumerable maid cafés dot that area of Tokyo. This deep understanding of this subculture provides the book with its fascinating perspective on the *otaku* phenomenon and some of its more interesting case studies. Galbraith, who has authored several works on both *otaku* and *moe* (feelings of strong affection towards female characters in anime and manga), explores how *otaku* culture has been both condemned as a form of sexual perversion and yet is harnessed by the Japanese state to burnish its image overseas in tandem with the burgeoning interest in Japanese media products globally.

Galbraith incorporates his long experience in Akihabara and interaction with the *otaku* community at large to a significant effect throughout his dismantling of the encrustation of stereotypes and moral panic that has accumulated around this subculture. Galbraith dedicates much of the text to complicating and adding nuance to the perception that *otaku* are sexually deviant and incapable of succeeding within mainstream society. Rather, Galbraith argues that the *otaku* community is instead engaged in constructing a novel social order in which hegemonic concepts of masculinity are suspended. At the same time, its members find new forms of creating and maintaining interpersonal relationships.

For example, Galbraith details the relationship between a young woman who had long worked as a maid in Akihabara's notorious maid cafés, a type of eatery in which the wait staff are

also performers who role-play as overly friendly maids with customers, and one of her fans. Instead of portraying the relationship between the pair as a sign of the fan's inability to form "truer" romantic relationships with members of the opposite sex, Galbraith instead notes that the relationship is not predicated on romantic or sexual desire. Instead, the relationship founded on the *otaku* preference for the *nijigen* (the two dimensional—or fictional) world over the *sanjigen* (the three dimensional—or real) world. Despite being performed by real women, maids are perceived as part of the *nijigen* and, therefore, merely a more tangible break in hegemony that allows *otaku* to form direct relationships with others who experience a similar dissatisfaction. Galbraith notes that the relationship is mutually satisfying between the former maid and the fan. Both are perfectly capable of undertaking and completing goals in their personal lives and careers—something that critics allege are outside the more extreme *otaku's* abilities.

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of Galbraith's work is the problematization of the term *otaku* itself, which is placed in what the author calls "scare quotes" throughout the text (pg. 3). The precise meaning of *otaku* has long been vague and typically is highly dependent on both author and context; however, as Galbraith notes, it was initially coined as a means of denigrating this initially externally-defined community in the early 1980s. The moral panic concerning this community has created a strained relationship between the so-called *otaku* subculture and the wider community. The long-standing impact of this mutual distrust is elaborated in great detail by Galbraith throughout this book. Furthermore, Galbraith explores how this community seeks to create a tangible, physical space in which members can play and interact freely while also remaining uncomfortable with the *otaku* identity itself—a vital component of this subculture that has been only lightly explored in past research. Due to this, Galbraith's work fills in a niche that

past texts, such as Saito's *Beautiful Fighting Girl* and Azuma's *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, have left relatively untouched.

In addition, Galbraith notes the potential bias that Orientalism introduces into research into *otaku* culture. In the United States in particular and English-language media reporting in general, Japan has been portrayed as a bizarre other—one that has a population of young men who are both unable to cope with reality and drawn sexually towards, mostly illustrated, underaged school girls. As *anime* and *manga*, the types of media to which *otaku* are perceived to be drawn, become increasingly part of global culture this perception has caused unease within Japan, where *otaku* culture was already viewed as a potentially violent form of deviance. In perhaps one of the most telling anecdotes within this book, Galbraith recounts an interview with *otaku* expert/manga author and editor Otsuka Eiji. In response to a question concerning the exact nature of *moe*, Otsuka retorts that the alleged uniqueness of *otaku* consumption of images of seemingly sexualized young girls is one that is grounded mostly within the imagined Japan that is found within the depictions of the culture internationally rather than something innate to the culture itself. Confoundingly, Otsuka then follows up his argument by showing off the illustration of a *manga* character published during his tenure as the editor of the magazine *Manga Burikko* and positing that the character may be the origin of *moe*.

In this incident, one also finds the primary weakness of this book. Galbraith highlights the vagaries of the forever shifting understandings of *otaku* and *moe* without forwarding a potentially more definite elucidation of either nor completely abandoning the terms altogether in favor of new, and perhaps more useful, definitions. Furthermore, *otaku* in this work is still primarily coded as male. As an ever-increasing number of young women now self-identify as *otaku*, their relative invisibility outside of their limited role as content creators and fictional counterparts is noticeable.

However, these quibbles do not detract from the value of this work. Galbraith's years of participant observation and knowledge of *otaku* discourse have resulted in one of the more engaging and thoughtful explorations of this subculture in the English language. This work would be an excellent addition to reading lists for any who are teaching undergraduate courses on contemporary Japanese popular culture and society, as Galbraith's straightforward prose and detailed discussions of *otaku* would be readily accessible to even novices in the field.

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