

UC Berkeley

Working Words: New Approaches to Japanese Studies

Title

おたく / Otaku / Geek

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5zb9r8er>

Author

Morikawa, Kaichirō

Publication Date

2012-04-20

## おたく / *Otaku* / Geek

Morikawa Kaichirō

Translation by Dennis Washburn

The English words closest in meaning to *otaku* are “nerd” and “geek.” The character type denoted by *otaku* is found in many nations and cultures, even though not every language has a precise name for it, and the common image the word brings to mind—an unattractive male obsessed with technology—can be traced back as far as Hephaestus, the ugly, crippled blacksmith-god of fire and the forge in Greek mythology. This universal type of course exists in Japan as well, but a number of unique factors during the 1980s—cultural structures, social conditions, educational institutions—were responsible for the coining of the derisive term *otaku*.

The contemporary usage of the word *otaku* originates in an essay titled “A Study of *Otaku*” that appeared in the June 1983 edition of *Manga Burikko*, an erotic manga magazine. Nakamori Akio, who was just starting out at the time, wrote the essay, which barely fills more than two pages in a light Shōwa style<sup>1</sup> that vividly depicts the *otaku* type.

Do you know about Comic Market? [...] Well, it’s this festival for *manga* crazies, an exhibition of amateur *manga* and fanzines. More than ten thousand attended recently, young men and women from all over

---

<sup>1</sup> *Translator’s note:* This style (Shōwa keihakutai 昭和軽薄たゞ) is an informal, colloquial form of writing that was popularized during the late 1970s and early 1980s by Shiina Makoto, Arashiyama Kōsaburō, and others. Several features characterize this style, which was given its name by Shiina: a reliance on spoken colloquial language, dashes to mark long vowels, the copious use of onomatopoeia and katakana. The effect is an informal, accessible style of writing that is well suited to short pieces that attempt to create a light, hip, or irreverent tone.

Tokyo, and they were so weird it really shook me up. How can I put this? You've seen this type in almost every class in your school. You remember...they're the ones who are hopeless at sports, who stay locked up in the classroom during breaks, fidgeting in the shadows, utterly absorbed in a game of *shōgi*. You'd recognize them right away. Their hair is either long and stringy, parted on the side, or it's some horrid buzz-cut a little boy might wear. Dressed in the neat shirts and slacks their moms bought for ¥980 or ¥1980 at some bargain store like Ito Yokado or Seiyu, wearing those pirated Regal sneakers with the *R* logo they got several years ago, trundling along with their shoulder bags stuffed to the point of bursting... that's them. They're either so skinny they look malnourished, or they're like laughing white pigs, the frames of their silver-rimmed glasses biting into their foreheads. [...] Always sitting off in a corner of the class, virtually invisible, with a gloomy expression, without a single friend... just imagine ten thousand of them filing by on and on and on. You have to wonder, what tidal pool did they all bubble up from. [...]

When you think about it, these types aren't just *manga* fans, and they aren't a species whose only habitat is Comic Market. Those creatures who line up outside the theatre the day before the opening of some *anime* film? Or those train spotters who nearly get themselves killed trying to get a picture of a Blue Train<sup>2</sup> with a camera that is their pride and joy? Or those alien beings who have the back numbers of every SciFi magazine, not to mention the Hayakawa Gold Cover and Silver Cover SciFi Series lined up in precise order in their bookcases? Or the young science geeks with glasses as thick as the bottom of milk bottles—you know, the ones who hang around computer shops? Or the fans who go early in the morning to secure a spot at an autograph fair for some teenybopper idol? Or that timid preppie who, if you took away his studies at the famous cram school he goes to, would be nothing more than a bug-eyed idiot? Or a young man who is, let's just say, a little "particular" when it comes to audio equipment? We have lots of names for people like this – crazies, fanatics, introverts—but none of them quite do the trick. In my opinion, we still don't have an appropriate term that somehow covers both these particular variations and the general phenomenon of this character type. And so, for reasons entirely of my own making, I shall dub them *otaku* and hereafter refer to them solely by that word. [Nakamori, 1983]

---

<sup>2</sup> *Translator's note:* A "Blue Train" really is blue, painted that color to signify an overnight train with sleeping cars.

The term Nakamori coined, *otaku* is taken from the second-person pronoun<sup>3</sup> that *anime* fans back then used in conversations among themselves. Normally adolescent boys and girls use the words “kimi” or “omae”<sup>4</sup> to call one another “you,” but *anime* fans took up the oddly elegant-sounding *otaku*. Nakamori transformed this distinctive second-person pronoun to a derisive term. The origin of *otaku* was not explained in Nakamori’s essay, but the word symbolically distilled the essence of their culture so well that *otaku* themselves clearly understood the source of the word and the sarcasm behind it. Those “creatures” Nakamori observed, the ones who were “virtually invisible, with a gloomy expression, without a single friend,” had begun to mingle at events like Comic Market, striking up conversations with people who shared the same tastes. They were reluctant to use the familiar terms “kimi” or “omae” with strangers, and so adopted the formal second-person pronoun *otaku*.<sup>5</sup>

The magazine in which Nakamori’s article first appeared, *Manga Burikko*, was a trailblazer among commercial erotic *manga*. It developed a unique *otaku*-culture style that sexualized the figures and bodies of the sweet, innocent characters of young girls usually featured in *shōjo manga* (*manga* for girls). Thus, the readership was the very *otaku* that Nakamori was ridiculing; and Nakamori may well have intended to be provocative, since the serialization of his essays on *otaku* was cancelled by the editor-in-chief, who found the work distasteful. (Nakamori, 1989)

---

<sup>3</sup> *Translator’s note:* “Otaku” is an honorific term used to refer to another person’s home—and when it is used in direct address, it means “your home.” Many pronominal forms in Japan are based upon words that indicate place or direction (e.g. “kochira” can refer to either the location “here” or to the person in this location here, that is “I/me”), and so by analogy with those pronominal forms *otaku*, which refers to “your home,” is used as a formal, honorific form for “you.”

<sup>4</sup> *Translator’s note:* *Omae* is commonly used by male speakers.

<sup>5</sup> This explanation for the source of the word “otaku” was provided several years later in an article Nakamori wrote for a general audience in which he told the full story about how he came to first observe the special qualities of this character type. (Nakamori, 1989)

Although the word was coined in a throwaway series of essays in a minor magazine, the use of *otaku* spread over the course of the 1980s within the *otaku* community itself, where the stereotype of the *anime* fan was already circulating long before Nakamori revealed his “discovery.” It was as if *otaku* had achieved group-consciousness and were simply waiting for an identifying name. An essay in a volume of the *anime* fan magazine *Fan Rōdo* (Fan road) published in 1981 describes young people associated with “culture clubs” and creates an amusing typology of behaviors exhibited in school society.

A culture club (*bunkabu*) is usually a group of mama’s boys who are completely uncoordinated. Most of them tend to be plump, if not outright fat. As a result, they’re averse to exercise and put down anything that has to do with sports, desperately droning on about the meaninglessness of such activities, which they dismiss as foolish while basking in their self-satisfied spiritual superiority. [...] Moreover, they are far more informed about their own interests than is absolutely necessary, and as it turns out, that’s all they know. Take, for example, their obsession with the study of *manga* for their *anime* and SciFi clubs—an interest that is, after all, the special domain of this magazine. The only kinds of music these culture-club types listen to are theme songs from *anime* or soundtracks from SciFi films, and they maintain the pose of intentionally ignoring the kind of music that most young people listen to. To top it off, they have no fashion sense, and they are almost all near-sighted. (Shirakawa Shōmei, 1981)

Again, in a magazine aimed primarily at *anime* fans, *otaku* are depicted cartoonishly in that light Shōwa style. So before it was given the name *otaku*, how did the stereotype come to be formed in the first place?

Both Nakamori’s essay and the article in *Fan Rōdo* start by establishing a framework—the school social world, which organizes students into class levels fixed by their year of graduation. At the very top of their list of typical characteristics is “uncoordinated.” The differences in athletic ability possessed by each individual student

are exposed in Physical Education classes and at athletic events, and those differences form the basis for a power hierarchy, especially among the male students. This phenomenon is common in schools around the world.

School society in Japan, however, is special in that after school it reorganizes students around club activities, disrupting the structure that differentiates students according to class years. Students who are not athletically gifted form communities in fields related to cultural interests as a way to escape being judged by the standard of athletic prowess. Whereas the school's class structure acts as a kind of caste system that rigidly identifies students according to physical attributes, club activities function as a haven from that hierarchy. Because a student's talents in a specific interest will be recognized in a club setting, the student can achieve a sense of belonging. Moreover, the club is a site where members represent a cross-section of the class structure of the school as a whole. This highlights the special traits common to the club membership, and the club thus became the setting out of which a stereotyped figure emerged.

The unpopular adolescent—bad at sports, introverted, fat or of delicate constitution—can be found in just about every school around the world. However, the structure provided by clubs that systematically encourage unpopular students to pursue interests other than sports is unique to Japan. *Otaku* may be found throughout the world, but in Japan *otaku* are strongly associated with specific fields of interest; school culture in Japan has played an enormous role in nurturing an “*otaku* culture.” In particular, clubs devoted to the study of manga, SciFi, or computers, as well as art and literature clubs, are frequently transformed into dens of *otaku*.

The rise of culture clubs accompanied a revision of school curricula. Clubs became compulsory from the early 1970s and continued to diversify over the course of that decade. During the same period the number of sites outside of school where club members could interact was still quite small. The unprecedented *anime* boom that occurred between 1977 and the early 1980s changed all that. On the opening day of *Space Battleship Yamato* in August, 1977, Japan witnessed for the first time the phenomenon of people waiting in line all night to get in; and *Galaxy Express 999* topped the box office in Japan in 1979, a first in the history of *anime*.

Initially, the *anime* boom was led not by obsessive, nerdy adolescents, but by more cutting edge youths and their followers who saw *anime* as a counter-culture opposed to adult society. Nerds and geeks at that time were more into SciFi, amateur wireless radio, or building plastic models, and they had yet to develop a strong group consciousness that would allow them to blur the boundaries between their various interests. However, as these *otaku* began to turn their attention to *anime* with the appearance in 1979 of *Mobile Suit Gundam*, a work with a SciFi sensibility, the topic of *anime* eventually became a central protocol that brought them together.

*Gundam* was epoch making. In contrast to the hot-blooded heroes or born-leader types that had dominated *anime*, *Gundam*'s hero was an introverted young man who stayed indoors tinkering with machines. That such a youth could perform remarkable feats of war through the use of a weapons system (a robot-shaped vehicle called Gundam controlled by a human pilot), that he could be treated as a member of an elite class of humanity, and that he could attract lovers with his natural good looks ... well, that was a view of the world that intoxicated young men who were otherwise clumsy at

communication and averse to sports. Moreover, because of their knowledge of SciFi, they felt superior whenever they talked about *Gundam* with fans who viewed *anime* as a counter-culture.

As these obsessive adolescents became noticeably absorbed in *anime*, the medium itself was associated with people who had poor interpersonal skills. Consequently, the average adolescent started to avoid *anime*. Their peers didn't look down on *otaku* for watching *anime*, but instead *anime* came to be viewed as the medium for unpopular students who were markedly obsessed with it. The importance *anime* held for those adolescents in turn exerted a powerful influence on the content and style of subsequent *anime*. The history of animated film in Japan from the 1980s on, not to mention the histories of *manga* and video games, is tightly entwined with the history of *otaku*.

Just when these obsessive adolescents all seemed to be turning toward *anime*, they also began to show up in full force at Comic Market, an event that had been held mainly for fans of *shōjo manga* and *anime* starting in 1975. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Comic Market, which was held in March, 1983, counted 13,000 participants. As the site expanded in scale, the quirky character of the participants lent a kind of "weird" atmosphere to the event, which inspired Nakamori to label the participants *otaku*.

As mentioned above, *otaku* was mainly used within the community of *otaku* as a self-mocking referent. Indeed, *otaku* themselves could observe the appearance of the bustling crowds of *anime* fans at events like Comic Market, and so the new usage of the word, which denoted the figure being mocked by Nakamori's clever nomenclature, was easy to comprehend. When *otaku* used *otaku* among themselves, they were simultaneously self-deprecating and self-confirming. Using the word in this manner

suggests that to some extent a self-consciousness was at work trying to gauge the nature of the difference between people who recognized themselves as *otaku* and “normal” people. We find in various columns contributed by readers of *anime* magazines an attempt to create some kind of personal identity by appealing to a self-image that others regarded coldly, or to a self-image of a person obsessed with *anime* even though he was too old for such interests. The word *otaku* thus acquired the nuance of an introspective search for identity.

In August, 1989, the derisive term *otaku* suddenly gained wide usage in a completely discriminatory sense. Between 1988 and 1989 police discovered the bodies of four small girls who had been brutally murdered. The perpetrator of these notorious crimes was a plump, timid-looking 26-year-old man named Miyazaki Tsutomu. The mass media, searching for an image to explain the criminal and his motives, turned their cameras on Miyazaki’s room, where they found 5,763 video tapes—*anime*, special effects movies, and violent pornography. Headlines screamed “Perversion Lurks in Solitude” and “His Companions? *Anime* and Videos” (Asahi shinbun, August 8, 1989), and the word *otaku* came up over and over on television talk shows in connection with Miyazaki. As a result, *otaku* was fixed in the public mind as a person who has retreated into a fantasy world, is unable to tell the difference between reality and illusion, and is sexually attracted to small children. A powerful negative image of *anime* fans took hold, and the 36<sup>th</sup> Comic Market, which opened with 100,000 participants right after Miyazaki was arrested, was covered by television news, with one reporter going so far as to claim, “Here are 100,000 Miyazaki Tsutomu’s” —an example of the extreme bashing of *otaku* culture at that time.

The prejudicial view that there was a reserve army of criminals ‘out there’ circulated through television talk shows and weekly magazines. After news of the incident dropped from the headlines, Itoi Shigesato, a copywriter, published a fascinating essay in *Kōkoku hihyō* (*Advertising Review*). He wrote that whenever young people, including those younger than Miyazaki, brought up the topic of these atrocious crimes, they referred to him as “Miyazaki-kun.”<sup>6</sup> The use of the suffix “-kun” is similar in nuance to the discriminatory usage that occurs when, for example, a classmate intentionally and sarcastically uses an honorific form when calling out the name of a child who is a target of ridicule at school. (Itoi Shigesato, 1989) The incident of the serial kidnapping and murder of young girls thus came to be referred to as the “M-kun affair.”

In light of Itoi’s observation, we can see that the word *otaku* was able to penetrate quickly into the consciousness of average people for two reasons: first, in addition to the grotesque impression left by the incident, the accused, Miyazaki, became conflated in people’s minds with the stereotype of the *otaku* Nakamori described as “existing in every school class;” and second, *otaku* was also already familiar by virtue of its original meaning. Six years after Nakamori coined the term, a variety of sites where *anime* fans could gather as cohorts inside and outside of school had been formed—a fact confirmed by the tremendous growth in the number of participants in Comic Market in 1989, which was almost ten times the number who attended in 1983. With the growth in the number of these sites, opportunities for average students and adults to observe the common characteristics of *otaku* increased greatly.

---

<sup>6</sup> *Translator’s note:* “-kun,” which attaches almost exclusively to male names, is less formal than the polite suffix “-san” or the honorific “-sama” and is used by both men and women when addressing a boy or man who is a social equal, a familiar member of a social group (a family, a club, a co-worker, a classmate), or a social inferior.

As memories of the Miyazaki Incident have faded, so has the nuance of *otaku* as a reserve army of criminals, though it has not entirely disappeared. As the average person came to understand the word, a diffusion of meaning and usage occurred—as, for example, in phrases such as “film *otaku*,” “fashion *otaku*,” or “*insert-interest-here otaku*,” all of which connote a gentle teasing or self-mockery that average people use among their peers. However, when *otaku* is used on its own with no modifying terms, the image that springs to mind is essentially the character type first depicted by Nakamori. This image has remained fixed since the time of the Miyazaki Incident, despite the tremendous growth in popularity of *otaku* pastimes like manga, anime, and video games, which have now been recognized by various government ministries and agencies as important “content industries” for Japan. Two factors have largely shaped this semantic development.

The first is the nature of school hierarchies. It doesn’t matter that Miyazaki Hayao wins an Academy Award for his *anime*, or that Murakami Takashi is highly praised in European and American art circles. Such events have absolutely no connection to the heartless realities of school society. Looking at the situation prior to the early 1980s, the constraints imposed by the hierarchy of student status were generally confined to the period when students entered school (especially the period just prior to middle school), and could be escaped by moving on to a higher school, or by graduating, or by achieving academic success. However, this hierarchy has gradually become more difficult to overcome. Up until the late 1980s adolescents were trapped in a vertical structure, stuck in the opposition between the social standards of adults, exemplified by academic achievement, and the value system of their peers. The rise of an advanced mass-consumer

society, which was created by the bubble economy, and the weakening of the authority and power of adult society, which accompanied the bursting of the bubble, weakened this vertical structure and brought to the fore horizontal differentiation within the younger generation.

Before the early 1980s, if an adolescent who was bad at sports and unpopular but worked hard at his studies, went on to what adults said was a good university, and found a job at a good company, he could obtain a social position that people around him would acknowledge as worthy, and he could imagine a future with a spouse. But by the late 1980s it was more difficult for a child who was poor at sports, who lacked self-confidence, or who was awkward when communicating with his peers, to overcome the constraints of his status position through academic achievement. Such adolescents became keenly aware that without interpersonal skills they would not succeed in society and they would never find a partner of the opposite sex. The resignation that marked this generation caused many to gravitate toward the fantasy in *anime* or games, even after they had passed through adolescence, and to adopt a lifestyle that gave priority to such interests. Although the decisive moment when *otaku* first appeared coincided with the *anime* boom, the *otaku* phenomenon was not transient. As generations have overlapped, a social structure has developed that has actually worked to increase the *otaku* population.

The second factor that has helped preserve the ability of the word *otaku* to conjure up a specific image is the fluid nature of the relationship between *otaku* and “*otaku* culture.” For example, the nature of the relationship between *otaku* and *anime* has constantly changed over time. Nowadays when we discuss the works of Miyazaki Hayao, one of the representative figures of Japanese animation, as examples of “*otaku* culture,”

many Japanese might feel uncomfortable because the bad, unwholesome image attached to the phrase is at variance with the image of Miyazaki's art.

It is no exaggeration to say that Miyazaki Hayao's *anime* stood at the center of *otaku* culture and *anime* fandom in the 1980s. *Lupin the Third: The Castle of Cagliostro*, a full-length *anime* that was his first work as solo director, topped fan voting in *anime* magazines for three years running as one of the top films in history, despite doing only so-so at the box office. With this *otaku* fan base, Miyazaki was able to serialize an original *manga*, which was then produced as an *anime*, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, in 1984. This work was enormously popular, and the heroine, Nausicaä, held the top position in fan voting for 54 straight months as the most popular character—an all-time record that has yet to be surpassed. The heroines of Miyazaki's three early works, *The Castle of Cagliostro*, *Nausicaä*, and *Laputa: Castle in the Sky*, are all princesses, and he developed a style of character-design for them that combined sex appeal with the pure, idealized beauty of a young girl. Miyazaki's heroines became an important resource for fan activities, and they exerted an enormous influence on later *otaku* culture. At the same time, the tremendous amount of support provided by *otaku* fans made it possible for Miyazaki to continue making his films.

Miyazaki first gained wide recognition with the success of *Nausicaä*, and yet when his works achieved general popularity through a series of breakthroughs—receiving the Minister of Education's Artistic Merit Award for *My Neighbor Totoro* in 1988; setting the all-time domestic box office record in Japan in 1997 with the film *Princess Mononoke*; winning the Academy Award for best animated film for *Spirited Away* in 2001—the percentage of votes they received in fan magazines actually decreased in

inverse proportion to their rising popularity. It wasn't that the quality of Miyazaki's animated films had deteriorated. Rather, when the popularity of *anime* in general rose, largely thanks to the success of Miyazaki's works, *otaku* began to shift their attention to the kinds of *anime* that focused on the charms of beautiful young girls—*anime* that were viewed by society as vulgar or low quality.

A similar sort of movement occurred at roughly the same time in the realms of *manga* and video games. Instead of worrying about a return of the negative image of *otaku*, once *manga* and video games became popular and widely disseminated, male *otaku* moved ahead and created *Lolikon* (“Lolita complex”) *manga* and games featuring beautiful girls, infusing the original visual design of young girl's *manga* with a highly sexualized style. At the same time female *otaku* created “outrageous” (*dame na*) subgenres of *manga* such as *yaoi*<sup>7</sup> and “Boys' Love,” which depict erotic love between beautiful young men. *Otaku* have shifted their focus as if to reject anything that might be accepted by respectable society.

The trend indicated by these shifts in *otaku* taste may, at a glance, appear to be anti-establishment. However, even when *otaku* may be motivated to protest against the mainstream, their motivation is fundamentally very weak. As mentioned above, *otaku* culture has been generated in a social context where the vertical opposition between generations has faded and a strengthened horizontal, intra-generational structure of mainstream versus anti-mainstream has surfaced. If youth culture in an age of vertical structure was anti-establishment, then *otaku* culture is the “non-establishment” —that is to say, it's a “loser's culture.”

---

<sup>7</sup> *Translator's note:* *Yaoi* is a neologism created by the initial syllable of three phrases: *yama nashi* (no peak or climax), *ochi nashi* (no punch line), and *imi nashi* (no meaning or sense).

*Otaku* are drawn toward objects of extreme fantasy in order to escape the mainstream, which valorizes communication skills and the heterosexual love that depends upon those skills. They construct sites liberated from the pressures of the mainstream. Thus, when their interests become popular, average men and women, armed with the latest fashions and stylish hairdos, invade their fandom, destroying it as a haven. In fact, by the time outsiders recognize these particular interests as “*otaku* culture,” the invasion has already begun, and many *otaku* flee. In that sense, what we call “*otaku* culture” is the traces left by *otaku*.

We can discern a cycle in those traces. First, *otaku* nurture a kind of seedling subculture. Then, as the market for that subculture grows and it becomes popular, the *otaku*, like pioneers, move toward unexplored realms and prepare the “next.” The cycle thus has two phases: in the first the mainstream steals *otaku* culture, and in the second *otaku* are spurred to move on and create something new.

Japan is strong in the areas of *manga*, *anime* and video games not because of the emerging power of geniuses like Miyazaki Hayao, but because, compared to other countries, the communities that serve as the creative sites for *otaku*—everything from club activities in school to Comic Market—exist on an abnormally large scale. The number of participants in Comic Market, 10,000 at the time *otaku* was coined, has risen to 550,000 over the three days of the 72<sup>nd</sup> Comic Market, which was held in August, 2007. A volunteer staff of 2,000 manages Comic Market on a non-profit basis, skillfully suppressing business principles that put profits ahead of diversity. Comic Market is an event where people invested in trivial personal interests gather on a large scale and interact with one other on the basis of their interests without the kind of commercial

tactics and mobilization found in politics, ideas, and industry. There they find fertile ground to nurture original culture. This social context accounts for the biggest differences between the European and American nerd or geek and the *otaku*.

As a final point, I'd like to stress that a gap exists between the image conjured by the word *otaku* and the real-life circumstances of *otaku*. Although *otaku* generally brings to mind a male figure, more than half of the *otaku* population in Japan is female. About 70% of the participants of Comic Market are women. Japan is the only country where original modes of expression by amateur women have developed on this scale. Because this essay has taken the word *otaku* as its focal point, its center of gravity has tended to shift toward the image of the male *otaku*. However, if we take the word to refer to all *otaku* in Japan, we find there has been an asymmetrical history of *otaku* that concentrates on men. We must therefore find a way of joining the history of the word to the experience of women.

The asymmetry of the word originates in school culture. In the case of girls, athletic ability does not create the same kind of powerful status hierarchy as it does for boys, nor do sports clubs and culture clubs necessarily result in the same type of caste relationships as they do for boys. The class structure that exists among boys is clear from the point of view of girls, but the class structure that exists among girls is more difficult for boys to discern. Moreover, there is frequently a disjuncture between a girl's position or status among girl students and her popularity with the boys.

These differences have obstructed the formation of an image of "female *otaku*" that may be shared, like the image of the male *otaku*, within *otaku* communities. This situation has made it relatively easy for female *otaku* to conceal their *otaku*-ness. Indeed,

many of these women have acquired, as a kind of life skill, the ability to conceal their tastes and interests from the outside world. Once the word *otaku* became widely used in society to refer to the figure of a sex criminal following the Miyazaki Incident, the tendency for concealment among female *otaku* grew much stronger.

Nonetheless, in the early 1990s a rush toward publishing “Boy’s Love” magazines took place, and in the late 1990s shelves devoted to “Boy’s Love” *manga* and novels appeared in all bookstores. In the early years of the present century collections of this kind of material were brought together in specialty shops on a side street in Ikebukuro called *Otome rōdo* (girlhood road), and that marketplace has provided a site where it is fairly easy to catch a glimpse of the figure of a female *otaku*. Now, in 2007, the self-mocking name “fujoshi,”<sup>8</sup> which is used mainly on the internet by women who are fond of “yaoi” and “Boys’ Love” *manga*, has been “discovered” by the mass media, and the word shows signs of seeping into the culture at large. Even so, it is difficult to predict if this word will be a passing phenomenon, or if it will continue to live on as *otaku* has.

Some people are of the opinion that the position of *otaku* has improved as a result of the “discovery” of female *otaku*, the expansion of male and female *otaku* markets, the formation of market centers such as Akihabara (for male *otaku*) and *Otome rōdo* (for female *otaku*), and the official recognition that *manga*, *anime*, and video games are part of Japan’s “content industry.” Still, as noted above, despite the popularity of *otaku* culture, *otaku* continue to face discrimination. *Otaku* may find it easier now to get on

---

<sup>8</sup> *Translator’s note:* *fujoshi* (腐女子) literally means “rotten girls” though that translation may call forth associations with punk culture (i.e. the Sex Pistols) not quite right in this case. *Fujoshi* suggests something more like “girls gone bad” (a translation that unfortunately and perhaps a little misleadingly calls to mind the video franchise *Girls Gone Wild*) or “girls gone off” in the sense of milk or meat going bad/off. The word is also a pun with *fujoshi* (婦女子), which means “woman” in a general sense, but which also has the sentimental nuance of “the fair sex.”

with their lives than they did in the past—though that is not because their social position has improved. It is merely the effect of a number of wider social conditions symbolized, for example, by the trend in Japan to postpone marriage or even avoid it altogether. These social conditions act to weaken the pressure exerted on people by their peers to adopt mainstream interests and lifestyles and to avoid dropping out.

The tale being forged by these modern-day descendants of Hephaestus is not yet finished.

### **Works cited**

- 中森明夫, 1983. 「『おたく』の研究街には『おたく』がいっぱい」, *漫画ブリッコ*第2巻第7号: pp. 200-201.
- 中森明夫, 1989. 「僕が『おたく』の名付け親になった事情」, *別冊宝島*104号: pp. 89-100.
- 白川祥明, 1981. 「ダラク君のよい子教室今宵もカモノハシる第1回: 新入生のための必殺よい子心得習得講座」, *ふあんろーど*第2巻第2号: pp. 68-71.
- 糸井重里, 1989. 「みんなの秘密」, *広告批評*第121号: pp. 8-13.