

An Asylum Culture's Heart: Two Sides of Otaku

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Abstract:

Otaku were once the subject of contempt in the 1980s in Japan. However, societal turmoil in the 1990s drove deluded adults into the otaku culture, forming the core of avoidance, indulgence, and fear of reality that lasted until now, and otaku culture became the asylum placed between reality and virtuality. From the beginning, the purpose of the culture is to let otakus return to the reality, whose famous exemplification is *Evangelion*. Defined backward, anime culture refers to the consumptive side of otaku culture that originated from *Evangelion*, which offers a stimulation on otakus that drives them into field of creation. The “anime” referred here, therefore, can even include doujin works. Doujin culture, on the other hand, is where those. With the case study of Rayson, a musician, this essay demonstrates how doujin creators are able to walk out of their distress. However, just like any other cure, it may not be effective to every people and may have some side effects that is not yet fully understood, but one should not ignore that doujin is a prominent phenomenon where people are rescuing themselves (or being rescued) using creativity.

Keywords: otaku, anime, doujin, Vocaloid, China

1. Otaku Culture

Otaku, as Azuma Hiroki has defined it, is “a general term referring to those who indulge in forms of sub-culture strongly linked to anime, video games, computers, science fiction, special-effects films, anime figurines, and so on.”^[1] Counterintuitively, he points out that, instead of a “youth culture,” it was adults who aged 30-40, born in the 1950s or 1960s, who formed the core of this culture.

“However, ever since 1988– 89, when Miyazaki Tsutomu carried out the kidnapping, rape, and murder of several young girls, the term “otaku” had been

burdened with a particularly negative connotation,” Azuma writes. Indeed, otakus were, and maybe still are, often perceived as those who tend to stay at home, unemployed, who are indulging in virtuality but failing in reality, who are perverse and queer, who are “without basic human communication skills who often withdraw into their own world” – people are not particularly friendly toward otakus when their economy is at its height, where everyone has great prospect over themselves as well as their country. However, soon, things undergone dramatic change. Japan suffered a traumatic downfall in the 1990s – a

historic economic bubble burst and decades of stagnation. While their economy plunged into the cold, its neighbors like China and South Korea were rising up in miraculous speed, proving to be strong rivalries across industries and sectors. Natural disasters and terrorist attacks are even more amplified by the advancement of media. People are simply pressured from the society, the economy, the politics, which, collectively, becomes reality. Natural disasters also did not cease to occur. In 2011, Japan suffered the most powerful earthquake ever recorded in the country.^[2] Those who are fluidized and disillusioned in this event feel compelled to join otaku culture, constituting a major resurrection, even a paradigm shift. This is also the time when otakus are suddenly being viewed favorably, following the anime series *Evangelion*, as Azuma writes, “On the other hand, a completely opposite position also exists. It is not widely known that, since the 1990s, a certain generation of otaku have come to use the term in a highly positive light,” even though the authority persisted loathing attitude.

Just as words written in the dictionary does not prevent its meaning to be twisted over people’s ever-evolving habit of language shaped by society and cultural shifts – culture, on the other hand, can shift as well. Before 1990s, otaku culture is the Other viewed by the majority of society who lacks subjectivity. However, in the 1990s, those who suffered distaste in reality formed something that may or may not be close to otaku under the name of otaku, and these people, without a doubt, were adults who participated actively in society. The figure Azuma threw out also matches up – those born in the 1950s or 1960s would indeed age 30-40 by the 1990s. One should not ignore that the 1990s is the first meaningful existence of otaku, instead of a small community, as a societal phenomenon capable of being called a “culture” as we now see it as a giant industry and a name card of Japan.

The existence of otaku culture is therefore an indulging and escaping one, and this is solely the effect of the particular reason that it is the Lost Decade of the 1990s that shaped otaku culture. A side comparison with North American queer culture may help to illustrate the point. Sexual minorities have been long demonstrating and marching since the left-wing movements in the last century, protesting for the right that they demand. These people form the core of contemporary culture. Even though people may argue that how queer culture has a long rich history before the last century, it is the first meaningful existence of these people and their behavior as a culture, which later aggrandizes into a powerful electoral force in politics – their rights are indeed partially granted. Their culture, therefore, remains generally rebellious, extroverted, and confrontational. On the other hand, adults – those

born in 1950s or 1960s, who aged 30-40 – have no way to reverse the reality. Indeed, Japanese economy have not walk out of stagnation even until now in 2024. Naturally, the emotions aroused would naturally be fear, indulgence, escapism, and introversion, placing otaku culture somewhere between reality and virtuality. Indeed, otakus themselves may treat them as existing in both sides as well – they deliberately formed a binary contrast between 2D world and 3D world in contrast to each other. Many internet memes surrounding otaku would exploit such intermediacy, like how the anime girl’s tears in 2D and the otaku’s tissue paper in 3D were separated by the screen in figure 1.



Figure 1. The subtitle writes in Chinese, “Why aren’t you responding to my love?”

There are other things that sit between such relationships as well. For example, patients sit between life and death in the hospital. Since the problem of intermediacy of otakus is a particularly psychological one, an asylum, a massive hospital for mental illness, would categorize otaku culture. The purpose of asylums has always been to restore their patients back to the society; otaku culture would not fall out of the bound. One may question me on whether I am saying that otaku culture is inherently morbid. I would rather view such in a positive light: the surge of patients should not be attributed to the fault of hospitals, but somewhere in the society. Rather than blowing it up, what we should do as researchers is to conduct investigations into it, and it would not just benefit the academy of East Asian popular culture. Rather, it is always something that would provide insight into humanity in general, since prosperity and downfall is always the ostinato of history, this interconnection would mean that revealing the logic of one of them would also benefit the other. This essay is solely based on this purpose of proposing a theory that may trigger some scholarly response.

2. Anime Culture and Doujin Culture

The asylum of otaku can be divided into two chambers,

which are anime culture and doujin culture. I feel the urge to explain them, so they do not arouse any questions about the scope of my research.

The contribution of *Evangelion*, an anime series, to the otaku culture in the 1990s also led to a boom in anime industry. However, the anime culture discussed in this essay does not possess any of those that it may have in order to exist as a self-contented culture – namely, those anime works made specifically for those who fall out of the ambit of otaku whose purpose is to earn profit, as corporations and associated industries proliferate. Rather, the anime culture being referred to in this essay would be a dependency of otaku culture that originated from the 1990s, and since it is a dependency, it would be fair to use otaku culture to define anime culture backwardly – anime culture, in this essay, refers to the consumeristic side of otaku culture.

The productive side of otaku culture is doujin. A less well-known term compared to anime, doujin literally means “people with similar interests” by itself. Hiroaki Tamagawa defines doujin as “self-financed, self-published works created by an individual or collaboration between individuals.”^[3] Doujin creations are non-commercial and unrestricted by finance. It was freedom that distinguishes doujin from other modes of creativity. I would again define such term backwardly as anything productive in otaku culture constitutes doujin culture.

To further illustrate this concept, listening to doujin music produced by independent musicians is a part of anime culture. Although the music itself can have no connection with anime whatsoever, the act of consumption would indicate that it is anime culture. By contrast, people who edited a clip of anime into a AMV (anime music video) belong to the doujin culture. Otakus belonging to doujin culture would not belong to anime culture, since their mentality and sense of accomplishment may be entirely different from underachieved otaku consumers. In general, why I would call anime and doujin as two chambers is because it is functioning like a heart (though the heart has four chambers since it needs to do two circulations, like the number “8”. So far, I can only discover one circulation with otaku culture, like a “0”). The atrium (anime) receives the blood from the body (society), guiding it through the atrioventricular (creativity) valve into the ventricle (doujin) before it is pumped back to the body (society).

Anime culture is often categorized as indulgence. Indulgence, or *genjitsu-touhi*, a term I borrowed from internet to specifically designate this indulgence from reality with Japanese background, is not a very good habit to practice. The format of indulgence may or may not include anime, but when it includes, it proves its weakness. Though it

can be a temporary container of those who are despair and depraved, that should not be their destiny. Immersing oneself into the world of fictional beauty and idealism may exacerbate the detachment from, and misanthrope toward, reality. As the contrast becomes more and more sharp, genres like *isekai* (Alien world anime) gain popularity, and the method by which people reincarnate into the *isekai* world is inevitably through death. In this sense, anime culture has walked otakus to a dead end. There are, however, other anime works that do provide therapy in addition to indulgence, though they provide an equally defected main character to the consumer, who will then undergo a series of challenges and struggles to be mentally stronger. The audience, hopefully, would insert themselves into the weak protagonist and learn how to survive in the society. The best example is *Evangelion* in 1995. In fact, this is one of the dimensions that I would propose to evaluate anime works: is it therapeutic or not? And the best way to evaluate is: does the character give you a sense of conclusion, or question, doubt, tension, dissonance, yearning for resolve? (Or: how much does the character resemble a real otaku in real life?) If we were to base on this further divide the phases of anime, the former is indulgence, while the latter is also indulgence, so I guess they did not really make a difference? The latter, however, differs from that they guide otakus deeper into otaku culture, realizing equally traumatized people around them, and eventually leading them to creativity. Since the products for consumption do not have to be anime, works produced by doujin culture can actively provide the same purpose of the latter, if not better.

The ultimate goal of otaku culture (that is, anime plus doujin culture) is to redirect otakus back to reality. This is the goal which *Evangelion* was striving for, and the goal of every otaku in their heart. From the fact that the word otaku itself bears a negative connotation in Japan, and the fact that they deliberately place themselves in contrast with *riajuu*, a word specifically referring to those who have a satisfying life in reality, one can sense a strong self-pity. Counterintuitively, to get back to reality, one has to dive deeper into anime culture, to a point beyond anime culture – that is, doujin culture.

Being a culture that is not quite accessible from outside, doujin culture seem to be associated with exclusiveness to those elder otakus. Doujin culture provides otaku some of the basic psychological and philosophical needs that people have long proposed to be necessary, including but not limited to belongings, self-esteem, meaning, and sense of accomplishment (it is a messy set of vocabulary, so does the study of the human mind). Creative people are the most admired ones within otaku culture. When people rely on the psychological needs from others (but

rarely financial needs, since it is a mental struggle that is being experienced), this form of creativity is exactly *doujin* itself – people with similar interests. When things are posted online, people with similar interests would react, and then the sense of accomplishment, their self-esteem, their basic need to survive euphorically, suddenly gets fulfilled; their life can continue, just by continuing enjoying those comments from the internet and interactions with other accomplished creators that they once admired. In some sense, doujin has made otaku culture more extrinsic and intrinsic. People put their meaning outward, judging themselves based on the reaction of others; on the other hand, people are also more egocentric as creators. If I should pick a word to describe it, their floating heart has been condensed by doujin culture.

3. How does Doujin Activity Work?

In this session, I want to do a case study on a Chinese Vocaloid-P (Vocaloid Producers, the musician) Rayson on bilibili (Chinese equivalence of YouTube and Niconico, though it has an anime background and plays a key role in anime popularization in China), since it is those contents that I find readily available. Since all her activity online – e.g. anime she watched – would not be available to me for privacy protection, this essay begins with someone already familiar with doujin culture who then starts to influence other otakus, although I have to clarify: the effect of creativity on those who don't possess creativity is hard to evaluate, like the effect of *Evangelion* and other sekai-kei anime on otakus is hard to evaluate. Therefore, the main focus of this session is on the doujin side of the cycle. I would encourage other scholars to keep researching with some innovative methods so this portion of the cycle can be revealed with more clarity.

Born in June 18, 2008, Rayson, who is also known as Chaoxitaoyi on bilibili, posted her first video^[4] with humorous editing and description at the age of 12 on June 1, 2021. She used “sans.” from Undertale soundtrack as the introduction, accompanied by several meme pictures in both Chinese and English, and then a screen recording of her project file. She wrote the song when she was 12, and she then treated it as her 13th birthday gift. A rhythm game song in the genre of J-core, “Prison of Fractured Swords” by Rayson was then accepted by the developers of Orzmic, a non-commercial mobile rhythm game. At last, she posted a selfie in backlighting against the sky with a headphone hanging around her neck. Subtitles of “TAT Happy Birthday to Me” covered half of her face. In her video description, she used a particular tone that I found common with those familiar with rhythm game, which is fraught with a special punctuation of “()” that has

a mitigating effect on overall the harshness of voice, as I am personally familiar with rhythm gamer's language. In conclusion, she got used to the internet relatively early. From her willingness to share her personal information, including her birthday and her concealed photo, I won't conclude her as “introverted” as traumatized otakus are. Indeed – she is not an adult who suffer from life. This is another evidence of how the proliferation of otaku culture is reaching to broader audience across age, gender, and ethnicity. More exposure would simultaneously signify that more people will reach to the traumatic core behind it, before finally get back to society. However, when she gets used to anime would be largely unknown – it would not be possible to know every anime she watched and every trace of her activity online – or otherwise internet is indeed horrendous.

Only a year and six months later, she posted her first song that she decided to leave on her discovery: “#P^R^€\$M#.”^[5] Instead, she invited others to make a music video for it. A Vocaloid song in English using Hatsune Miku V4E Voicebank, it maintained all the conventions and styles she has obtained from rhythm game music. She has her own introduction to this song in the video description. Here, I would translate and quote: I thought for a long time, and I eventually decided to repost this song.

Every time I saw the analytics of this song – my heart breaks. This should not be the outcome of it, should not be the outcome of my shattered dream at the beginning of this year... Why songs that are posted according to conventions would only get 600 views in the end?

We are able to know that she suffered a setback earlier this year, which provoked her to make this song, and, indeed, the lyric can be concluded as cathartic and depressing:

Tonight, please don't destroy me

Since I lost all seriously

Please don't turn me off completely

Don't leave me alone, I can't Breathe

By September 18, 2024, this song received 10k views on bilibili. It would mean a huge achievement for most creators, though it did not gain a statistics as good as her first song, nor was it as successful as her later works. One senses a big shift in tone – this is her first attempt to use music for personal and expressive purposes.

Her next post is in Chinese, titled “[Shi'an(the virtual singer)] There are no fallen flowers in spring.”^[6] However, from the popularity rank of Vocaloid songs from that week, I come to know that the original video title is not conventional at all – “[n-buna-ian Rock] Goodbye to you, who have died, and those nonexistent fallen flowers of spring.”^[7] N-buna is a Vocaloid producer himself. Later on, he formed a J-rock band “Yorushika (which literally

means night deer),” which is quite infamous. His song chansons mostly spring and summer, with a strong “mono no aware” feeling within.

First of all, the original title is indeed specially worded in order to attract audiences (which calls into the question of the song “PARACOSM” and “Prison of Fractured Swords”— the title we are seeing now, which is quite conventional, may also be worded differently originally.) One can sense how n-buna’s Rock music has influenced her greatly, implying that her “anime” phase may have a lot to do with this band. This song is a huge departure from all her rhythm game styled electronic music: the guitar and bass in this song are recorded into the track instead of being MIDI inputs; the structure follows a typical Verse-Chorus and applies several techniques n-buna places in his music – sudden modulation, rapid build-up of emotion, fast drums, and, quoting from herself, “a grand melancholy.”^[8] I would cite her entire lyric her for analysis:

A life ready to be settled in coffin
Swallowed a blade in the spring.
Before truly dying, I look back –
The useless me should be thinking of you.

...

Actually, you should know long ago
Life is like watching fluttering flowers in the night.
The fireworks we promised to watch together
Have evaporated in ink-stained letters.

...

So, please listen, don’t respond anymore.
I would pretend you never existed
Like those fallen flowers that no longer blooms in spring
I would pretend you already knew.
Sporadic, dispersed, drifted Flower Green Blue
Unspoken, broken, powerless promises
Concealed, blurry, never-met you
And youthful, naïve, obsessive thoughts

...

Sometimes, I want to say that Vocaloid is an excellent medium for doujin activity, though if I think twice, it is doujin that have shaped Vocaloid. Here, we are looking at a perfect example of doujin activity.

Why people often get the misconception that doujin is simply fan culture is because of the nature of doujin itself. Creators are always audiences before becoming creators. Therefore, when they first create, they would necessarily take some inspiration from what they have taken in in the anime culture phase. When they want to create, it is when they cannot suffer their replaceability and lack of recognition among millions of listeners, therefore such work would also be egotistical. The “fan-creation” part of the song is evident in implying that phase by demonstrating

influence from n-buna, which is also evident in her lyrics: she used “Flower Green Blue” instead of Paris Green for the toxic substance copper(II) acetate triarsenite. The former, pronounced as hanarokushou, is Japanese expression that was also used by n-buna, while the latter, is the English and Chinese expression. She also probably made reference to the action of writing letters in n-buna’s story by writing the line “...evaporates in the ink-stained letter.” However, other than this, the song is entirely her work. Elements such as spring, flower and proposition does not really present in n-buna’s story.^[9] The contrasting elements like the blade would have been entirely personal feeling, as that unique expression of “swallowing the blade” and “spit out the blade” may symbolize all sorts of things.

However, she quickly passed through the phase of “fan-creation.” Due to the nature of doujin activity is to gain recognition, fan-creation phase would never be the destiny. Her next song, titled “Shi’an | J-rock | It wasn’t until the rain ceased to fall that I realized summer had long since ended.” She maintained the long title used for marketing, instead of replacing the title with the song title: “Rain, Cry”^[10] The lyrics of the song are even more menacing than the previous one. It is evidently about suicide.

...

If I only can leap up like this
Wipe out the last trait of my existence
Dwelling within elusive memories

...

Walking through youth, walking through summer
Crying in the downpour and falling asleep again
Writing music that no one would remember
As she had said in her own comment session, “...If it rains, I would get really comfortable, but I am not good at expressing my emotion, so I would think irritably for the entire day when it rains... Looking through the rain with my blurred eyes, like looking at that tragic “myself” – would it only be in such instances that I would be able to cry out properly in the rain that nobody is watching?” This song is about her and only about her. She portrays her own pain into something beautiful and sublime that is more palatable, so they can gain recognitions over their obsessions that is everywhere demonstrated in sekai-kei anime, which is the point of art in this case.

On May 4, 2024, she uploaded another song: “Let’s escape from the cycle of spring,”^[11] which can be treated as a response to “There are no falling flowers in spring” from last year. The song is a lot more positive, though her audience seems to possess inertia, commenting: “Escaped from the cycle of spring, but died in the summer,” which is not the theme of this song at all.

Even though the answer to the world is only absurd

“Please hold it,” please let me convey properly:

Life is too long

Let’s escape together

...

Had been swallowed, can I still hold your hands?

When can I see that immature sky again?

What kind of life do I want to live in the future?

Anyway, (maybe) I can’t be escaping anymore.

If I have a choice,

Can I escape away with you?

Like how fast blood flows being pumped, Rayson places a milestone in every song she releases. From “A dying life” to “Life is too long,” from “Goodbye to you who have died” to “Can I still hold your hands?” one finds such juxtapositions to be retrogressive logically. This is exactly the point – she is gradually escaping the common characteristics of otaku. Otaku who has moved through doujin culture is no longer an otaku, but wholesome, mentally sturdy people who (probably) don’t need otaku culture anymore.

Her most recent song, “The giant jellyfish outside the convenient store,” did not even mention seasons like spring and summer which is used to commonly for a melancholic atmosphere. “Retrieve the heart that has sunk to the bottom from the tangled words once again,” she wrote in the description, a special type of deliverance expressed in a cryptic way. More specifically, she wrote in her lyrics:

...

Since the world can’t be destroyed no matter what

Let’s wake up tomorrow and have some pork cutlet rice together.

...

Therefore, let’s escape from that mundane every day

Remind me of the heart that was abandoned long ago

Embrace it all,

And run toward that daily life where you are still waiting for me.

This is the first time “daily life” is being mentioned. It illustrates some fantastical imaginations of a giant jelly fish floating outside the convenient store, that would destroy the world. However, then the main character realized that it was all fake, expressing hope for a more idealistic way of living day by day. This song is structured like a *sekai-kei* anime – providing indulgence by affirming to the otaku: “Yeah I also wish the world could be destroyed,” though she states at the last of the song “but the world cannot be destroyed, so I will run toward my daily life.” Escape from reality, being the most central and core characteristic of otaku culture, is being defied in a rather euphemistic way of rebuttal: she emitted a unique feeling of replenished hope.

4. Conclusion

One may question the applicability of my final conclusion of “doujin has the effect of letting people return to reality.” However, that would be beyond the scope of this research. Psychology, especially motivation, is still one of the most cryptic and unpredictable fields of study. If we continue the analogy of heart, that would be some sickle-cells that tends to clog in our cardiovascular system. For example, Tenshien (Angel Salt), another female Vocaloid-P, who dreams to be a bilibili-UP (Chinese equivalence of YouTuber that derived from “upload”) rather than a Vocaloid-P,^[12] do seem to find her salvation on the internet instead of reality, so the action of creating music itself may not be the finale for her. Others may be failing the treatment of doujin completely, making songs that rather looks like a countdown – namely, Fangpu-P, currently Account Deleted 304076. They (unknown gender) had posted several songs that seemed to make a series: 1/17 criminal of unfortunate, 1/19 criminal of religion, 1/23 criminal of incompetence, 1/29 criminal of naivete, and his last song, 1/31 criminal of death, whose description says that “probably a willful death is criminal.”^[13] On the same day – July 27, 2021 – he posted “Sorry,” and ceased all activity^[14] The account is not deleted, since his songs are still there. I am not able to confirm whether he died or not, but such things remind me of other Japanese Vocaloid-Ps who have mysteriously died, like wowaka and siinamota. There are, indeed, plenty of examples of Chinese Vocaloid songs that romanticize and fantasize death, or to describe such and such in an artistic – painfully lofty or despair manner. Rayson and Tenshien have created such songs, like “Rain, Cry” and “If I can forget; if I can forgive.”^[15] Other songs include “See you, not again.” by Seele (Luminous Night)^[16] and “The reason to end one’s life before one’s dream is achieved.” by Mulin (Fantasy Inference).^[17] However, their depiction of death normally constitutes for cathartic purposes, which is positive and curative; Fangpu-P seems to be obsessed with death itself that he said in his last song “at least, (pronoun) exit should be romantic.” If we again use the analogy of a hospital or an asylum, he failed the treatment. Even though they may have died, I still believe that doujin provided them and those anguished a persistent period of joy and meaningfulness – they would disapprove their life even more if there is no creativity in their life. After all, otaku culture is a shelter for those depraved ones, whether it is the carnal jokes of anime or the euphoria of realizing that your voice is reaching thousands of people who have listened to your songs and have resonate with you. After all, every heart has a purpose to pump, every shelter has a purpose to protect, and every hospital has a purpose to treat. Otaku culture is no excep-

tion; a few failing cases would not deny the culture itself of the immense value it has provided.

In conclusion, otaku culture was born in Japan in the Lost Decade out of trauma. Traumatized people from society replenished the otaku culture, which defines the core of everything related to otaku contemporarily. Anime culture and doujin culture are two sides of otaku that gradually came to existence that provides the same purpose. The relationship between the two is similar to the atrium and the ventricle of a heart. As otaku culture undergoes tremendous development, the definition of trauma transcends mere Lost Decade and encompassed all sorts of distress. Anime provides indulgence. However, patients gradually become influenced by the creativity displayed by the work, who then create contents that took inspiration from them. Gradually, they abandon such influence so they can recognize something as entirely their own, something that can better facilitate the sense of recognition doujin provides. It may well help those who somehow suffered a setback to walk out of their distress, like the case with Rayson; it may also fail to resurrect someone, leaving a tragic ending with Fangpu. Just like how hospitals sometimes succeed and sometimes fail, doujin culture is largely analogous; one should not deny the usefulness of hospitals just because patients both survive or die, therefore one should also not deny that doujin culture is playing its role of helping otakus.

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