JAPANESE POPULAR CULTURE

Edited by
Matthew Allen and Rumi Sakamoto

CRITICAL CONCEPTS IN
ASIAN STUDIES

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INTRODUCTION TO VOLUME III: SUBCULTURES AND JAPANESE SOCIETY

In this, the third volume on Japanese popular culture, authors continue with the theme of twenty-first-century pop culture, this time focusing on subcultures. While the Japanese economy has faltered in the early twenty-first century, technology has continued to expand its influence, and fashion, music, fandom, high-tech gadgets and online communities and gaming have grown in stature within the popular culturescape.

The first section (Part 2.1) examines some of the many aspects of fashion in Japan, and covers *loli* (Lolita complex) and street fashion, gender and fashion, the beauty industry, tattooing and the ongoing trend of 'love hotels'. Winge's opening piece on *loli* fashion subculture (Chapter 49) investigates some of the premises that underscore this complex and intriguing phenomenon, and examines how identity is framed and lived within this social context. Staying with urban youth and fashion, in her piece on Tokyo street fashion (Chapter 50) Kawamura observes that youth drive fashion in ways that do not fit with perceptions of large corporate models; Tokyo high school kids lead the fashion stakes, not only in Japan, but also in Asia, she argues. Iida's confronting article on feminised masculinity (Chapter 51) looks at the performance of gender in the context of Japanese youth culture, and through her focus on feminised, appearance- and fashion-conscious young men asks some incisive questions about the implications of gender-crossing in contemporary Japan. Also focusing on fashion and gender, Miller's piece on how the Cinderella motif is employed in the Japanese beauty industry engages the fascinating world of hybrid body shaping for competition and the social mores that surround beauty and fashion (Chapter 52). The next article in this section opens an intriguing discussion about the place of tattooing in contemporary Japanese pop culture. Yamada (Chapter 53) locates the contemporary trend of tattoos as fashion overseas within the context of Japanese history of tattooing and current attitudes towards its fashionability versus tradition. Continuing with current social trends as a motif, Lin (Chapter 54) looks at the complex background to love hotels in Japanese society, and asks and answers some incisive questions about their continued

popularity across a wide demographic of users. In the context of their 'startling' profitability, her assessment of the trend's social implications for Japanese popular recreation is revealing. And in the final article in this section (Chapter 55), Manzenreiter's contemporary assessment of the pachinko industry, first encountered in Volume 1, provides a number of insights into how the industry has responded to the ongoing economic crisis. Focusing on risk management strategies, he asks some penetrating questions about the future of organised gambling in the current economic climate.

In the next section (Part 2.2) authors look at aspects of Japanese popular music in the twenty-first century. The development of J-pop, and its twenty-first-century ability to constantly reinvent itself and diversify internally in response to domestic and external influences, is the dynamic on which Monty focuses in the opening short article (Chapter 56). In a more in-depth analysis of one 'boy' band, SMAP, Darling-Wolff argues that the constructions of masculinity within the Japanese pop music scene contribute heavily to their ongoing success (Chapter 57). She locates their phenomenal success within the contemporary production of gender-sensitive masculinity in the public sphere, in ways that link to Iida's piece (Chapter 51). Still focusing on gender and music, but examining the case of three high-profile female J-pop stars in the early twenty-first century, Toth explores how these pop divas challenge and cross gender, sexual and ethnic boundaries through their performances and public personas (Chapter 58). In an interesting twist on the creation of J-pop stars, in the next article (Chapter 59) Black examines the phenomenon of virtual idols. He shows that in the world of J-pop they embody femininity and the streamlining of cute technology and consumerism, and he draws on parallels with robot development and animation classics to make his points. The last two pieces in this section link music and the politics and performance of race. Condry's analysis of the hip-hop scene in Japan (Chapter 60) looks at how the music, and in particular the messages of the lyrics, address race. He posits a transnational approach to perceptions of race and identity via the construction of racially defined markers of aspirational identity among practitioners and fans of the genre. In contrast to Condry's focus on Western music that is culturally appropriated and modified by Japanese artists and fans, Doerr and Kumagai (Chapter 61) examine the case of Jero, the young, black, US-born *enka* singer, and his popular success in a highly idiosyncratic Japanese musical form in Japan. They argue that despite appearing to offer the potential to subvert racial stereotyping, his success in the charts and his high media profile in fact reinforce the 'regime of difference' between Japanese and Others.

Fandom has been of considerable interest to cultural theorists in recent years, and in Japan the participation of fans in linked and networked communities has been notable. In the next section, on fandom (Part 2.3), authors examine the phenomenon known as *dōjinshi*, literally 'like-minded publications', which incorporates fan appreciation, reproduction and parody of

manga and *anime* characters and storylines. Lam begins with an account of the world's biggest comic fair, Comike, which since the mid-2000s has attracted over 500,000 visitors and 35,000 exhibitors each year (Chapter 62). This forum for production and consumption of fan-written *manga* sets the agenda for continued production of *dōjinshi* literature, Lam argues. Leavitt and Horbinski (Chapter 63) take a specific case study of *dōjinshi* – the political activism authors and fans initiated in 2010 – and examine how in response to Bill 156 proposed by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, known as the Nonexistent Crimes Bill, authors and fans were able to mobilise a nationwide, then global community to challenge the legitimacy of such legislation. And in the final piece in this section (Chapter 64), Galbraith takes a further case of *dōjinshi*, a group of women writers who consume, reproduce and parody *manga* fiction and who refer to themselves as *fujoshi* (rotten girls). Like those in the community described by Leavitt and Horbinski, the *fujoshi* publish their own literature to facilitate their imagined community, both real and virtual, complete with fantasy elements.

Moving from the production and consumption of fan-written *manga* to newer technology that also has a high level of user interaction, the next section, on new media and mobile technology (Part 2.4), addresses culturally specific uses for mobile communications in Japan. Japanese users have embraced specific applications available through this technology, and in ways similar to their appreciation of *manga*. Kim (Chapter 65) engages the phenomenon of *keitai shōsetsu* (lit. mobile phone novels) and investigates why writing and consuming novels for mobile phones have become so popular with young women in particular in the first decades of the twenty-first century. Like the *dōjinshi*, female mobile phone users have written and made available on phones many and various novels through internet portals. Developing this theme of the production and consumption of *keitai shōsetsu*, Lukacs investigates the massive expansion of this medium of creative expression in her more recent article (Chapter 66), but focuses not on the production of these novels as 'literature', but rather on the political and gendered meanings that such forms of communication can generate. Mobile phone technology has also been used for other creative purposes, as Daliot-Bul discusses in her article on 'play' and phone usage (Chapter 67). She examines how mobile phones have moved from being a business tool to a 'little friend' that is intensely personal, and argues that the *keitai* playscape is transcending the current technologies and has become an agent of socio-cultural change.

Work produced about the rapidly evolving new media is subjected to equally rapid technological and consumer redundancies, and it could be argued that accounts of new media should be published only in these media. However, authors in this section are able to provide us with contemporaneous accounts of online fads and fashions, with a particular focus on online gaming (Part 2.5). The articles emphasise the relations between virtual, created worlds and the socio-cultural world in which they are located, and each emphasises

the important role of gender in understanding aspects of online lives. Kim's work on how women's games are marketed and sold exclusively to young Japanese women explores the implications of gender identity in the construction of story narratives, and in the development of gender-specific gameplay (Chapter 68). She points the way forward to a more diversified and more inclusive online gaming community. In the second article in this section (Chapter 69) Taylor investigates the phenomenon of dating simulation games, which allow players to interact with fantasy characters, often *anime*, and have been popular in Japan since the early 2000s. She argues that the cultural location of the games and the cultural contexts restrict the genre's applicability to other cultures; moreover, she demonstrates that gender roles are able to be reversed and reallocated through gameplay in this environment.