

An Analysis of Japanese Otaku Culture from a Viewpoint of Animation Anthropology

Xiang Chaochu
Chengdu University, Chengdu, China
Email: 254494839@qq.com

Abstract—Since the concept of "Otaku Culture" was proposed by Nakamori Akio in 1983, this culture has been popular in Japan for 35 years, and it has spawned a sub-cultured otaku group. The young Japanese spirit highly affected by its deeper malaise. Their pursuit of material is limited to meet the minimum standard of living. They lock themselves in the home as much as possible, and indulge in the virtual animation world to meet their own fragile spiritual demand. With the development of the globalization process, the otaku culture has also gradually had a negative impact on Chinese youth. So what are the characteristics of the Japanese otaku? What are the negative effects of otaku culture? How does animation affect this cultural phenomenon? In this regard, this article will be discussed accordingly.

Index Terms—otaku culture, animated anthropology, vigilance

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1970s, some Japanese youth have become obsessed with animation and its derivatives. Along with the three "animation fever" phenomena, the number of Japanese youths who are addicted to animation has shown a significant increase trend, and gradually formed a sub-culture group with obvious characteristics. In 1983, Nakamori Akio first defined this group as "the otaku". According to the theory of anthropologist Raymond Williams, "Culture is a social and people's way of life as a whole" [1], and the concept of Bronislaw Malinowski: "Culture reflects people's common psychological needs" [2]: The common lifestyle and psychological characteristics of many otakus have gradually formed the corresponding otaku culture. With the continued prosperity of the Japanese animation industry, the number of otaku is also increasing rapidly: Japan's Yano Economic Research Institute has conducted a questionnaire survey of 10,000 Japanese nationals, of which approximately 25.5% of respondents recognized themselves as otaku; in 2017, in the strict sense of Japan, the number of otaku people reached 17.24 million, accounting for 13.5% of Japan's total population. [3] Therefore, the otaku culture has gradually become stronger from the initial marginal subculture. Not only has strong power in Japan, but also be very influential in the world. However, the otaku culture itself has obvious

negative factors. These negative factors have a negative impact on many young animators who have different nationalities and cultural backgrounds. So what are the characteristics of the Japanese otaku? What are the negative effects of otaku culture? How does animation affect this cultural phenomenon? In this regard, this article will be considered accordingly.

II. THE ONTOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS AND NEGATIVE INFLUENCE OF JAPANESE OTAKU CULTURE

For the Japanese otaku culture research, we should first focus on the characteristics of the otaku as the ontology. Professor Azuma Hiroki of Waseda University believes that the otaku is often strongly infected by the hot animation during the critical period of his personality formation, and then has an enthusiastic pursuit on animation, comics and games. [4] Specifically, the Japanese otaku has roughly the following negative characteristics:

At first, the otaku tends to shrink as much as possible at home, for which work is only a helpless behavior to maintain survival and ensure the consumption of animation products. The otaku has a highly psychological dependence on specific areas such as animation, and regards it as a spiritual pillar. They usually spend a lot of energy to collect animation information, indifferent to other social news, and to some extent, there is a tendency to self-enclose. The group is keen to spend a lot of time to "study" the animation works. They don't pass any details in the picture, raising the superficial plot problem to the height of "cultural studies", but does not necessarily understand the core connotation of the works. At the same time, the otaku has a morbid collection tendency for the surrounding products of animation, investing a lot of money to purchase animation peripheral products as much as possible, and losing the desire to pursue other substances.

Secondly, the otaku people usually have obvious psychological retreat characteristics: this group generally lacks anti-frustration qualities, low communicative ability and even resists social interaction. Some of them have different degrees of fear on strangers and strange things. Nakajima Azusa believes that the otaku has a serious problem of communicative incompetence: "The standard of judgment is often self-centered and not consider for others, only people who recognize themselves are

regarded as human beings, and their communication way are hardly recognized by the mainstream society." [5]

Thirdly, the otaku people generally rely on the internet, which is a key channel for them to obtain outside information, communicate with others, and even survive. However, the non-contact hyperspace communication in the network world has further aggravated the social obstacles of the otaku, and even caused them to be disordered. In serious cases, it is impossible to distinguish the boundaries between the network world, animation world and the real world.

According to Clark Wissler's philosophy: "Culture is a collection of standard beliefs and behavioral methods that a group follows" [6], and Dana Walrath's research: "The culture must satisfy its member's psychology and the emotion demand" [7]. The otaku culture, which is constructed by the thinking, emotional needs and codes of conduct of many otaku individuals, has undoubtedly a significant negative impact. With the continuous spread of the otaku culture, its negative energy has caused different degrees of mental health damage to a large number of Japanese young people. Mild people can still maintain the normal work and life, while moderate people lose fighting spirits and spirits are dying all day, and the severe people almost completely lose their viability to survive. According to Yasuda, as of 2010, there were at least 3.6 million heavy otaku in Japan who could not work, refused to go out, and completely locked themselves at home. Some otaku people have serious personality disorder, and some extreme members also have obvious criminal tendencies. They even created many vicious criminal cases. During 1988-1989, 26-year-old otaku Miyazaki Tsutomu of Saitama Prefecture continued to smash, sexually assaulted and murdered a number of young girls, the police found nearly 6,000 animation videos of pornography themes in his house. In 2008, 25-year-old otaku Kato Tomohiro, who was stimulated by work things, made indiscriminate and vicious killings of serious injuries in Tokyo Akihabara, about 7 people were killed and 10 people wounded. In 2017, the 27-year-old otaku Shiraishi Takahiro of the city of Zama was affected by the negative animation and could not distinguish between virtual and reality, he actually killed 9 victims. In this regard, Japanese critics have repeatedly criticized the otaku culture. Some Japanese parliamentarians represented by Yamamoto Ichita even think: "The otaku is a criminal reserve army, and the source of these vicious cases is in the otaku culture." To a certain extent, although otaku culture has become a hidden danger in Japanese society, and the Japanese government has been trying to advocate actively striving culture among the youth for more than 30 years, in fact, the otaku culture is growing and spreading. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze the internal factors of this weird cultural phenomenon.

III. THE INFLUENCE AND PROMOTION OF JAPANESE ANIMATION ON THE OTAKU CULTURE

Japanese animation has played a very important role in the formation, development and growth of Japanese otaku

culture. Animation has a very strong social foundation and great cultural influence in Japan. Therefore, some Japanese youths who are frustrated by various reasons and have a retreating mentality naturally place their spirits on the virtual animation world to escape the real world and then develop into Otaku. Coupled with the social simplification of the internet age, the multiple structural problems existing in Japanese society, and the popularity of many nihilistic animations in recent years, more and more Japanese youth have lost their fighting spirit, lack of spirit, and indulge in animation, thus making the Japanese otaku culture influence is also growing, and the influence of the output of the otaku culture has further attracted more audiences to join, thus forming a vicious circle of intensification. Specifically, the impact of Japanese animation on Japanese otaku culture mainly covers the following three points:

A. Strong Social Foundation of Japanese Animation

The Japanese animation industry is known as the "smoke-free heavy industry". It is supported by the Japanese government and has a high positioning in Japan. Currently, the animation industry has become the third pillar industry in Japan. In 2008, the Japanese government launched the "Cool Japan" strategic plan, emphasizing the further expansion of the influence of Japanese animation, and developing more Japanese animation fans around the world to enhance the development of the Japanese animation industry and inject into the development of the Japanese economy vitality. With the promotion of the "Cool Japan" program, the Japanese animation industry continued to prosper. In 2015, the scale of the Japanese animation market reached 1.83 trillion yen. Therefore, animation has a very broad social base among Japanese nationals. According to the Mitsubishi Research Institute, 87% of the nationals in Japan love animation, and 84% of the nationals have derivatives related to animation characters. In the past five years, Japanese TV and online media have broadcasted a minimum of 70 animations per month and a maximum of more than 100 animations, the number of movie animations released annually in the theaters is as high as 65 per year. At the same time, the animation image spreads all over the Japanese society: a large number of highly popular animation images can be seen in many social functional images, such as poster advertisements, product packaging, publicity notices, and even street signs. This shows the strong cultural influence of animation in Japanese nationals.

Moreover, the social environment in Japan is also relatively conducive to the survival and spread of animation. The bursting of the bubble economy has forced most Japanese families to work hard to maintain their lives. Japanese teenagers who faced heavy examination system and academic pressures are not only accompanied by their parents, but also lack the opportunity to contact others. Therefore, animation naturally becomes an important part of the way of entertainment for them. When they grew up as a youth, and because Japanese society emphasized teamwork and observance of order, and have a certain degree of

suppression of individual consciousness, coupled with the high work intensity of the Japanese workplace and the cumbersome customs and rules of Japanese society, Japanese youth who are under the heavy pressure are prone to negative psychological characteristics. American anthropologist David McDougall believes that "film and television works are human cross-cultural communication medium, they can express the commonality between human experience and emotion, and thus establish an affinity." [8] Therefore, because of its unique artistic features, narrative mode and emotional expression, Japanese animation has a natural appeal and affinity on teenage viewer, which encourages individuals who have a retreating mentality in real life to pin their emotions in the virtual animation world in order to get catharsis and relaxation. This shows that the strong social foundation of Japanese animation is a prerequisite for the promotion of Japanese otaku culture.

B. The Super-authenticity of Japanese Animation

In the development of Japanese otaku culture, the super-authenticity of Japanese animation has played an important role in itself. The core reason why Japanese otaku chose to place their spirits in the animation world is that Japanese animation has a high degree of authenticity in scriptwriting, art setting and audiovisual language, as well as many aspects. John Lasseter, CEO of Pixar Animation Studio, said: "Compared with American animation, the biggest attraction and core competitiveness of Japanese animation is that it creates a virtual world with a high degree of true feeling." David Morley, the representative of Birmingham School, believes that: "The Japanese are not changing the way we see the world, they will take us into another world of electronic images and sounds. The boundaries between the future world of film and television and the real world may be even more blurred, even unresolved point." [9] Susan Napel, a professor at Tufts University, said: "Japanese animation directors are good at using realistic techniques to convey specific ideologies to audiences." [10] In the animation world, the Japanese devote themselves to rigorously presenting many realistic details in the real world, such as geographic pattern, political economy, national character, hierarchical order, social etiquette and interpersonal relationship. Many Japanese directors, represented by Shinkai Makoto, have even directly copied blocks, buildings and spaces in the real world into animation scenes. Even in the imaginative magic and science fiction animation, we can find a strong microcosm of the real world.

In addition, the Japanese are committed to creating a "virtual history" in animation: in a series of animations with a common story background, set out a rigorous and meticulous chronology of history. According to the historical axis of the play, many animations carry on with each other, and ultimately build a grand, real and credible animation world together. For example, in the *Macross* series of animations, since 1982 the first work *Macross* was broadcast until 2016, the series of animations has developed into a huge system consisting of four TV animations, five OVA animations and five movie

animations. The starting point of the historical chronology is A.D. 1999, when a tremendous alien space warship crashed into the South Pacific, human has since determined that there is a strong extraterrestrial civilization in the vast universe. With the advancement of the historical axis in these animations, a series of successive "historical events" such as: "Establishment of Earth Integration Government" (A.D.2000-2001), "First Cosmic War" (A.D.2009-2012), "The Era of Space Navigation" (A.D.2012-2038), "Sharon Apple Event" (A.D.2039-2040), and the "Battle of Vajra" (A.D.2047-2059) have been subtly distributed among the 14 animations.

In addition, *Macross* series animation also launched a detailed official chronicle, sorting out and collecting all the plot points of the 14 animations around the chronicle, and additionally introducing the background and foreshadowing of the stories which could not be explained in many plays. Even the image design in this department's animation has a strong sense of reality: for example, the VF series variable-form fighter plane, the main weapon equipped by the U.N. Spacy, from the VF-0 Phoenix serving in A.D. 2008 to the VF-31 Siegfried in A.D. 2067, the front and rear 12 VF fighters are the main force developed by the United States and Russia in many aspects, such as their performance positioning, technological innovation, shape design and so on. The VF-1 Valkyrie is based on the U.S. Navy F-14 Tomcat, VF-11 Thunderbolt from the Russian Air Force Su-27 Flanker, VF-17 Nightmare from the U.S. stealth fighter bomber F-117 Nighthawk, and VF-19 is referred to the Su-47 Berkut multi-purpose technology validation aircraft of the Sukhoi Manufacturing Bureau. Similar cases are also seen in the series of popular animations such as "Mobile Suit Gundam", and the Japanese animation created with such a concept has a strong sense of realism and credibility. Professor Oishi Eji of the International Center for Japanese Culture believes that the "virtual historical authenticity" created by Japanese animation is an important pillar supporting the Japanese otaku culture, but this "historical authenticity" separated from reality is a kind of strong limitation of emptiness. [11] At the same time, Japanese animation excels in creating a sense of authenticity through delicate emotional expression, complex inner description, and a large number of detailed characterizations. Therefore, Japanese animations with such creative ideas have strong super-authenticity, and create a highly authentic and parallel world for the audience to some extent. According to the American anthropologists Carl Hyde and Voss Sol said: "All the films and television films can be regarded as anthropological films to a certain extent"; [12] and because of the authenticity, the anthropological film has a strong cultural influence and communication. [13] And the French film scientist Christian Metz's research: "The simulation image brings a cognitive and emotional participation process to the audience, which is easy to cause the audience to agree." Japanese animation with super-authenticity clearly conforms to these above theories, so Japanese animation is easily accepted and

recognized by audiences of different ages and cultural backgrounds, thus forming a wide audience.

This is enough to explain why many Japanese youths who are depressed in life choose to vent and release by watching animation. An animated world full of fantasy and super-reality is the best choice for Japanese youths escaping the pressure of Japanese society. Therefore, these Japanese youths choose to accept the otaku culture, choose to indulge in the virtual animation world to paralysis and indulge themselves, so that they cannot distinguish the boundary between the real world and the virtual world, and even choose to become themselves into the propaganda of the otaku culture, entice more individuals to indulge in the animation world. Therefore, the super-authenticity of Japanese animation is an important factor in the development of the otaku culture.

C. The Prevalence of Nihilistic Animation

Since 1995, Japan has become popular with nihilistic animations, and the popularity of such animations has substantially further contributed to the influence of the otaku culture. The writers of Japanese nihilistic animations generally prefer Nietzsche's positive nihilism: its theme emphasizes that "the existence of human beings has no value; the individual differences of human beings and the limitations of self-consciousness are the root to cause human suffering." The most representative nihilistic animation is *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, which has promoted "The Third Animation Fever".

Neon Genesis Evangelion exists the value of a strong anti-social education and deny the significance of human existence. The protagonist Ikari Shinji always urges the outside world to affirm himself. With the development of the plot, Shinji has a strong psychological conflict in the process of repeated struggle and compromise, self-identity construction and negation, and under the influence his inner boundary consciousness and self-protection mechanism, his mental state is more and more negative. After a series of abandonment, deception, and betrayal, the true values of Shinji have completely collapsed and no longer have any hope for the world. In the "Human Completion Plan" he pulled the final trigger, causing "all human beings to lose, the shackles of shape have completely returned to the emptiness of the beginning of life." The pain of the individual will affect the world, and the destruction of the individual means the destruction of the world. The nihilism animation with such a heavy suffocation of the end of the world has caused great heat in Japanese society and has spawned a lot of works similar to the tone: for example: in *Vexille*, the developed biotechnology in Japan finally destroyed the whole Japanese nation. The human beings in *Bio Booster Armor Guyver* are actually the defective products of aliens who developed biological weapons. Although they escaped the "destroyed" doom in ancient era and developed their own civilization in the long river of history, but finally it is still difficult to escape the fate of being destroyed and cleaned again by the Adventist. In the *Ghost in the Shell*, the human body has been completely transformed into a machine. When the flesh

and blood cease to exist, when the memory and the soul are to be digitized, does that mean the human race has been destroyed by science and technology?

The reason for the prevalence of nihilistic animation is, first of all, that the Japanese nation itself has a psychological tradition of nihilism. The Japanese psychologist Minami Hiroshi believes: "The idea stemming from the Buddhist view of impermanence is that happiness is illusory. This Japanese nihilism has long been passed down as the bottom of the Japanese outlook on life." [14] At the same time, the severe population crisis in Japanese society has also strengthened this in recent years. In the data released by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications of Japan in 2018, the proportion of the elderly population over 65 years old reached 27.9%, while the total population of all populations aged 20-64 was only 27.8%; the average birth rate of Japanese babies in the past ten years was 7.9%, and the rate of corresponding population died reached 10.1%, and the annual population reduction in Japan reached nearly 365,000. Such a severe situation has led to tremendous economic and mental pressure on Japanese youth; at the same time, serious class solidification has made it difficult for ordinary Japanese families to have rising space, and most young people have difficulty seeing future hopes; and the cost of raising children has forced the more and more young people give up their marriage. In the long term of a vicious circle, Japan may even have the possibility of destroying the nation. John Collier Believes: "According to the nature of applied anthropology, film and television media can generate corresponding social interventions, and can put 'invisible' issues into public view and cause public reflection." [15] Therefore, Japanese animation director's thoughts on the population crisis have spawned many nihilistic animations, and the Japanese people's panic about the demographic crisis has resonated in nihilistic animation. David McDougall said: "When we are in a favorable position and watch with a resonating attitude, this kind of emotion will make it easier for us to accept the film." [16] So the subject about "despite the struggle, but it will still be ruined" which the nihilistic animation expressed, and the negative behaviors and retreat mentality of the protagonists in the drama will naturally strengthen the nihilism of the Japanese youth to a certain extent, and encourage them to accept the otaku culture further more to escape the real world. Japanese society has a more serious negative impact.

As an anthropological film, Japanese animation will inevitably bear the negative social problems, cultural phenomena and spiritual will of Japanese society; with the process of viewing, the above negative factors must be passed to those who have a negative psychological audience, and further strengthen their escape responsibility back mentality, making them more difficult to obtain recognition and achievement in real life. Thus more indulged in the virtual animation world, promote them into the otaku, or even become a heavy otaku. With the increase of the number of otaku, the influence of otaku culture will be strengthened. The strong otaku

culture will further strengthen the influence of negative factors in Japanese animation and attract more young people to indulge in it, thus forming a vicious circle that is difficult to solve.

IV. EPILOGUE

Japanese Otaku culture is essentially the inevitable product of the interaction of many social contradictions when Japanese society develops to a specific historical stage. The popularity of the Otaku culture has had a very serious negative impact on the Japanese society, which already has a serious population crisis and a serious shortage of age labor force. Under the strong influence of Otaku culture, more and more Japanese youth “their DNA has changed, they constantly reduce their desire, all risks and responsibilities do not want to bear”, [17] and even some extreme individuals have embarked on the road of self-destruction crime. Although the Japanese government tried to solve this structural problem through various methods, it did not produce a more ideal improvement. Many young Japanese, who should be vigorous and promising in the future, are in fact on the road of depression, decadence and self-closure.

With the deepening of the globalization process and the convenient cross-border cultural exchanges in the internet age, the Japanese otaku culture is also having a negative impact on many young people in China. Due to the similar cultural background of the two countries, Japanese animation has been popular in China for nearly 30 years and has been sought after by many Chinese animation enthusiasts, including nihilistic animations such as *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, which have obvious negative colors. China also has similar social problems such as population aging, low birth rate, and high pressure on young people, and China's developed internet economy has reduced the need for communication between people to a greater extent, so the input of otaku culture has caused a large number of Chinese youths to begin to lose their fighting spirit and languish. According to the data released by the National Bureau of Statistics, the number of otaku in China has reached 10.2 million in 2011, and its number is gradually increasing. In recent years, the controversial “Buddha youth” has been influenced to some extent by the Japanese otaku culture, and has become a local otaku group. The group's concept of “unmarried, infertile, otaku, Buddhist” even has a market in China. If we failure to be vigilant and let this phenomenon continue to develop, it will seriously reduce our social vitality and will have a series of sustained negative effects.

At present, China is shouldering the heavy responsibility of building a community of human destiny, so we should attach great importance to the negative impact of Japanese otaku culture. First of all, we should be vigilant against the Japanese nihilistic animation, to

prevent these films with obvious negative components from having a negative psychological impact on our youth. At the same time, we should encourage the creation of excellent domestic animations that promote positive energy, fully utilize the positive effects of these films on the audience, and gradually guide young people to establish healthy, uplifting and hardworking values, and work hard for the great revival of the Chinese nation.

REFERENCES

- [1] R. Williams, *Culture is Ordinary* (Ed.) Ribin Gable, Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, and Socialism, Verso, 1958, p. 3.
- [2] W. A. Haviland and H. E. L. Prins, *Cultural Anthropology: The Human Challenge*, Cengage Learning Press, Arp, 2016, p. 34.
- [3] Yano Research Institute, *A thorough Study of the Cool Japan Market / Otaku Market 2017*, Oct. 2017, p. 12.
- [4] A. Hiroki, *Animalized Postmodernism - Japanese Society in the Eyes of Otaku*, Kodansha Press, Nov. 2001, p. 17.
- [5] N. Azusa, *Communication Incomplete Syndrome*, Chikuma Shobo Press, Dec. 1999, p. 24.
- [6] C. Wissler, *An Introduction to Social Anthropology*, Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences Press, Apr. 2017, p. 370.
- [7] W. A. Haviland and H. E. L. Prins, *Cultural Anthropology: The Human Challenge*, Cengage Learning Press, Apr. 2016, p. 27.
- [8] S. Pink, *The Future of Visual Anthropology: Engaging the Senses*, Routledge Press, Feb. 2006, p. 62.
- [9] D. Morley, Kevin Robins, *Space of Identity*, Routledge Press, Jan. 1995, p. 47.
- [10] S. Napier, *Confronting Master Narratives, History as Vision in Miyazaki Hayao's Cinema of Deassurance*, *East Asia Cultures critique* 9, no. 2, 2001, p. 471.
- [11] O. Eji, *The Spiritual History of the "Otaku"*, Kodansha Press, Feb. 2004, p. 166.
- [12] L. Guangqing, *Theories of Visual Anthropology*, The Ethnic Publishing House Press, Dec. 2011, p. 42.
- [13] H. Guanmeimei, *Vision of Visual Anthropology*, China Federation of Literary and Art Circles Publishing House, Jan. 2015, p. 114.
- [14] M. Hiroshi, *The Psychology of Japanese*, Iwanami Shoten Press, Nov. 1953, p. 45.
- [15] S. Pink, *The Future of Visual Anthropology: Engaging the Senses*, Routledge Press, Feb. 2006, p. 110.
- [16] P. Hockings, *Principle of Visual Anthropology*, De Gruyter Press, Aug. 2003, p. 113.
- [17] O. Kenichi, *Low Desire Society*, Shogakukan Press, 2015, p. 14.



Xiang Chaochu was born in Chengdu city, Sichuan, China on 8th December, 1984. Mr. Xiang graduated from Chengdu University with a bachelor's degree in July 2007. Then he graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts of Sichuan Conservatory of Music with master's degree in July 2012.

In September 2012, he taught at the Academy of Fine Arts of Chengdu University as a teaching assistant. In 2015, he was promoted to lecturer title. In 2017, he taught at the Chengdu University Film and Animation School. The main research background is Japanese animation, animation sociology, animation industry and so on. His main academic research results: “The Success of Japanese Anime from the Perspective of Gundam”, *Chinese Core Journal Criterion of PKU, Movie Literature*, Vol.511, pp.73. “The Sword and Traditional Culture in Japanese Anime”, *Chinese Core Journal Criterion of PKU, Movie Literature*, vol. 612, p. 73. “The Function of TV Animation in Japanese Industry”, *CSSCI, Contemporary Cinema*, vol. 12, p. 161.