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MAID FOR BUSINESS
THE DEPICTION OF MAID CAFES IN JAPANESE MEDIA

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INTRODUCTION

Stepping out of the underground station at Akihabara, the self-proclaimed "*otaku-mecca*" quarter of Tokyo, the first thing one encounters is a line of young women in french maid outfits, handing out flyers. They are advertising coffee shops known as "maid cafes", where waitresses not only dress for the occasion, but also treat the customers as if they are the masters of a household. In the few short years since their inception, maid cafes became a well-known symbol of the Japanese enthusiast ("*otaku*") subculture. Looking into the situation, however, one can't help but ask *why* a phenomenon which is relatively small-scale, as we shall see below, became so identified with the subculture.

It is my claim that this identification is part of a deliberate attempt by Japanese financial stakeholders to affect the general Japanese public's opinion of the otaku subculture. These stakeholders are using the characteristics of french maids, and their similarity to Japanese idealism of femininity, as part of a strategy to soften the public's negative opinion of otaku in an economy where they become increasingly important.

I will start by taking a look at the background of Japanese society's attitude towards the otaku subculture, its financial importance and the origin of the maid cafe. Next, I will take a look at some recent examples of maid cafes featured in Japanese media. Finally, I will construct my claim by showing how the representation of maids in Japanese media is connected to the classic Japanese ideal of femininity.

BACKGROUND

In 1989 the otaku subculture, which had been developing steadily over the previous decade, took a major blow. Tsutomu Miyazaki, a 26-year-old man, was caught after he abducted and murdered four small girls. After his arrest, the police discovered stacks of pornographic manga and animation videos in his apartment, leading to a wide-spread public panic towards the otaku all over Japan. Miyazaki's antisocial behavior and poor upbringing only added to the flame. An attack by Japanese media on the entire otaku subculture quickly followed, often portraying young men who take interest in amateur manga and anime as part of a cult, or potential murderers. For a significant part of the nineties, the word *otaku* itself was often used as a synonym for youth delinquency (Kinsella, 1998: 308-310).

The public opinion of the otaku subculture only worsened in 1995, when manga and animation were used by the Aum sect, who were behind the gas attacks on the Tokyo underground. Shoko Asahara, the leader of the sect, was known to be a fan of robot manga. Japanese media, in an attempt to explain how the cult attracted members, came to the conclusion that people with otaku tendencies were impressionable and easy to draw into such activities (Schodt 1996: 46-47).

The Japanese public's image of the otaku remained low even into the twenty first century. From a business perspective, however, the otaku subculture became increasingly important in the past few years. The otaku market was estimated at 290 billion yen in 2004 (Kitabayashi, 2004). As Japanese comics and animation became increasingly popular outside of Japan, the otaku industry also brought in a significant amount of money from export, licensing and tourism. At the time of this writing, the Japan National Tourist Organization features an otaku tour package of Akihabara and other otaku destinations on their world wide web front page. In a country just now recovering from years long recession, otaku business became a gold-

mine for the Japanese government and businesses alike.

Maid cafes first appeared in Tokyo in 2001. These small coffee shops, where waitresses dress in french maid costumes and treat customers as their masters, were developed out of *cosplay* cafes popular in final years of the nineties. Cosplay cafes featured hostesses costumed as various characters from anime and manga franchises, but due to popular demand such costumes were soon tuned out and replaced almost entirely by the french maid outfit.

At maid cafes, waitresses not only dress in a french maid uniform, but also act the part. They address their customers as "master" ("*go-shujin sama*"), greet them with "welcome back home" ("*o-kaeri nasai*") instead of the traditional "*irasshaimase*" when they enter the restaurant and indulge them with additional services, far beyond what is expected from a waitress in a regular restaurant. Depending on the shop, maids are expected to spoon-feed their customers, put sugar in their drinks or cut their food. They must also hold long conversations with the customers, or play party games with them (Hotta, 2005).

Despite their apparent popularity, maid cafes are still a relatively small-scale phenomenon. There are an estimated 30 small coffee shops in Akihabara, the largest one offering no more than 50 seats. Outside of Tokyo, the number of establishments is even smaller. Considering the number of Japanese otaku is estimated to be in the millions (Kitabayashi, 2004), it is easy to conclude only a fraction of the target audience are actually regular customers of maid cafes.

EVIDENCE

Otaku culture have been featured heavily in mainstream Japanese media over the last couple of years, usually in a positive light. I will now examine three examples, focusing on how the maid cafe is presented in each.

Densha Otoko, a prime-time television drama which aired between July and September of 2005 to high ratings, was based on a best-selling novel by Hitori Nakano, which was loosely based on a true story. It tells the story of Tsuyoshi Yamada, a shy anti-social otaku man seeking advice online after saving a beautiful woman from a drunken man on board a late-night train. The series, played as a romantic comedy, follows Yamada's attempts to hide his hobbies from his new-found love. At one point he decides to renounce his hobbyist life, and graduate ("*setsugyou*") from otaku-ism. In the end, however, he realizes being an otaku is part of who he is, and also gets accepted by his family and the girl.

The maid cafe is featured prominently in scenes dealing with Yamada's otaku life. The maids working in the cafe frequented by Yamada and his friends are played mostly for laughs, and depicted as a group of indistinguishable young women doting on their customers, tremendously invested in their problems. Yamada's graduation from otaku-ism party also takes place in this cafe. In this scene, the waitresses are all teary-eyed, acting much like his friends -- happy at his change in life but sad to see him leave.

Another TV series, *Akihabara@DEEP*, was a screwball comedy that aired late night between June and September of 2006. This series tells the story of a group of outcast otaku forming an investigation agency. One of the main cast is Akira, a waitress at a maid cafe skilled in martial arts. Many scenes take place at the maid cafe where Akira works. Waitresses in this series are given a little more personality than in *Densha Otoko*, but apart from Akira, those personalities are grotesquely exaggerated in a humorous way. Akira herself almost never takes off her maid uniform, either inside or outside her workplace. Despite her physical superiority over most male characters in the show, she sees being a maid as a calling, not a mere job. She's also highly popular among the clients of her cafe, who idolize her and follow her around even when not at work.

A third series, *Maid in Akihabara* was a straight-to-video collection of short episodes released in February of 2006. This series takes place entirely at a maid cafe. Saki, the series' protagonist, is a young woman with a shady past who comes to work at a maid cafe after running away from the local yakuza. At first Saki is skeptical of the job, but after an encounter with two renegade yakuza henchmen coming to Akihabara to form a yakuza base, she sides with her otaku customers and embraces her maid persona.

Saki's coworkers at the maid cafe are Himeko, a cheerful but vulnerable young woman and Miyabi, who until Saki's arrival was the reigning queen of the coffee shop, adored and idolized by her customers. In the final scenes of the show, Saki performs a perfect maid performance for the renegade yakuza, awakening "nostalgic feelings" within them and winning the day. No longer running away, she decides to stay at the maid cafe, seemingly finding her inner self in this job.

These are just three examples from a much larger oeuvre of television shows and feature films dealing with the otaku subculture in recent years. Nearly all of them are comedies and feature the maid cafe either as a backdrop or playing a significant role in the plot. Maid waitresses are almost always portrayed the same -- they are devoted to their profession, often seen wearing the maid outfit even when not at work. Most of them lack any personality other than enthusiastically pampering their customers. When one emerges as part of the main cast, she's usually kind-hearted and helpful, but also sees being a maid as a life calling.

ANALYSIS

The importance of maids in the Japanese campaign to push the otaku-based market forward is not hard to deduce by their prominence in media produced for the general public. More evidence is provided by trade shows. An account of the 2007 Tokyo International Anime

Fair, an industry-only event into which the public is not allowed entrance, reports that "...seems you can learn a lot about a company based on what kind of cosplay they endorse... [but] most companies on a budget just settled for maids." (Macias, 2007: 129).

Such business importance doesn't go hand in hand with the relatively negative opinion the Japanese public still holds towards the otaku subculture. It is my claim that the prominence of the subculture in popular culture directed towards the general Japanese public, and the way it is presented, are all part of an attempt by the Japanese financial powers to soften this opinion, and make the subculture more acceptable by the general Japanese population. Otaku characters are presented as eccentric and obsessive, but also kind-hearted and intelligent. Maid cafes share a similar fate. On one hand, they are portrayed in an exaggerated, satirizing light, bringing forward the fetishism and absurdity inherent in their existence, and calling into attention the differences between the behavior of otaku and that of "normal people". On the other hand, key elements of the maid cafe are emphasized that are tied into Japanese ideas and ideals of femininity, and so can make the otaku subculture seem less dangerous.

In order to understand why the image of the maid cafe is used so prominently not only in Japanese media but even in a strict business context to promote the otaku subculture, we need to take a close look at what the character of a french maid represents. Being a maid, as a profession, means serving and nurturing one's master, usually a male household owner. The maid cafe, both in real life and as presented in Japanese media, extends these duties even farther by making waitresses act towards their customers almost as if they were mothers spoiling a child.

These characteristics share a close relationship with what many believe to be the Japanese view of ideal femininity. Long (1996: 164-165) describes the ideal of "the selfless woman" and likens it to the care and indulgence given by a Japanese mother to her child ("*amayakusu*").

Shows like *Maid in Akihabara* contain scenes focusing on the maid waitresses blowing on customers' cups of coffee to make them cooler, or spoon-feeding them cakes. Such scenes are sure to provoke familiar images of *amae*, the over-indulgence of children by Japanese mothers, in the minds of watchers. Taking this even farther, the maid cafe is sometimes depicted as an extended family for the otaku. In *Densha Otoko*, for example, waitresses in the maid cafe hold a graduation party for the hero, as if they were his family. They are seen crying over the idea of him never returning as a customer, much like a mother may cry over a child leaving home.

In addition, the image of the french maid has one more characteristic important to Japanese society on several levels: it comes with its own boldly-defined uniform. Maids in maid-cafes dress in an unmistakable standard uniform - a black skirt with white lace and apron. McVeigh (2000) conveys how Japanese society emphasizes the uniform as a way to define the self of the wearer in different contexts. Uniforms, in Japanese society, aren't used just to signal to outsiders the role a person plays in a given situation. Instead, they *define* the person wearing it, as the boundaries between the role and the self become blurred. Putting on a uniform that symbolizes the feminine ideal of a caregiver, such as a maid uniform, can work towards gaining approval from the Japanese public, and seems to be one of the main reasons Japanese media latched into the maid cafe in its depictions of the otaku subculture.

The uniform also ties in with the Japanese cute ("*kawaii*") culture. Waitresses in maid cafes often modify their uniforms to include "cute" elements on top of the classic black-and-white outfit. These include accessories such as pink aprons, heart pins and depictions of well-known cute characters, such as *Hello Kitty*. In addition, food served in maid cafes is nearly always decorated in a *kawaii* way, and waitresses employ such *kawaii* mannerisms as using a high-pitched voice. These "kawaii" qualities are also in focus when the maid cafe is featured in popular media. As McVeigh (2000) explains, cuteness is often used in Japanese culture to

"symbolize norms that privileges males over females," as it presents feelings of obedience and empathy. Indeed, part of the maid act employed by maid cafe waitresses, as can be seen in episodes of *Maid in Akihabara* and *Akihabara@DEEP*, often includes feinting or attempting to need the male customer's help when some task requiring physical strength or assertism is attempted. Inclusion in the "kawaii" culture not only places maids and maid cafes into familiar territory for the average Japanese, but also reinforces norms of male and female positions within society.

It is worth mentioning that along maid cafes, a parallel phenomenon of *butler cafes* is present in Tokyo since 2003. These are the mirror image of maid cafes, where young female fans of manga and anime are served by male waiters who dress as butlers and act the part. Needless to say, no mention of these establishments appear in Japanese popular entertainment. I believe this is both because it is much harder to settle Japanese norms of male-female positions with the image of a butler cafe, and because female otaku are still considered a rarity, and are much less threatening for the average Japanese than the male majority.

CONCLUSION

It is worth mentioning that the maid figure is also exceedingly prolific in media targeted towards the otaku subculture itself. The characterization of maids in these cases is not vastly different from the characterization described above, although its goals here are clearly not the same. I think it would be interesting to explore the appeal of the french maid figure to Japanese audiences farther, in a more inclusive context.

In this paper, I tried to show how the depiction of the maid cafe by Japanese media is tied to an overall attempt to soften the image of the otaku for the Japanese general public. I have shown how maids are presented in a way that strikes a chord with the Japanese femininity ideal

by using their formal role, their uniform and their mannerisms. As the otaku subculture continues to grow, it is my opinion that we will continue to see it depicted positively in Japanese popular culture directed at the general public. It will be interesting to see what aspect of it will be portrayed next.

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