

# POPULAR CULTURE

## A wide spectrum of popular tastes

### Manga

With the appearance of writer-illustrator Tezuka Osamu after World War II, so-called “story *manga*,” or illustrated publications in comic book format, developed in a somewhat unique way in Japan. At one time, the main readers of such publications were people born during the “baby boom” of 1946–1949, but as those readers grew older, many different types of *manga* came into being. Beginning in the 1960s, *manga* readership steadily expanded to include everyone from the very young to people in their thirties and forties.

As of 2010, *manga* accounted for 24.2% of the sales and 39% of the volume of all books and magazines sold in Japan, with their influence being felt in various art forms and the culture at large. Though some story *manga* are aimed at small children who are just beginning to learn to read, others are geared toward somewhat older boys and/or girls, as well as a general readership. There are gag *manga*, which specialize in jokes or humorous situations, and experimental *manga*, in the sense that they pursue innovative types of expression. Some are nonfictional, treating information of different sorts, either of immediate practical use or of a historical, even documentary, nature.

The appearance in 1959 of the two weekly children’s *manga* magazines, *Shonen Magazine* and *Shonen Sunday*, served to firmly establish the sort of *manga* culture we see today. Both magazines put out a succession of extremely popular stories. Beginning in the 1980s, another *manga* magazine, *Shonen Jump*, remained for many years at the center of *manga* culture, with a



#### Manga comics

*Manga* magazines on sale in a store. (Photo courtesy of Getty Images)

weekly circulation of over 6 million and affiliated marketing systems for animation and video games. Most typically, children’s *manga* stories feature young characters and depict their growth as they fight against their enemies and build friendships with their companions. However, as their readers grew older, the readership figures for these children’s *manga* magazines dropped. By the end of the 1990s the weekly circulation for *Shonen Jump* had dropped to around 3 million. What became popular in their place were *manga* magazines targeting older



A scene from an anime  
(Photo courtesy of AFLO)

readers. Originally aimed at young men in their 20s and 30s, these *manga* come with a wide range of styles and topics—issues relating to life as a student or adult, or social issues and economic matters—capturing a wider demographic of readers. From the mid-2000s, so-called “*moe manga*,” or “crush *manga*” dealing with love and infatuation became a very popular genre. “*Moe*” is a Japanese slang word that refers to the strong feelings people get for certain characters. The characters are drawn with rounded lines and exaggerated features; the stories are not based on combat or fantasy like the children’s *manga* but generally develop around the everyday lives of normal female high school students. Some *moe manga* have been animated, and this, in turn, has widened the audience.

The *manga*-for-girls genre has also become prominent. Female *manga* artists born in the 1960s, as well as those of the “baby boom” generation, came to demonstrate their talents in the 1970s and 1980s. They gradually widened the range of artistic expression for *manga* productions. Delicate psychological depictions are made through special types of illustrative techniques not usually seen in *manga* produced primarily for boys.

Since the early 1990s there has been a notable increase in the export of Japanese *manga* to Europe, America, and countries in Asia. In places like Taiwan, Hong Kong, and South Korea, which used to be known for their pirated editions, large numbers of the most recent popular *manga* from Japan are published in translation through formal license agreements with large Japanese publishers. In Europe and America, the popularity of broadcasts of Japanese animation on television has greatly increased interest in *manga*. Shelves lined with *manga* featuring the stories of animation series such as *Dragon Ball* (by Toriyama Akira) and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* (by Takahashi Kazuki) are now a familiar sight in U.S. bookstores. In 2002, a major Japanese *manga* publisher established an overseas affiliate to market translated editions

of Japanese *manga* and distribute animated *manga*. The company launched a monthly English-language edition of *Shonen Jump* in 2003. As of 2009, *NARUTO*, a *manga* serial in the *Shonen Jump* magazine, in which the main character is a ninja boy, has been republished in book form and distributed in more than 30 countries. The animated version is on the air in more than 80 countries. Japanese *manga* and animation have clearly expanded beyond their original group of hardcore fans to become a significant part of Western pop culture as a whole.

## Animation Films

Feature-length Japanese animated films can be categorized overall as either a standalone original work or a theatrical-release edition of a television animation series. Pioneering examples of the latter include the movies of Tezuka Osamu (*Astro Boy*, etc.) and Matsumoto Reiji’s *Space Cruiser Yamato* (1977; released outside Japan as *Star Blazers*) and *Galaxy Express 999* (1979). Popular long-running television animation series such as *Crayon Shinchan*, *Doraemon*, and the phenomenally successful *Pokemon* (“Pocket Monsters”) release feature-length productions on a regular basis.

For more than two decades the market for standalone animated films has been dominated by director Miyazaki Hayao. Combining humor, social criticism, environmental activism, and poetic lyricism, Miyazaki has produced a string of artistic and box-office successes that includes *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), *My Neighbor TOTORO* (1988), *The Princess Mononoke* (1997), *Spirited Away* (2001; winner of the 2003 Academy Award for best animated feature film), and *Howl’s Moving Castle* (2004). Another important animated film director is Oshii Mamoru, whose two *Ghost in the Shell* movies (1995 and 2004) are groundbreaking science fiction works that question



what it means to be human. Both Oshii and Miyazaki released major new animated films in 2008. Oshii's *The Sky Crawlers* is an action and adventure story of young fighter pilots, and Miyazaki's *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea* is the tale of a young mermaid who wants to become a human girl.

## Film Industry

Kurosawa Akira greatly spurred international interest in Japanese films when his production *Rashomon* (1950) won the Golden Lion Award at the Venice Film Festival in 1951. His other works include *Ikiru* (1952, *To Live*), *Shichinin no samurai* (1954, *Seven Samurai*), *Kagemusha* (1980, *The Shadow Warrior*), and *Ran* (1985). Kurosawa won the Best Foreign-Language Film Academy Award for *Dersu Uzala* in 1975, and at the Academy Awards ceremony held in 1990 he received a special honorary Oscar for his lifetime achievements as a cinematic artist. Another very highly acclaimed Japanese film director is Ozu Yasujiro, who directed such films as *Banshun* (1949, *Late Spring*) and *Tokyo monogatari* (1953, *Tokyo Story*). In these films he depicts in poetic terms the sensibilities of the life of Japan's ordinary people. His scene-joining techniques (using neither fade-ins nor fade-outs) have had a great influence on European film makers.

During the 1950s movies were the principal form of popular entertainment, but in the 1960s many people purchased their first television and stopped going to the movies, where attendance plummeted from the all-time high of 1.1 billion in 1958 to 246 million in 1970. The dominant director of the 1970s was Yamada Yoji, whose overwhelmingly popular success was the *Torasan* series. These films fused two bedrock motifs of Japanese film: the everyday collective life of a family and the adventures of a lonely wanderer.

The year 1997 saw an unusually large amount of attention given overseas to non-animation Japanese movies. In particular, the

film *HANA-BI*, directed by Japan's well-known comedian Kitano Takeshi, won the Golden Lion Award at the 54th Venice International Film Festival; *Unagi (The Eel)*, directed by Imamura Shohei, won the Palm d'Or Award at the Cannes International Film Festival; *Moe no Suzaku (SUZAKU)*, directed by Kawase Naomi, won the Caméra d'Or Award at the same festival; and *Tokyo yakyoku (Tokyo Nocturne)*, directed by Ichikawa Jun, was chosen for the Best Director Award at the Montreal World Film Festival. In 2003, the period film *Zatoichi* by Kitano Takeshi won prestigious awards at both the Venice and Toronto film festivals. While few Japanese movies achieve wide distribution abroad, in recent years a number of English remakes of Japanese films have been released, one example being the hit 2002 remake of *Ring* (1998), a horror movie directed by Nakata Hideo.

Japanese films were also honored twice at the 2009 Academy Awards in the USA, with the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film going to *Departures*, directed by Takita Yojiro and the award for Best Animated Short going to *La Maison En Petits Cubes* by director Kato Kunio.

## High-Tech Games

Video game media have already been around for quite some time and today they have grown to rival both the music and movie industries as money-making branches of entertainment.

A milestone event in the history of Japanese video games was the debut of the "Space Invaders" game in 1979. The video apparatus—positioned horizontally, with an upward-facing screen set into the table—led to widespread popularization (indeed a social phenomenon) that included the opening of Invader Houses. As part of the recent video



**PSP®  
(PlayStation®Portable)**  
(Photo courtesy of Sony  
Computer  
Entertainment Inc.)



game nostalgia boom, “Space Invaders” has reappeared in some game centers.

In 1983, when the first sales of game systems such as Nintendo and other models permitted video games to enter the home, a full-fledged video game culture got under way. Games that previously could not be enjoyed unless one went out to a game center or a tea shop and slotted 100 yen for each game, could now be played without having to spend so much time or money. Such games soon won the almost fanatical devotion of many children. The games comprise diverse genres, including action games, which stimulate the reflex nervous system; role playing games, in which the player participates by assuming certain roles; and simulation games, where the player may be made to feel that he or she is driving a car, for example, or piloting an airplane.

A video game that captured the hearts of many small children in 1996 and 1997 was “Pokemon” (“Pocket Monsters”). It involved capturing, in a certain order of succession, 151 types of monsters hiding in prairies or forests. These creatures are then tamed and raised. The game was the genesis of the Pokemon phenomenon that eventually expanded to include trading cards, *manga*, several television animation series, and many feature-length animation films.

The start of the 21st century saw video games further diversify. First, online games became able to allow an unspecified group of players to interact online and enjoy the game simultaneously. The player-experience was enhanced by the chance to play against people never met before, or to cooperate with them to defeat the enemy, as well as the chat function to communicate with each other in the games. In addition, next-generation games were released one after the other, including games with sports or training features where the player could play by moving a remote control or by moving the body while standing on a balance board. Others featured advances such as 3D screens.

The computer game bonanza has not merely increased sales of game hardware and software. Background music used for certain games has joined more conventional musical hits to rank on the charts of best-selling CDs, and best-selling books have come to include *koryakubon*, manuals for the playing and solving of various video games. These are examples of ways in which game systems have had multimedia effects while coming to occupy a significant place among Japan’s culture industries. The fact that such industries have also been successful abroad (most notably in the United States) is something that marks a turn of events for Japan, which has been a diligent importer of foreign culture since opening up to the outside world in the Meiji era. The release of a new video game console by a major company like Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. or Nintendo is a huge event not only for game fans but also for the global consumer electronics industry.

## Cell Phone (*keitai*) Culture

The incredible growth of cell phone (*keitai*) use since the early 1990s and the rapid advance in the functional capabilities of the units themselves have created a whole new medium for popular culture in Japan.

For many people, from school age children to middle-aged adults, the cell phone has become an integral part of their way of life. In the pre-*keitai* era, subway and commuter-train passengers in major cities were likely to be seen reading newspapers, books, or *manga*.

Today, however, they are more likely to be using their cell phones, not to talk—since long cell phone conversations are discouraged on public transportation—but to send email, to access the Internet (usually sites specially formatted for small cell phone screens), and to play video games. Students and young adults, most often women, sometimes carry on continuous, day-long

“conversations” with one or more friends via cell phone email.

Starting around 2005, smartphones went on sale in Japan. In contrast to smartphones which feature functions akin to those of a computer, conventional Japanese cell phones are packed with unique features developed in isolation from other markets, which is why Japan’s cell phones are sometimes called “Galapagos *keitai*.” Still, their sophisticated features—such as TV broadcasts, high-spec cameras, and a financial service known as a “wallet phone” (an IC chip embedded in the cell phone which can be used as electronic money or a credit card just by touching it against a special terminal)—give a lot of advantages to users. That is why so many people in Japan use both a smartphone and a traditional cell phone to make the most of the various features of each type of phone.