

# Trends in Japan

## Pop Culture

Discover manga, anime, J-pop, and much more in this section showcasing the latest pop culture phenomena to capture the imagination of Japan's young people.

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## "Loose" Characters Employed to Boost Local Development



Hiko-nyan. (Photo courtesy of Hikone City, Shiga Prefecture)



Sento-kun. (C)Association for Events to Commemorate the 1,300th Anniversary of Nara

Local governments and other organizations are increasingly turning to mascot characters to boost regional development. Certain of these beloved yuru kyara (literally "loose characters") are even transcending their home regions to become popular nationwide.



The Yuru Kyara Festival in Hikone. (Photo courtesy of Hikone City, Shiga Prefecture)

According to the results of the "Yuru Kyara Popularity Survey" conducted by Oricon Research, Inc., the most popular *yuru kyara* is Hiko-nyan, while the character Sento-kun ranked second. Hiko-nyan is a *maneki-neko* (a cat that beckons happiness with its paw) adorned with a red samurai helmet. It was created as a mascot for an event held in 2007 to mark the 400th anniversary of the construction of Hikone Castle in Hikone City, Shiga Prefecture. Even now, Hiko-nyan plays a part in attracting tourists by appearing on the grounds of Hikone Castle three times a day on weekends. Now a popular character throughout Japan, Hiko-nyan received over 7,800 New Year's greeting cards in January 2009, including some from overseas.

## Manga and Game Locations Become Tourist Attractions



A *Lucky Star* residence certificate (Photo courtesy of Washimiya Town, Saitama Prefecture)

"*Otaku* tourism" is now in full swing, with scores of manga, animation, and video game enthusiasts traveling to places mentioned in their favorite works. These young tourists delight in shooting scenes from the same angle as in the work, purchasing limited edition memorabilia, and immersing themselves in the world of their favorite characters. The towns and cities affected, though surprised by this sudden attention, are upbeat about the trend and the possibilities it holds for them.

*Sengoku Basara* (Devil Kings), a series of action games produced by Capcom Co., has brought many fans to Miyagi Prefecture. The game features the struggle among feudal warlords from the Warring States period, all depicted as very good-looking men by today's standards, to unify the country. Among the warriors, Date Masamune from Sendai enjoys the greatest popularity. The number of young women visiting the ruins of Sendai Castle, which Masamune built, and the ruins of Shiroishi Castle, held by his retainer Katakura Kojuro, has reportedly surged. City buses bearing a portrait of Katakura took to the roads in April 2008. The city is embracing the new trend with open arms, hoping that its tourists will now include both old and young.



A bus bearing a portrait of Katakura Kojuro (Photo courtesy of Shiroishi City, Miyagi Prefecture)

## New Manga Format a Hit with Readers of Both Genders



The cover of *Darling wa gaikokujin* (My Darling is a Foreigner) by Oguri Saori. (C)Oguri Saori / Media Factory

Over the past several years, a new style of manga known as the "comic essay" has become popular among readers in Japan. This new format features illustrated anecdotes from the authors' everyday lives. Many of the first such works were told from a female standpoint and focused on subjects like marriage and childrearing; their main audience was women in their twenties and thirties. But lately numerous comic essays have appeared that portray the lives of Japan's *otaku* (anime and manga fanatics). These comics, most of which are written from a male perspective, are becoming increasingly popular with readers of all ages and genders.

Recently the comic essay genre has expanded to include works addressing different themes. Especially popular are manga that tell the story of the everyday lives of *otaku*. Two of the best-known examples of such works are *Tonari no 801-chan* (My Neighbor Yaoi) and *Boku, otaryman* (I Am an Otaryman). (*Otaryman* is a recently coined word meaning "*otaku* salaryman.") Kojima Ajiko, the writer and illustrator of *Tonari no 801-chan*, began posting the comic on his blog in 2006; subsequently it went to print in manga format. *Tonari no 801-chan* has already been adapted into a live-action drama and an audio CD of the story.



The cover of *Boku, otaryman* (I Am an Otaryman) by Yoshitani. (C)Yoshitani / Chukei Publishing Company

# Bumper Year for Japanese Cinema

## Diverse Range of Films Wins Film Festival Plaudits

Japan's movies are receiving more than their fair share of the spotlight at the world's international film festivals. Among the Japanese films that have captured audiences' imaginations in 2008 were sophisticated anime features, a depiction of the bond of marriage and the subtleties of family life, and a delicately woven tale of life and loss.



A scene from the movie *Okuribito*. The protagonist, a mortician, looks at a body.  
(C)2008 Okuribito Production Committee



Director Miyazaki Hayao's *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea* was a huge hit in Japanese cinemas.  
(C)2008 Nibariki/GNDHDDT

*Okuribito*, directed by Takita Yojiro, portrays the life of a mortician in rural Yamagata Prefecture. His various duties, such as cleaning, clothing, shaving, and applying makeup to corpses before enclosing them in their coffins, provide the subject matter for a moving and beautiful portrayal of traditional Japanese rituals associated with showing respect for the dead. Through their interactions with the families of the deceased, the film's protagonist and his wife are prompted to question the mysteries of life, death, and love.

## "Cosplayers" from Around the World Flock to Japan



The cosplay parade. (Photo courtesy of Aichi Television Broadcasting Co., Ltd.)

Manga has become an international lingua franca. Many enthusiasts also enjoy dressing up as their favorite characters. "Cosplayers" from around the world, each dressed in a unique costume, gathered in Nagoya, Aichi Prefecture, this summer to take part in the World Cosplay Summit (WCS) 2008.

One of the highlights of the summit is a cosplay parade through a shopping district in Nagoya featuring not only the summit participants but also cosplayers from the general public. Another is the intense competition among the teams from various countries for the title of cosplay champion. In the parade that took place on August 2, 2008, there were 28 cosplayers from the teams of Japan, France, China, the United States, and nine other countries, and they were joined by about 300 participants from the general public. The parade stretched about 100 meters. When the championship was held the next day on August 3, the venue was buzzing with excitement as some 12,000 spectators gathered to watch.



The runner-up Chinese team. (Photo courtesy of Aichi Television Broadcasting Co., Ltd.)

## 20th Century Boys Becomes Movie Trilogy

20th Century Boys, a hit manga series written by the globally renowned Urasawa Naoki, has been turned into a live-action movie trilogy, with the first part scheduled to premiere in August 2008.

*20th Century Boys* was originally serialized in a weekly manga magazine from 1999 to 2006. It was later published as a 22-volume set of manga books. A two-volume set titled *21st Century Boys* has also been published. In total, more than 20 million copies of these manga have been sold. The stories have been translated and published in 12 countries and regions. *20th Century Boys* has won several awards, including the Prize for a Series at France's prestigious Angoulême International Comics Festival and an award for excellence in manga at the Agency for Cultural Affairs' Japan Media Arts Festival.



The movie's all-star cast.



The young friends draw in the Book of Prophecies at their base.



Tomodachi, the founder of a religious sect.



Strange events take place around the world.

(C)1999, 2006 Naoki Urasawa, Studio Nuts / Shogakukan Inc.

(C) 2008 *20th Century Boys* Movie Production Committee

## Making the Exhibition Space Part of the Experience

Just as modern artwork continues to shatter existing boundaries, there is also growing experimentation in the design of art museums and exhibition spaces. Museums are displaying more hands-on artwork, moving their exhibits to outside venues, and designing their premises to be an integral part of the city outside their walls.



(C)Leandro ERLICH, The Swimming Pool, 2004.  
Collection: 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa.  
Photo: ATSUSHI NAKAMICHI / NACASA & PARTNERS.  
Courtesy: 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa.

The 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa features modern artwork from around the world. Hands-on works of art are located in various places both in and outside the walls of the museum. One such work, entitled "The Swimming Pool," appears as nothing more than a swimming pool of ordinary depth when viewed from above. Proceed downstairs, though, and you'll see an entrance that allows you "inside" the pool. If you look up from here, you can see the faces of other guests staring down at you through the water's surface. This is a fun piece of artwork that lets people interact using water as a medium.



Courtesy: 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa.



Towada Art Center. (C)Towada City