

*Pure Invention: How Japan's Pop Culture Conquered the World*. Matt Alt. New York: Crown, 2020. ISBN 9781984826695.

Japanese pop culture is nearly inescapable right now. *Anime* (Japanese animation) and *manga* (Japanese comic books) are so ubiquitous that their Japanese provenance is rather unremarkable. Each effectively defines their respective genres. And, while Korean pop culture is having a moment with Bong Joon Ho's film *Parasite*, which won the 2020 Oscar for best picture, and the worldwide success of K-Pop bands like BTS and Blackpink, Japanese pop culture seems nonetheless firmly entrenched in its place of pop culture global domination.

Matt Alt's book *Pure Invention* tells the story of how Japanese pop culture achieved this enviable position. An American working in Japan as a "localizer" of pop culture by translating games, comic books, and other media into English, Alt is in a unique position to chronicle the development of the local pop culture scene and also explain its success abroad. Alt argues that Japan makes its real impact on the world through its products. However, this impact results from not just any Japanese product, but from those that possess "the three ins"—inessential, inescapable, and influential. The book covers the Sony Walkman, the Nintendo Game Boy, and Sanrio's Hello Kitty, among others, but not items like a Toyota Corolla or an Epson printer. The products covered in the book have "planet-sized cultural gravity." Alt further argues that these Japanese pop cultural creations are "fantasy-delivery devices" that have "transformed how we interact with the world, how we communicate with each other, how we spend time alone with ourselves, how we shape our very identities" (11). More than being pervasive, Japanese pop culture has changed the world as we know it.

Alt develops this argument by presenting a history of Japan's rebirth and growth into an economic superpower from the 1950s to today. While this is not a new story by any means, Alt offers a unique approach by focusing on the creators and their creations (and sometimes

consumers) in each one of his nine chapters arranged chronologically by decade. Some of these people and products are well known, such as animator Hayao Miyazaki and Sony Chairman Akio Morita; others, like toymith Matsuzo Kosuge and online bulletin board founder Hiroyuki Nishimura, are not as famous but produced no less influential cultural creations. In all of his case studies, Alt grounds the creator and creation in the socio-economic circumstances of the time period, showing how domestic conditions in Japan combined with creative vision to produce goods whose impact would reverberate far beyond Japan's borders.

The first section of the book, divided into five chapters, chronicles the 1950s to the 1980s, beginning in post-surrender Japan when toymaker Matsuzo Kosuge salvaged aluminum cans from the trash of the Allied occupiers to make tin models of the U.S. Army jeep so common on Japanese roads at the time. The popularity of the jeep led to expanded production, a deal with newly established toy company Marusan, and the creation of other models like the 1950s Cadillac sedan. Kosuge's exquisite craftsmanship and Marusan's marketing acumen led the Cadillac model to be a worldwide hit and contributed to Japan becoming the largest toy exporter in the world by the late 1950s. The Cadillac toy car would be the first of many Japanese creations that would not only enjoy success abroad but change how consumers experienced the product category.

Japan got its first glimpse of modern *anime* when Osamu Tezuka's cartoon *Mighty Atom* debuted on New Year's Day 1963. Based on Tezuka's *manga* series of the same name from the 1950s, the animated version presented new themes and a visual style that would come to define *anime* for decades. As story-driven vehicles, *manga* and their related *anime* series became widely popular in Japan. Although *Mighty Atom*, rebranded as *Astro Boy* in the U.S., enjoyed

success internationally, it would not be for several decades until *anime* revamped the way children watched cartoons.

Similarly transformative creations in the 1970s changed people's relationship to music: the karaoke machine and the Walkman. Developed independently at least five times, the karaoke machine was a direct response to salaryman culture of socializing after business hours. The machines spread across the country allowing customers in bars and lounges to feel like a star for a song or two. The Sony Walkman was a similar "game-changing" (132) invention when it was released in 1979. The Walkman, when paired with Sony's new compact headphones, allowed people to take music with them, and only them, as they went about their day.

Sandwiched between the karaoke machine and the Walkman, Japanese company Sanrio introduced *kawaii* ("cute") culture to the world by debuting Hello Kitty in 1975. Sanrio did not invent "cuteness," but the company may have been the first to monetize the aesthetic so effectively. Drawing on its experience creating and selling licensed products of Snoopy in Japan, Sanrio produced an extensive range of Hello Kitty "fancy goods" that captivated the hearts of young girls around the world in the late 1970s and into the 1980s. The story of Japanese products like Hello Kitty and the Walkman was part of a larger narrative of the Japanese economic juggernaut in the 1980s that many believed would soon overtake the United States as the largest economy in the world.

But that of course did not happen. Japan's economic bubble burst in 1991, ushering in the "Lost Decades" of the 1990s and 2000s. The second section of Alt's book covers these decades explaining that the challenges posed by economic recession pushed Japanese pop culture along new and even more influential avenues. A main driver of pop culture during these decades was the Japanese schoolgirl. As Alt explains, Japanese schoolgirls changed consumer culture in Japan

simply through their consumption. Long the domain of salaryman singing traditional ballads in lounges, the schoolgirl embrace of karaoke brought about the rise of private room karaoke (known as karaoke boxes) and streaming song catalogs filled with the latest pop music hits. Japanese schoolgirls were also early adopters of mobile communication devices, beginning with pagers and then mobile phones, with which they invented texting and emojis. If you stream music or use emojis today, you owe a small debt of gratitude to Japanese schoolgirls.

As Japanese schoolgirls expressed their cultural influence, another population, anime “super fans,” known as *otaku*, began to make headlines. By the late 1980s and increasingly in the dark decade of the 1990s, anime garnered the obsessive allegiance of fans, who often celebrated the release of each new episode, series, or film by dressing up as their favorite character, known as cosplaying. Animated films like *Akira*, *Ghost in the Shell*, and *Princess Mononoke* enjoyed fantastic success and increasing acclaim abroad. In tandem with the anime explosion in the 1990s was the Japanese domination of the video game market by Nintendo, Sega, and Sony’s new PlayStation console. Nintendo’s portable GameBoy gaming system, released in the mid-1980s, came to be the Walkman of video games. With the turn of the century, the popularity of Japanese anime and video games continued to steadily increase from the highs of the 1990s.

Alt’s final chapter sheds light on the darker aspects of Japanese pop culture by outlining the similarities between Japanese net-rightists and American alt-rightists. Both groups, which are known for their nationalism, xenophobia, and internet activism, owe their origins to the creation of anonymous online bulletin boards. The first was created by Hiroyuki Nishimura, then a student at the University of Central Arkansas, as a way to discuss anime and manga online. The popularity of both in the U.S. quickly led to the creation of other boards which expanded beyond Japanese pop culture to pornography, conspiracy theories, and extreme identity politics. The

connect-the-dots picture Alt presents begins with Japanese anime and ultimately ends with the establishment of the alt-right in American politics.

Highlighting these connections between Japanese pop culture and our everyday lives is the strength of Alt's book. Anyone born in the last sixty years will nod their head knowingly while reading this book as Alt recounts the Japanese creations that have infused our lives. However, there is a tension underlying the book over what constitutes pop culture. Alt transitions in the book from creations that are more purely cultural, such as anime and manga, to technological innovations that spark new cultural practices such as the karaoke machine and the Walkman without explaining the fundamental differences in creative process and product intent. Is it the Walkman or the music being played on it that is the true expression of popular culture? Surely arguments could be made for both, but the book does not explore to any great extent the theoretical foundations of pop culture studies.

This is a minor and perhaps unwarranted criticism of a book aimed squarely at a popular audience—one who is undoubtedly less interested in cultural theory. The book is a welcome addition to the growing scholarship on Japanese pop culture and highly recommended to an undergraduate audience interested in postwar Japanese history or Japanese pop culture.

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