

Jinying Li, **Anime's Knowledge Cultures: Geek, Otaku, Zhai**, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2024, 344 pp., \$30.00 (paperback).

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If there ever was a code showcasing how someone may morph from an anime fan to a technocrat, it is cracked within this book. From the geek in the United States, otaku in Japan, and zhai in China, the devoted die-hards to the medium of anime have not just been exposed to it but have been rooted, watered, and thrived in its uncontained ecosystem. Anime has gone far beyond a source of entertainment and taken on a life of its own, so much so that what was once considered to be nothing more than child's play by some has turned into a titan of postindustrial knowledge work with many powerful servants.

In **Anime's Knowledge Cultures: Geek, Otaku, Zhai**, Jinying Li, Assistant Professor of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University, takes a critical look at the economic, sociocultural, and psychological impact of anime's knowledge culture. Starting with a historical deep dive into how anime has gone beyond its origins in "cool Japan," Li explains how anime has become a transnational social phenomenon that has influenced markets and cultures across geopolitical borders and altered our understanding of identity formation. Throughout the text, Li juxtaposes animation and technology, culture and information, digital and "real." Li explores how the geeks, otaku, and zhai who immersed themselves in the heavily guarded and information-dense world of anime grew into major players of the knowledge economy beyond anime and into the tech and cybersphere. By recognizing anime as a medium as just one component in a goliath of media mix (or participatory culture), Li demonstrates how anime has shaped the gaming and technology industries, influenced Hollywood cinema, and contributed to an Internet and fan culture that has dramatically changed the way products—and ideas—are made and marketed.

Of the many fascinating concepts that Li introduces as an analysis of anime knowledge cultures, one that helps to cement it as a root of both psychic joy and disturbance throughout the book is that of *kong*, or "complex." The complex describes the geek, otaku, or zhai's obsessive need to know as much as possible about an anime's lore, creation, fanfictions, and affiliations. The complex can become an all-consuming, possessive force that results in both a sense of satisfaction and triumph when feeling all-knowing, and physiological anxieties when realizing they do not know enough. The importance of what Li calls "cybernetic affect" is strewn throughout her analysis, providing insight into how these feelings transgress physical and digital lines and contort a space that claims to be communal into a space that is gatekept and divided by a hierarchy of knowledge.



Through her analysis of the impact of zhai culture in China beginning in the 1980s, Li looks at the introduction of *Astro Boy* from Japan into China's newly opened economy, and how its promotion as an educational science program for children catapulted it across television screens in millions of homes throughout the country. But when China again closed its borders off to outsiders, *Astro Boy* and other anime that had become popular among Chinese youth had already left an impact. Unable to watch it on their television screens, video game magazines began to incorporate anime into their content, and Chinese anime fans found ways to pirate anime and created a fansub culture that turned into a source of unpaid communal labor. Fans worked individually and collectively to form original websites, forums, and other online fan communities. The youth who grew up in this culture went on to become major players in China's tech industry and knowledge economy, where the phrase "knowledge is power" reigned supreme. And those who had the "knowledge" in the joined worlds of tech and animation grew influential when their seat at the table—or attempt to claim one—was suddenly respected, further cementing the identity of geek, otaku, and zhai.

Li analyzes even further the ways in which anime, information, and tech interfaces collide in her discussion of the popularization of danmaku, or "bullet curtain" (named such because of the speed in which text moves across the screen), a method of placing text over anime for fans to share their thoughts on what is occurring in the episode and to then respond to one another. Anime fans would share fun facts, opinions, jokes, or critical analyses of episodic content, and with each comment added, the text would scroll down, and what had been written before would eventually disappear. Though danmaku began in Japan, it was popularized in mainland China and created a desire in fans to know everything that was being said about an anime to remain an elite member of its knowledge culture. This even led to the creation of televisions with danmaku interfaces so that people could share their thoughts during watch parties with friends, and to danmaku movie screenings. Li spoke of the temporality of danmaku and the ways this triggered cybernetic affect, as fans who were not participating live were seeing comments written days, months, or years prior, never allowing them to be fully caught up and leaving them in distress over what they may have missed, and the possibility that they were responding to nothing more than a digital ghost who may never see what they have to say.

The recurring frustration, excitement, and thirst for knowledge through interaction with the digital interface manifests in self-recognition via what Li calls the "mecha-child," which builds off cybernetic affect and connects to her later concept of "cybernetic play." Analyzing anime and a Japanese video game (p. 164, 170, 217), Li considers the *moe* aspect—or the precious, cute, must-be-protected innocence—of primarily female characters, the ways in which they are identified with *mecha*—machines—and code. She also analyzes this in two other anime series (p. 163, 183) where teenage boys gain strength and courage by becoming one with a mecha. It is here where readers can see an analysis of what the beginning formation of future technocrats may very well be. Though Li never uses the word "technocrat," she explains the ways in which viewers and players identify with the mecha-child, because they *are* the mecha-child. Misunderstood and searching for strength, they learn to find power by binding their bodies with tech and code—a knowledge and power that cannot be taken from them.

In a thought-provoking finish, Li analyzes the superflat art style of anime and how our digital lives and digital selves are now compressed into a superflat interface. Though now called a "timeline," Li delves into a comparison of the compressed layered imagery in anime by relating it to the Facebook "Wall." The

Facebook Wall was a space where data, memories, and ideas were laid bare and computed. This turned users and their past, present, and—through targeted advertising—future selves into nothing more than a superflat, like the information-heavy style in both the animation and narration of anime, something to be taken in timelessly and all at once. Connecting back to her earlier discussion of the impacts and understandings of various theories of semiotics, Li claims that we can no longer simply consider consumption of narrative and character-*moe* in media mix. Now, the impacts of *cybernetic* consumption must be considered as well, as it provides feedback to knowledge-seekers so they may achieve what she calls the “true end,” or, knowing everything they can possibly know about the anime or game they are interacting with. This turns the act of knowledge-seeking into a game of its own.

Li concludes by reminding readers that this anime knowledge culture, the agony endured, the power sought, is part of a cybernetic affect because it is a control that can never be achieved due to the uncontrollable influx of information, always leaving the geek, otaku, and zhai wanting more, but never with enough, because “this tension is both psychological and infrastructural” (p. 284). Readers will walk away with wide-open eyes toward anime culture and see it differently than what they may have considered before, understanding it as part of an information capitalism with a boundless transmedial influence that stares back at them through every screen.