CULTURE, MEDIA & FILM | RESEARCH ARTICLE

The translation of otaku and transnational construction of East Asian masculinity

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Abstract: This article explores the process by which the Japanese cultural term Otaku has been adopted into the Chinese linguistic system as the neologism Zhainan, along with the creation of other related terms. It attempts to explore how the term has become widespread within popular culture by online communities and the young groups in mainland China in recent years, and how it has acquired localized cultural meanings associated with masculinity. The article argues that international and intercultural encounters of the triangle (Japan-Taiwan-Mainland China) promote a cultural translation that stimulates localized interpretations of masculinity within modern China. The aims of this article are threefold: to investigate the process of the linguistic and cultural translation of the term within a transnational context; to examine how the translation stimulates Chinese conceptualizations of masculinity; and to offer an overall enlargement of our understandings of masculinity in East Asia. This article may contribute to Asian notions about masculinity by highlighting differences in divergent regions.

Subjects: Cultural Studies; Media & film Studies; Translation & Interpretation; Historical & Comparative Linguistics

Keywords: Otaku; zhainan; masculinity; cultural translation; East Asian studies; gender studies; youth subculture; discourse analysis; ACG culture; anime fans

1. Introduction
Due to the global popularity of Japanese anime, comic books and games (ACG), the Japanese term otaku is not entirely unfamiliar to English speakers. A general definition can be found in The Oxford English Dictionary, where it has been included since 2004, as “(in Japan) a young person who is obsessed with computers or particular aspects of popular culture to the detriment of their social skills”. The English language term “nerd” has more recently been suggested as a translation of otaku. The term otaku has gained widespread use in many Asian countries. It has been translated into Chinese through Taiwanese popular culture, and many new words related to the original term otaku have also been coined. The connotations of the term have undergone significant changes both in Taiwan and mainland China.

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This article, examining the Japanese term *otaku* as a loanword in Mandarin, and investigates how it has been transformed in its travels into different linguistic forms and new cultural connotations. Furthermore, it looks at how the process of localization stimulates the conceptualization of masculinity in both Taiwan and mainland China. Specifically, the article focuses on the following questions: How has the Japanese term *otaku* been translated into *zhainan* as a cultural term in Taiwan and mainland China? How has the term *zhainan* developed as a concept of localized Chinese masculinity in encounters with cultures from other regions? In what way does this term develop specific masculine identities that are represented in the pan-East Asia community? How does the term reinforce the stereotypical East Asian concept of masculinity?

In order to address these questions, this article uses discourse analysis as the theoretical approach for exploring the transformation process of *otaku*'s linguistic form and connotation during cultural travel. By reviewing the literature in Japan, Taiwan, and mainland China, the article analyses in detail how the word *otaku* has been re-appropriated by various social groups for articulating different meanings, as well as how the linguistic form and connotation of such a word re-stabilized as the consequence of the power struggle among these social groups. The article is divided into three parts that will explore the meaning of *otaku* and its various historical, social, and cultural contexts. In Japan, the origin of the term *otaku* can be traced to the scholar Akio Nakamori's biased definition published in 1983, that was later reinforced by the serial killer Tsutomu Miyazaki in 1989, who identified himself as an *otaku*. The term developed to refer to Japanese anime fans, becoming both negative and positive as the popularity of Japanese ACG culture increased globally. Thus, when the term was imported into Taiwan, it already had specific resonances. It came to express various needs simmering in Taiwanese society, and the impact on this society of Japanese ACG culture. The Japanese word *otaku* became enriched with new meanings. It could convey positive implications, offering ACG fans an elitist identity; equally, it might be a derogatory term used by Taiwanese mainstream media to denote a negative representation of male identity, and it could be a general word for anime fans. The word *otaku* was replaced by the cultural term *zhainan* in 2005; a term that carried negative resonances. Interestingly, *otaku* in mainland China underwent dramatic changes: from a negatively perceived Japanese term into a positive Taiwanese reference for knowledgeable anime fans, and has further developed to suggest the two-dimensional youth subculture that is stimulated by the consumption market. It not only refers to anime fans but also relates to consumers of ACG products and culture. In mainland China, the term *otaku* also reflects a discussion surrounding Chinese masculinity: it has shifted from an earlier de-genderized term to become a representation of a desirable male identity, and over the past few years has come to imply a negative perception of men’s consumerist attitude towards women as part of *otaku* culture. Further neologisms invented by young netizens in mainland China have also appeared, such as *funü* (腐女, meaning ‘rotten women’), *diasoi* (屌丝, meaning “loser”), and *feizhai* (肥宅, meaning “fat otaku”).

This process demonstrates how the borrowed Japanese word generates new connotations upon entering Taiwan and mainland China, and vice versa. It also indicates how and why the cultural term has become popularized through media and online discourse, and illustrates why *otaku* and *zhainan* can be studied as linguistically and culturally related, indexing transcultural masculinity in pan-East Asia. We can see that ACG fans in these three regions all emphasize an “authentic” anime culture by labelling themselves as *otaku*. This initially pure authenticity has gradually been diminished and dismantled by linguistic translation and transcultural interaction. The same may be said of how popular Japanese ACG culture shapes consumers’ understandings and preferences regarding masculinity in Taiwan and mainland China. The new images of masculinity in Asian areas have been significantly impacted by Western cultures, and simultaneously a transcultural hybridization of masculinity has developed—as exemplified by the transformation of *otaku* within China and other Asian areas. As Kwai-Cheung Lo (2004) points out “in a rapidly globalizing Asian environment, the simple East-West dichotomy and confrontation is insufficient in regional gender studies, as is the sheer assertion of some uniquely Asian realities” (p. 258). The Japanese term *otaku* has become familiar globally for its cultural meaning (in English, approximating to “nerd/
ish”). However, regional historical, social and cultural contexts, both in Taiwan and mainland China, have expanded its connotations: neologisms and distinctive cultural terms have been generated to speak about masculinity. Although there seem to be some shared concepts of manhood in East Asia, the discourse around masculinity cannot be separated from ethnicity and nationality, nor from social the categories of gender, sexuality, class and culture. In exploring local cultural interaction and differences, this article contributes to the as-yet-little-studied intra-Asian notions of masculinity.

2. The origin and definition of otaku in Japan

Nowadays, the term otaku plays an essential part in Japanese culture. Scholars have pointed out that anyone who attempts to understand Japanese culture has to understand otaku (Azuma, 2009, p. 5). Yet despite its importance and popularity, there is no generally accepted definition of otaku in Japan. Rather, it is a dynamic process of meaning-construction, intertwined with Japanese culture, and encompassing diverse and even conflicting connotations. It is a term that “can be defined in various ways, and once defined, it creates layers that cannot be covered by that definition” (Takawa, 2009, p. 74). To clarify its meaning, it is necessary to trace its origin and development in Japanese society.

From the perspective of its linguistic connotation, otaku, can be literally translated as “your house”. Originally, it referred to a second-person pronoun used as a polite way of saying “you” comparable to the French “vous” (Eng, 2006, p. 160). The term otaku was applied to anime culture in the early 1980s, referring to a socially-awkward male who secluded himself at home, spending all his time on ACG products. In the anime titled 超時空要塞マクロス (Super Dimension Fortress Macross) by the anime studio スタジオぬえ (Studio NUE, 1982), the heroine used otaku to address others who had gained extremely high popularity among Japanese sci-fi and anime fans. Although the jury is still out as to how exactly this jump occurred from the second-person pronoun to obsessive fans of Japanese animation (Schodt, 1996, p. 44; Eng, 2006, p. 190), at a later date some scholars began to use the term otaku to simply refer to anime fans. The first person to make use of the term in a scholarly article was Akio Nakamori, who defined otaku as being synonymous with anime fan groups:

They are not good at sports at all, shut them in the classroom, and play shogi or something in the shade. […] They dress in uniform shirts and sneakers that their moms bought either at the cheap price of 980 yen, or 1980 yen for the faked, and wear R-mark fake sneakers that they acquired a few years ago. […] The boys resemble white pigs, smirking stupidly and peering out from behind their glasses. The girls are generally fat and have the haircut called ‘okappa’, wearing white knee-socks on their thick legs which resemble little tree-trunks. […] They usually sit in the corner of the classroom, with dark eyes, without one friend. (Nakamori, 1983a)

This definition reveals blatant prejudices, indisputably offering a negative picture of anime fans. Nakamori did not genderize the term until the publication of his second article, in which he attacks male otaku fans who, in his view, lack masculinity. In his article he states: “With that look, that way of thinking, that personality, how can they ever find a girlfriend?” (Nakamori, 1983b). Nakamori’s criticism of males in otaku groups in connection with their ability to initiate heterosexual relationships would seem to emerge from the patriarchal ideology and social structure in Japan. His use of otaku presents a negative value judgment of the youngsters whose gender behavior conflicts with the traditional Japanese patriarchal ideology. His two articles received considerable rebuttal and criticism shortly after publication and were eventually excluded from the journal. Nevertheless, the negative connotation of the term has become widespread and was further reinforced by the serial killings committed by Tsutomu Miyazaki, who was arrested in 1989. The police found video recordings of four little girls who were kidnapped, murdered and defiled by Miyazaki, along with a huge number of anime videotapes, as well as porn videos and manga containing sexual abuse. Miyazaki’s lawyer defended his client by claiming that he was an otaku who had mental problems.
due to the negative influence of anime. The crime triggered a moral panic towards otaku, and the deep-rooted negative attitude towards otaku became firmly established. The discussions about otaku thus developed from a subcultural topic into a nationwide socio-political issue. From 1991 to 1995, ACG popularity in Japan experienced a five-year-downturn because of governmental restriction policies and strict censorship.

The situation did not improve until the late 1990s. As Takawa (2009, pp. 76–77) points out, while many people were demonized as being otaku, from the 1990s onwards there were also many who applied the term in a highly positive sense: this can be regarded as a discursive struggle for the term by those feeling connected to otaku as a group. Although it was not picked up in the press, after the anime NEON GENESIS EVANGELION (新世紀エヴァンゲリオン in Japanese, GAINAX, 1995) gained high popularity in Japan, the otaku social phenomenon once again received widespread attention, and various issues gradually resurfaced. Some scholars participated in academic activities and media programmes in an attempt to change the negative image of otaku. One notable scholar was Toshio Okada, whose work titled オタク学入門 (An Introduction to Otaku Studies) was published in 1996. Okada re-interpreted the term otaku, in light of three different aspects. First, by illustrating how otaku influences anime videos. Okada distinguishes between animation directors on the basis of their stylistic differences, and he suggests that otaku represents a “new type of human” who “possesses an extremely evolved vision in terms of their sensitivity for images” (Okada, 1996, p. 10). Their sensitivity to visual media, and broad knowledge of media texts, enables them to become excellent content creators—“only otaku creators have the ability to hit the world market” (ibid, p. 27). Secondly, Okada claims that otaku possess “a type of value and world view” which he describes as “the sense of otaku”, with which they understand cross-genre techniques of expression (ibid, pp. 28–29). For example, knowledge about role-playing games is necessary in order understand the storyline of the anime “Magical Circle Guru Guru” (魔法陣グルグル), because the entire anime is a parody of that type of video game. Finally, Okada proposes that the third feature is that “self-expression and self-improvement are necessary to become an otaku” (ibid, p. 33). This interpretation challenges the stereotype of otaku which caricatures them as spineless characters lacking any get-up-and-go or social skills. Instead, Okada argues that otaku can become leaders in contemporary Japanese society.

Although there have been discussions regarding the positive/negative images of otaku, prior to the present century the term was not associated with gender. Hiroki Azuma (2009) considered the position of otaku in modern mass consumption society in his book titled Otaku: Japan’s Database Animals. He outlines the differences between the youngest generation of otaku who were born in the 1980s, and previous generations (born in the 1960s and 70s). Azuma then argues that modern otaku show more interest in the anime’s female protagonists than in the actual stories, and that female images have become the focal point of otaku culture (Azuma, 2009, p. 37). To illustrate this phenomenon, Azuma discusses the presentation of “chara-moe” (an adjective used to describe cute and beautiful females) and the “moe elements” (such as the costume of maid-servants, cat ears, and specific ways of talking). Azuma regards otaku as “animalized humans”, suggesting that the consumption of moe-elements is a type of “database consumption” which abolishes the need for narrative: media texts are produced and consumed based on the database of moe-elements. Females’ bodies become the object of otaku, objectified by male consumers in order to satisfy their lust (ibid, Chapter 2).

Due to the discursive nature of the term otaku, and the fact that it has undergone such changes throughout its history, it is impossible to provide any clear objective definition of otaku or assign it to any distinct group. In 2010, Gao interviewed 300 Japanese people and asked them for their opinions regarding otaku. The results demonstrated that the negative stereotype triggered by moral panic, and the positive meaning given by Okada and others, continue to co-exist within the Japanese perception. According to the data, the general image of otaku is of people who are “obsessed with something, keen on animation and video games, rarely go out, do not like to communicate with people, and enjoy collecting things” (Gao, 2010, p. 67). Additionally, “obsessed
with something” and “do not like to communicate with people” form the largest proportion. Among the interviewees aged between 20 and 35 years old, 93% chose the former and 90% chose the latter, while these two data in the 36-50 and 50-65 age groups were 87%, 93%, 85% and 87% respectively. Based on the above discussion, it can be argued that due to the discursive nature of the concept, any sociological or anthropological study of otaku culture that simply applies the term without further qualification, will of necessity be influenced by a preconceived value judgment. We should now consider how the term otaku was introduced, localized and transformed.

3. The translation of otaku in Taiwan: the birth of zhainan
It is generally held that the Japanese term otaku entered the Chinese language in the 1990s through Taiwanese popular culture (Gao, 2010; L. Zhang, 2007). At first, this involved form-meaning reproduction: a complete borrowing with only the Japanese sound left in (Hsieh & Hsu, 2006). Otaku is written as yuzhai in Kanji, as one of four forms of the Japanese written systems (the others being hiragana, katakana and Romanized Japanese; Frellesvig, 2010). Kanji is a form combining 汉字 (hanzi, Chinese written characters) and a Japanese pronunciation. The Kanji character宅 is pronounced as taku in Japanese and as zhai in Mandarin. In Taiwan, Mandarin speakers borrowed the Kanji form of otaku (yuzhai,御宅), but pronounce the Kanji characters in Mandarin as yu (御) zhai (宅). From the linguistic perspective, a new cultural term, zhainan was created to replace it in 2005. In the past two decades, this term has been localized and has developed three new main connotations in Taiwan: 1) as a positive term used to establish an elitist subcultural self-identity by ACG fans; 2) as a discriminatory term that originated from Akio Nakamori’s argument, introduced by Taiwanese mainstream media while used to construct and exclude an “otherness”; 3) as a general term for anime fans (Fu, 2017, pp.112–113).

The loanword otaku (yuzhai) was introduced into Taiwan in the late 1990s by the first generation of Taiwanese anime fans (who were born in the 1970s and grew up with Japanese anime products). At the time, we can observe a growing trend to import and consume Japanese ACG culture. In the early stages, anime fans in Taiwan did not simply consist of people who loved Japanese anime and comics. There were also two hefty requirements for being part of this group. The first was an economic/class issue—even though Taiwan’s economy and consumption levels hugely increased during the 1970s and the 80s, video equipment such as projectors and video tapes were still not affordable for the majority. The second was the cultural and intellectual requirement established by ACG communities. An article published in one of the earliest anime journals in Taiwan, titled 神奇地带 (Magic Zone) advocates that animation information magazines should contain more substantial content. In other words, there was a requirement that anime fans possess considerable intellectual ability as well as related knowledge, that would enable them to critically understand the texts. These requirements form a strategy used by anime fans to construct their collective subcultural identity, allowing them to draw a distinction between themselves and others. In particular, they wished to see a contrast between themselves and the mainstream media, which stereotypically perceived otaku as childish: its assumption was that anime or cartoons are merely for children. It can be seen that otaku here represents a self-labelled identity for anime fans, initially imported into Taiwan as a positive term.

The situation was further stimulated by the anime “Otaku’s Video” (オタクのビデオ, GAINAX, 1991) written by Okada Toshio, which was introduced into Taiwan in 1993. As the embryonic form of the ideas expressed by Okada in the subsequent publication of “An Introduction to Otaku Studies” in 1996, this somewhat autobiographical anime also represented otaku in a similar positive way: in the story, the protagonist Kubou became an otaku because he was fascinated by anime, cosplay and other subcultures, which resulted in him giving up his previous hobbies, such as tennis. He was subsequently discriminated against by others, and broke up with his girlfriend due to the moral panic and prejudice that prevailed in Japan. However, at the end of the story, Kubou successfully entered the anime industry and became an excellent practitioner, producing many anime blockbusters regularly featured in the mainstream media. According to Fu (2016,
p.62, 85), due to the different social background of Japan and Taiwan, anime fans in Taiwan have not experienced the discrimination that Japanese anime fans did, and thus the demoralization of otaku in Japanese society contained in Otaku’s Video was difficult for Taiwanese anime fans to comprehend. Although this first connotation of otaku in Taiwan is very similar to Okada’s definition in terms of their content, their motivations were different. As mentioned earlier, Okada’s argument is a counterattack to Akio Nakamori’s negative concept and the moral panic triggered by the abhorrent behaviour of Miyazaki Tsutomu. In other words, Okada’s argument concerned a political movement which aimed to give positive meaning to the concept of otaku and to lessen the discrimination against anime fans, caused by the moral panic in Japan. Taiwan’s first conceptualization of otaku, on the other hand, aimed to construct an idealized subcultural identity that distinguished itself from mainstream culture.

In 2005, the original loanword otaku (yuzhai) was replaced by zhainan (宅男) when the Japanese movie Densha Otoko (電車男, Train Man) was broadcast in Taiwan (Y. Zhang, 2014). The gender indicator nan (男, male) was added to the term to specifically refer to males. In this film, the male protagonist is depicted as a shy and quiet ACG fan. Because of his introverted personality, it is difficult for him to initiate a relationship when he encounters his ideal female. With such a widespread, vivid, representative image of a Japanese otaku, the term zhainan, with the emphasis on a heterosexual male, became dominant in shaping the Taiwanese understanding of a specific masculine type: some social features, such as obedience to authority and being subject to group pressure, are greatly valued (Bih & Huang, 2012). It included several groups of people such as the ACG lovers and fans, the homebody, crazy netizens, the unemployed, and men with social disabilities. In terms of its linguistic application, once the term zhainan was coined, the use of otaku (yuzhai) gradually diminished in Taiwan, except within Taiwan’s ACG communities—who insisted on using the original term, because it represented an “authentic” anime culture. The transformation of the borrowed word otaku (yuzhai) into the gendered term zhainan in Taiwan suggests a reinforcement of masculinity. This gender indication is further embedded in the discourse of sexuality, as explained by Azuma’s database consumption theory of female images. Fu argues that mass media links the moe-elements of database consumption to a “special sexuality”, “pornography” and “the alternative object of sexual desire” for those males who lack the ability to communicate with women in the real world (Fu 2016, p. 95).

The third connotation of otaku developed as a result of the ever-growing anime audiences. With the development and popularization of digital technology, especially the Internet, the cost of accessing resources or information about anime, comics and games, fell significantly from 2000 onwards. It became relatively easy for people to access a wide range of resources as long as they could afford a computer and Internet. In addition, the vast quantity of pirated resources with Chinese subtitles from mainland China made it much easier to consume anime-related products. Consequently, from the 1990s on, the niche environment of anime consumption gradually collapsed. At the same time, the Japanese animation industry began to rapidly expand. This led to the segmentation of anime fans—the common topics within a particular group declined, so that in-depth communication between anime fans became more difficult: this ultimately meant that a unified subcultural environment collapsed and anime fans lost their common cultural interests (Fu 2006, p. 115). Thus, the strategy of constructing a collective identity to the exclusion of others—through consumption of related cultural products—no longer worked. The elitist connotation of otaku slowly disappeared (ibid, p. 105).

4. Otaku and masculinity in mainland China

The process of the localization of the term otaku in mainland China resembles that of Taiwan—a loanword was initially introduced by anime fans, later becoming a distinctive localized cultural term with specific connotations. In both Japan and Taiwan, there is a long history of debates concerning the definition of otaku. In mainland China, however, there is no such discursive confrontation. Rather, the term otaku and the images it represents were quickly established after its introduction into Chinese culture early in the present century. In July 2002, the word
otaku appeared for the first time in mainland China when it was used in one of the most popular anime magazines named Comic Fans·Comic 100 (Comic Fans·Comic 100, 2002, p.9). Here, it was used in the following context: “a limited edition phone card of The Super Dimension Fortress Macross sells for 1,300 Hong Kong dollars. It is really not easy to be an OTAKU” (2002, p. 9). The word otaku (yuzhai) is only mentioned en passant without any further explanation. However, it is clear that this earliest interpretation did not directly refer to anime fans. Rather, it was closely linked to the anime-product consumer. This restricted connotation was then expanded over the following years. In 2005, the 91st volume of Comic Fan·Comic 100 published two articles formally introducing the term otaku. The first article explained that: “[otaku] broadly refers to people who actively collect goods and information related to a specific field. In a narrow sense, it refers to people with a hobby of collecting anime, video games and other fields. In particular, it refers to people with a fictional worldview” (2005, p. 12). The second article further distinguishes two types of fans: “impure/pure anime fans” (不完全/完全动漫粉丝); “An excellent OTAKU knows more about anime than ordinary people, and has a unique understanding of anime. When recommending new or classic comics, they have better judgment and express themselves well. They often give people a feeling that they are really important, and they are highly respected as high-quality anime enthusiasts” (ibid, p. 47). Moreover, there is another difference between impure/pure anime fans that is rooted in the different ways they consume anime texts: pure fans consume “anime for anime’s sake” while impure fans may consume anime texts because they like peripheral products or are stimulated by other elements. Based on these two criteria, the article concludes that “only pure anime fans are respected as otaku” (ibid, p. 47). As such, it becomes clear that from an early stage in mainland China the term otaku tended to be used as a consumerist cultural term.

At the same time, negative images of otaku can also be detected. In 2005, an article titled “Sexy Japanese Hair Salon Young Girls in Mini-Skirts, Serving for Otaku” (日本性感发廊美少女穿迷你裙, 为御宅族服务) posted by SOHO.com (He, 2005), defined otaku as “those people whose entire life is occupied by animation and games […] They dress weirdly in shabby T-shirts, sloppy jeans, and scruffy backpacks, all of which makes people feel uncomfortable”. Moreover, the loanword otaku began to attract academic attention. Scholars published research on its definition and features, including the aspects of self-isolation and the absence of social skills (Wang & Gu, 2008, p. 42). ACG fans spend all their time consuming anime products and are preoccupied with an imaginary world rather than connecting with real people in the real world (G. Zhang, 2009, p. 93). In this regard, the discussions concerning the nature of otaku in mainland China do not vary greatly from those in Japan and Taiwan.

Early connotations have, however, been subsequently expanded in mainland China. Scholars argue that otaku people have their own self-identified outlook and behavior, but more than this, they also represent a new life style. Moreover, according to the article published in another popular anime magazine (Anime New Power) titled COMICMARKET (“The COMICMARKET You Know & Do Not Know”; Shi Ma Jie Yan, 2008), “In addition to being a huge bi-annual carnival for OTAKU from all walks of life, it is also an excellent opportunity to introduce Japan’s unique OTAKU culture to the world” (p,8). Here we can see that the ACG related cultural events were regarded as part of “otaku culture”. The group identified as otaku contains both producers and consumers of otaku culture, which is further developed into a new word 二次元文化 (Two-dimensions culture). Lou (2019, p. 115) explains that this term, in a narrow sense, originated from Japanese anime which are conveyed by two-dimensional media such as paper and screen. In a broader sense, it also refers to any ACG-related cultural products and practices, such as anime music, cosplay, virtual idols, doujin and so on. In this sense, two-dimensional culture is equated with otaku culture and ACG youth subculture, which has gained great popularity in mainland China over the past decade. Its users reached 3.32 billion in 2019 and can be expected to reach 4 billion in 2020 (iiMedia.cn, 2020). Being highly popular and having considerable commercial value, mainstream media and ideology began to incorporate otaku as a cultural term. For example, in a recent interview, Xiaoyan Tang (2021), producer of the 2021 China Online Spring Festival Gala, talked about “using traditional Chinese style, rap, anime, street dance, two-dimensional and other cultural forms that young people like
very much, to create a unique youth carnival”. In mainland China, the term otaku has been constantly transformed from a Japanese sociological category into a cultural term losing its connection with Japanese anime culture, and developing into a youth subculture allied to a consumption society.

In mainland China otaku is used as a de-gendered term, referring to both genders. The article The COMICMARKET You Know & Do Not Know (Shi Ma Jie Yan, 2008), associates otaku with 腐女子 (rotten woman). This name was actually given to women who participated in doujin (an unofficial created derivative work) activities through self-deprecating themselves as “the women with a corrupt heart”, which is a substantive for female otaku’ (p. 8). The new word does not create a negative definition of women, quite the opposite, it demonstrates a powerful notion of feminism that respects women’s interests and desires. Interestingly, the idea of feminism has been emphasized from the earlier ACG culture in mainland China. In the column of 无差别论坛 (Indifferent Forums), the article titled咆哮吧!女郎—论动漫中的女权主义 (Girls! Please Roaring—On Feminism in Anime; INSANE, 1999) in the anime magazines named 动漫时代 (Animation and Comic Times) clearly argues that: “feminism does not mean that women aim to be superior to men. It requires that we achieve a gender equality and that women’s desire and self-esteem should be respected”. The article further applies feminism to ACG culture: “after reading hundreds of girly anime, I found that there are really few female authors with feminist ideas, and they always unintentionally or intentionally belittle women in their works. […] Is it true that women themselves despise themselves?” (pp.32-33). The author recommends that other anime fans read Freud’s The Psychology of Love and Beauvoir’s The Second Sex in order to promote an awakening of female awareness in mainland China.

Through Taiwan, the term zhainan became familiar to young people in mainland China in 2005, but its meaning has evolved since then: it has been shaped by a meaning-constructing process that involves a development in gender discourse. At first, it was directly impacted by the Japanese film Densha Otaku. This was introduced by anime fans in mainland China and published in Comic Fans Comic 100 (2005, p. 95): “An otaku young man, Densha Otaku, devoted his life, all his heart and time, to his obsession with anime; but one day he discovered another passion: a girl named Hermes. In order to win her heart, he began to pursue her in an awkward manner”. Compared with the mainstream reports on the film in Taiwan, this introduction sounds relatively positive. In mainland China, the term zhainan tends to represent a desirable masculinity. This positive perception partially results from the newly emerged male image in East Asian popular culture; that of the androgynous and innocuous males, maintained by economically independent young female consumers (Glasspool, 2012; Jung, 2010). Furthermore, it is related to Chinese traditional scholarly works about masculinity in connection with the wen-wu (literary-martial) paradigm derived from the Confucian tradition (Louie, 2002). Thus, we realize that masculinity in mainland China is a hybrid. On the one hand, it shows obvious influences of both Western and Asian popular cultures, and on the other, it has its roots in Chinese traditions. Beside the tough, physically strong man, zhainan characteristics are thought to indicate Confucian moral purity in Chinese men. This makes the image of the zhainan increasingly “accepted and favoured in popular narratives of romantic love” (Song & Hird, 2013, p. 92).

As opposed to the clear linguistic transition from otaku (yuzhai) to zhainan in Taiwan (as related to the discourse of masculinity), the term otaku (yuzhai) has been used consistently in mainland China. Certain new words have, however, been generated to distinguish male and female otaku. For example, in the article posted by Chinanews.com on 29 October 2009, Wang used the word zhainü to refer to female otakus. Li (2009) explains that “nowadays, the popular language on the Internet calls them宅男宅女 (zhainan, zhainü) and that they originated from otaku (yuzhai) in Japanese” (p. 171). On the other hand, several recent neologisms have been created and popularized through media and online discourse in mainland China: these reveal a negative interpretation of masculinity. For instance, in an online entertainment program学妹来了 (The School Girl is Coming), which was broadcast on 23 April 2017, an interviewee used the term 死肥宅 (fat otaku,
死(literally means dead) in reply to the question: ‘what kind of boys count as diaosi (屌丝, meaning “loser”),’ describing them as a guy who “never trims his beard, wears dirty sneakers, and has holes in his socks”.

Since the otaku, or two-dimensional culture, is essentially based on Japanese anime products, it is not surprising to find that in mainland China there has been a similar trend of development towards the moe-elements: it deals chiefly with the presentation of female images. The Chinese otaku culture has the same cultural characteristics. In recent years, the majority of otaku cultural products in China use bishojo, that is, physically attractive young girls, as their selling point. As of 31 May 2021, out of the top five official edition mobile games with the two-dimensional cultural tag, created by the largest anime company Bilibili in mainland China, four of them also contain the tag of 美少女 (bishojo, pretty young girl). Of the remaining top 10, three of the games have the theme “Pretty Girl Doll”, “Mecha Girl”, and “Magic Girl”. Interestingly, this culture tends to have an inseparable connection with pornographic culture. According to Xinhuabet (2018), The Ministry of Culture has recently guided cultural law enforcement agencies in Beijing, Tianjin, Anhui, Hunan and other places to investigate and handle 20 cases of content-based online games that promote their contents with pornography and gambling, which violate social ethics. Among them, two games of two-dimensional culture—“Fate Grand Order” and “Azur Lane” were criticized because “the multiple female characters are dressed scantily and expose their body excessively”. Not surprisingly, the consumers of otaku subculture have increasingly tended to be male. Even though the construction of masculinity is largely negative, the term zhainan, as well as other newly-coined words, reflects a strong patriarchal ideology with an accompanying erotic exploitation of the female body.

5. Conclusion

Summing up, this article has explored how the Japanese term otaku has been translated and adopted via the Chinese neologism zhainan as well as other relative terms, and has developed various new connotations through popular culture in Taiwan. By examining the historical and transcultural context of Japan, Taiwan and mainland China, the article illustrates how the term otaku has developed into a localized Chinese cultural term, zhainan, and has come to represent a certain type of male identity. It argues that intra-Asian cultural exchange and consumerism has stimulated various connotations of otaku, including its place within the discourse of masculinity.

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