Where Have All The Salarymen Gone? Masculinity, Masochism, and Technomobility in Densha Otoko

Susan Napier, Tufts University

Over the last decade both the literal and symbolic place of the salaryman has changed significantly. Once the masculine icon of Japan’s postwar success story, in recent years the salaryman has become representative of the walking wounded who characterize post-bubble Japan. In his place have arisen a wide variety of masculine personas, but perhaps the most famous and controversial has been the otaku. Although women can be otaku as well, the term has long been used to disparage men who seemed to live their life in anti-social, technologically oriented pursuits. In 2004, however, the image of the otaku began to change with the publication of the bestselling book Densha Otoko (Train Man), purporting to be a genuine internet love story about an otaku’s courtship of a young woman whom he rescues from a drunk on a commuter train. The subsequent popular film and television series contributed to the notion of the otaku as an alternative form of masculine identity. This paper examines the construction of masculinity within the Densha Otoko phenomenon, suggesting that, while it contains genuinely new elements such as its technocultural framework, many aspects hark back to “classic” Japanese masculine values, such as endurance, stoicism and masochism, to create a contemporary wishfulfilling fantasy for both sexes.