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Self and salvation: visions of *hikikomori* in Japanese manga

Abstract: This article explores theoretical and popular views on the acute social withdrawal syndrome in Japan, known as *hikikomori*. Most sociologists contextualize *hikikomori* within the economic downturn of Japan and the subsequent economic pressure on individuals, also reflected in the growing number of *furitā* and NEET. Psychologically, *hikikomori* is a radical version of the *otaku*, the Internet and computer addict, who can communicate only within his virtual peer group. However, both sociological theories and popular narratives have recently observed a growing acceptance and even an improvement of the image of these psycho-social patterns. While the story of the charming *otaku* called *Densha otoko* ('train man') has been adapted into all visual media, some *hikikomori*, too, have been promoted to manga heroes, e.g., in Takimoto Tatsuhiro's *Welcome to the NHK* and Oku Hiroya's *Mēteru no kimochi*. Sociologist Ishikawa Ryōko in her recent field study reads *hikikomori* as a rather positive, though long-term process of self-confirmation. This change in the image of *otaku* and *hikikomori* therefore reflects a subliminal revolution of traditional and outdated Japanese concepts of obligation, work, and masculinity.

Keywords: *hikikomori*, *otaku*, manga, freeter, cultural change, psyche, crisis

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1 Introduction

In the "lost decades" since the collapse of the bubble economy, Japanese society has undergone a severe crisis, both economically and socially. The growing instability is mirrored in all empirical indicators: declining birth and rising divorce rates, shrinking income, as well as a general lowering of the expectations of the younger generations. The economic downturn has also triggered new, partly deviant patterns of life and consumption such as *otaku* (computer geek or 'weirdo'), *parasaito* (older singles still living with their parents and at their cost), and NEET (young people not in education, employment, or train-

ing), undermining the traditional system of lifelong employment. In 2010, Japan counted 1.8 million *furitā* (precarious workers, or temps) and more than 0.6 million NEET. At least a quarter of a million NEET are *hikikomori*: social recluses, who hardly leave their room or socially interact with family members or friends (Cabinet Office 2011a: 33–35).

The mass media reflect this cultural change in reports and fictional narratives. In Japan, TV dramas like *Haken no hinkaku* ('The temp's dignity', NTV 2007) or *Furitā, ie o kau* ('A temp buys a house', Fuji TV 2010) focus on the destiny of *furitā* and draw attention to the economic suffering of the younger generation. In the United States and Germany, three topical *hikikomori* novels feature male main characters: Jeff Backhaus's *Hikikomori and the Rental Sister* (2013), Kevin Kuhn's *Hikikomori* (2012), and Milena M. Flasar's *Ich nannte ihn Krawatte* ('I called him necktie', 2012). This paper scrutinizes the perception of the *hikikomori* phenomenon in two recent manga: Takimoto Tatsuhiko's *NHK ni yōkoso* ('Welcome to the NHK', 2008) and Oku Hiroya's *Mēteru no kimochi* ('Maetel's feelings', 2007). We trace a transformation of its image, a gradual detachment from social patterns prevailing in the age of high economic growth, and a development toward alternative notions of self, career, and lifestyle. We argue that popular media explorations of acute social withdrawal and seclusion also open up the path to a sustainable and autonomous individual existence, challenging outdated patterns of work life, consumption, and gender roles.

2 The *otaku's* career: from murderer to manga hero

Psychotherapist Okonogi Keigo (1977) was the first critic to observe cracks in the traditional Japanese system of groupism and *giri* ('social obligation'). A decade before the Japanese bubble collapsed, he had already labelled the younger generation as "moratorium people," who would not take responsibility and refused the traditional sense of belonging, the glue of Japanese society. In the same period, the Japanese *otaku* culture emerged, a wild bunch of "weirdos" or "geeks" addicted to manga, fanzines, and (later) computers. This *otaku* culture continued to grow during the Japanese bubble economy, although it had to withstand prejudice and a negative image from the start. In 1989, when serial rapist and killer Miyazaki Tsutomu was caught, the media and the public soon linked his felonies to his (partly pornographic) manga collection and his *otaku* lifestyle (Kinsella 1998: 309). This further exacerbated fears of the imma-

ture and perverted *otaku* and gave them “a particularly negative connotation” (Azuma 2009: 4, 123).

For a short moment in time, the *otaku* seemed to represent all of the concerns about Japanese society: social fragmentation, media addiction, and the loss of bonds. Their individualism appeared to amount to an extreme degree of isolation and a radical loss of realism or empathy. In his “*otaku* theory,” Ōsawa Masachi observes:

The *otaku* seclude themselves within the communication network of the intrinsic other. [...] This secluded community loses the relationship with the transcendental other, as its members are always drawn and attracted only to members of the same community. [...] Many *otaku* build up relationships in the same way as the *shōnen ai* and *yaoi* fan groups indulge in these manga genres and merge with their idols. (Ōsawa 1995: 267–268)

Nonetheless, in the age of the Internet, the *otaku* culture has gained momentum and recruited fans even outside Japan. The *otaku* created a digital biotope for their visual communication, inviting fans around the world to join their insiders’ club and enjoy their imaginary world of manga, anime, and video games. With the decay of all great narratives of modernity, the *otaku* were suddenly at the forefront of the postmodern subcultures (Azuma 2009: 73). During this process, their strictly negative image steadily improved. Almost becoming idols for kids and consumers around the globe, the formerly inept *otaku* emerged as vanguards, proudly celebrating their timely status. These new *otaku* overcame their sense of isolation precisely by using their digital network and suddenly appeared as cool and independent consumers indulging in their particular interests. The *otaku* image was successfully reversed and, according to Azuma (2009: 4), “a certain generation of *otaku* have come to use the term in a highly positive light.”

The *otaku*-bashing in the Japanese press came to an end, after these disenfranchised groups went public on a global scale. Azuma (2009: 13) states that the domestication of American animation in Japan and the effective use of its technologies were a prerequisite of the global *otaku* culture. This postmodern culture is entirely new, highly experimental, and has no relationship with pre-modern or even post-war Japan. Sharon Kinsella (1998: 306, 314) links the positive image of the *otaku* industry to the success of the Comiket and to the new manga genres *rorikon* and *yaoi*, which are mainly designed to mock, parody, and ridicule mainstream manga heroes. With these visual and narrative innovations, the younger generation expresses its rejection of outdated gender roles.

It was therefore logical that this new and positive *otaku* culture of Japan would give birth to an *otaku* hero on an Internet blog in March 2004, which was then quickly echoed by the visual media and transcribed into a manga, a

TV serial, and a live action film. The story of *Densha otoko* ('The Train Man'), who overcame his shyness to protect a young girl and *parasaito shinguru* ('parasite single') from the harassment of a drunken *sararīman*, quickly spread around the globe and even secured the anonymous hero a page in Wikipedia (Mitsuishi 2008: 101). In this plot, the typical Japanese company employee suddenly appeared as an evil perpetrator, whereas the *otaku* made his way out of isolation, eventually using advice and encouragement offered online by virtual friends to establish a stable relationship with the girl he saved. This time, with the help of the media, the *otaku*'s identity had finally changed from psychopath and murderer to life saver and everyday hero. In this role the anonymous train man won over the minds of readers and viewers worldwide.

As psychoanalyst Ian Parker (2008: 64) contends: "[T]he term 'otaku' as such has been rehabilitated because of the huge niche market it represents, and the negative aspects have been displaced onto young men who withdraw from society and lock themselves in their rooms." In other words, the baton of social threat has been passed on by the *otaku* to the *hikikomori*. In either case, it is the gradual but radical change of life and communication styles which is undermining the traditional Japanese value system. This (ex)change of values can be empirically traced in the thinking of both Japanese and Western *furītā*.

3 *Furītā* and NEET: a rumble in the value system

Since economic growth has faltered in post-industrial societies, a new type of worker, or working class, has emerged. This is the so-called temp without a fixed contract, without permanent employment, without social insurance, and without welfare benefits. In fact, along with the public debts, temporary contracts excluding this group from bonuses, promotion, and social security have been growing in all industrial countries over the last decade. In Japan, this new group, or minority, exists in sharp contrast to the former ideal of the company man (*kaisha ningen*), his lifetime employment (*shūshin koyōsei*), and his guaranteed promotion by age (*nenkō joretsu*).

The Japanese *furītā* was born after the first "lost decade" (*ushinawareta jūnen*) of the 1990s and with the turn of the century, when economic recovery was not yet in sight. This new Japanese word, combining the English adjective "free" and the German noun *Arbeiter* ('worker'), coined by the mass media in the late 1980s, is far more than a linguistic creation. In normative and groupist Japan, the *furītā*'s position, attitude, and lifestyle are threatening and undermining the traditional world of labor as well as the materialistic value system

of consumer society. Today, officially about 1.8 million *furitā* between 15 and 34 years are surviving in Japan, 60 percent of whom are female (Cabinet Office 2011a: 33; Tarōmaru and Kameyama 2006: 5). In contrast to the young men, who often seem frustrated without a permanent post, young women tend to emphasize their personal motivation and interest for a special kind of work. As Murakami Akane (2006: 90–92) points out, this gender order within the *furitā* faction reinforces the traditional Japanese role expectations of breadwinner and housewife, even in this marginal section of the labor market.

Three types of *furitā* have been distinguished: the “moratorium-type,” the “dreamer,” and the “no alternative-type” (distinctions designed in 2000 by *Nihon rōdō kenkyū kikō*; see Kobayashi 2006: 99). They all share a most precarious situation, receiving only a third of the salary of a regular employee (*seishain*). Along with these new forms of exploitation, however, there is also an important change of mentality taking place around the world. For an intercultural comparison, Carola Hommerich (2008: 485) interviewed *furitā* in Germany and Japan. Some of them saw their current lifestyle as “an unavoidable step on the way to the realisation of their dream job [...]. Others had voluntarily chosen to live as *furitā* in order to be able to dispose of their time freely and not to be subjected to predetermined lines of conduct.” Although the economic position of the *furitā* is weak, self-realization is at the core of their expectations. This corresponds to a general change, or Westernization, of the Japanese value system over the last two decades.

Today, individual independence and qualification, lack of pressure, and overcoming job commitments are of growing importance and are sometimes even surpassing Western standards and ideals. Hommerich (2008: 497) concludes that in both Japan and Germany, the “precarious post-materialist” is being established as a new value-type. Rather individualistic values are being combined with a yearning for financial security – and therefore the level of dissatisfaction and frustration will remain high and even undermine social cohesion. The growing awareness of these poor working conditions is reflected in the stunning success of the novel *Kanikōsen* (‘The Crab Canning Ship’), written by Marxist activist Kobayashi Takiji in 1929, and conquering the top rank of the Japanese bestseller list in 2008 (Kubota 2008). Variety East Press has published a manga version in 2007, and the black-and-white film version of 1953, directed by Yamamura Sō, was remade in color in 2009 by Tanaka Hiroyuki.

Like the *furitā* (who does at least work sometimes, and now has a pop culture hero to look up to), his twin, the NEET, is exposed to social suspicion and prejudice. He can easily be seen as a parasite, and in contrast to the positive connotation of the word “free” which the *furitā* enjoys, the NEET’s negativity is triggered by his own definition. About 630,000 Japanese between 15 and

34 years are NEET (Cabinet Office 2011a: 33). Sociologist Kosugi Reiko has defined five different types: the “hedonist,” the “isolated,” the “paralysed,” the “insecure,” and the “patient” (Kosugi 2004: 7; Werth 2008: 275–277). Given that these NEET only represent two percent of their age group and considering their rather passive or reactive attitude, they do not pose a direct threat to society. As in the case of the *otaku* murderer and later the discussion on *enjo kōsai* (‘compensated dating’) in Japan, the mass media with their need for scandal tend to overemphasize the nature of the phenomenon (Werth 2008: 285, 288).

However, the growth of precarious employment does produce risks and severe tensions in the long run. As Genda Yūji points out in his study on job insecurity in Japan, it even provokes a clash of generations. The younger employees are exploited to secure the position of those above 45 years of age. Genda speaks of a “displacement or vesting effect, [...] a situation in which middle-aged and older workers continue to occupy positions they received in the past, thereby stealing jobs that by right young workers ought to be doing” (Genda 2005: 35, 33; Werth 2008: 273). Especially in Japan, the success of careers is highly dependent on the economic climate at the time of graduation and first employment (*shūshoku*). Since the Japanese baby-boomers, born 1947–49, are now reaching their retirement age and must be replaced, the number of NEET can still be kept on a stable level. However, after two “lost decades,” the *otaku*, the *parasaito*, the *furitā*, and the NEET combined exacerbate social anxieties and fragmentation. For this process of disintegration, the withdrawal syndrome of the *hikikomori* is the most sinister expression.

4 Theories of *hikikomori*: social withdrawal as self-understanding

The noun *hikikomori* is composed of the verbs *hiku* (‘to pull’) and *komoru* (‘to retire’). Depending on its categorization as either a mere deviance or a psychopathology, it can be translated as ‘withdrawal’ or ‘acute social withdrawal syndrome’. *Hikikomori* are normally defined as NEETs, without economic status, who encapsulate themselves at home for at least six months and who have no social contact outside their immediate family. Most *hikikomori* are teenagers or twens and “shut in” for a few years, but the seclusion can even last a decade or longer. The latest representative survey, conducted in February 2011 and based on 3,300 participants, counts 240,000 so-called *kyōgi no* (‘hard core’) *hikikomori*, who never leave their room and don’t even talk to family members, plus 460,000 *jun* (‘soft’) *hikikomori*, who go out just only occasionally for their

own distraction. One in three is female. They suffer from maladjustment at work, mental illness, bullying (*ijime*) at school (which often leads to school refusal, *futōkō*), estrangement or separation from a partner, and a majority of two thirds does not even consider meeting with a doctor or a counsellor (Cabinet Office 2011a: 34–36). As their number steadily increases, the national health system and communities are taking countermeasures, sending out social workers or even “rental siblings/sisters” for a rudimentary social reintegration. There is also a potential of 1.6 million *hikikomori shinwagun* (*‘hikikomori-philés’*) showing strong reclusive tendencies. In this group, two thirds are female (Cabinet Office 2011b: 13).

Acute social withdrawal must be regarded as a psycho-social disorder, not a clinical illness (Wong 2009: 343). Medical doctor and consultant Saitō Tamaki (1998: 101–106) also emphasizes this dimension of “*shakaiteki*” (social) *hikikomori* and detaches it from clinical psychology. The confused and disturbed communication between the individual and his family is unable to alleviate or solve his conflict and therefore triggers coercions of conscience, neuroses, or feelings of inferiority and shame, which eventually sets up a vicious circle. Carla Ricci (2010: 54, 72, 115) sees the *hikikomori*, especially only children and eldest sons, exposed to authoritarian motherly expectations, which are further intensified, or exacerbated, by the groupism in the Japanese *kaisha* (*‘company’*). Michael Zielenziger (2007: 27) points out the extent to which the *hikikomori* feel under constant observation from neighbors and acquaintances, and how they are concerned with their appearance within their environment (*seken-tei*). Andy Furlong (2008: 310) argues that the “acceptance of the medicalised view of the phenomenon has helped blind policy makers to the impact of broader structures, especially education and labour market policies.”

As an acute, radical, and long-lasting withdrawal, the *hikikomori* phenomenon seems to fit into Japanese traditions, mentalities, and communication styles. With national isolation (*sakoku*) being the paradigm of Tokugawa Japan for more than two centuries until its re-opening (*kaikoku*) in the 1860s, the clear distinction between Japanese and Western culture, insiders (*uchi*) and outsiders (*soto*), real opinion (*honne*) and formal utterance (*tatemae*), has survived into our modern times. While cases of acute social withdrawal also occur in the West, the Japaneseness of *hikikomori* is clearly reflected in the standard reaction to the person’s withdrawal and his/her social and medical treatment. As Amy Borovoy (2008: 555) observes, guidelines for treatment often recommend accepting the deviant as they are, and there is a “general resistance among clinicians, parents, social workers and school teachers to pathologise youth problems,” as well as a reluctance to treat individuals in a different or unequal manner, even in cases where the differences are all too obvious. Also,

the maternal structure of the Japanese middle-class family tends to support prolonged dependence of children and it is normal and expected that they live with their parents until marriage. Retreat and withdrawal are therefore closer to the norm and more tolerable than in the West. Borovoy (2008: 566) continues: “The line between childhood and adulthood, or between dependence and independence, is not clearly drawn.”

While nurturing mothers and the normative conformity of children living with their parents help compensate for social ineptness, hide isolation, and smooth over unemployment, the mass media with their need for scandal could not ignore or downplay the social trend. Ishikawa Ryōko (2007: 45) has shown how the *hikikomori* attracted the attention of the Japanese print media, particularly between 2000 and 2004. Certainly, their initial image was negative. The media introduced the *hikikomori* as deviant and selfish, or even as parasites. Clearly overstressing or trespassing traditional norms, the *hikikomori* challenged and frightened Japanese society. As the *otaku* minority came under serious suspicion following the Miyazaki murders in 1989, the *hikikomori* phenomenon, too, has been linked to the brutal Kobe murders in 1995, committed by a teenager, and to other felonies (Furlong 2008: 313). Recently, even *The Telegraph* has blown this horn and exacerbated feelings of *angst* and threat caused by the “recluses” in Japan (Ryall 2008).

However, apart from the ritual condemnation of allegedly parasitical behavior, the media and society have learned to regard the emergence of *hikikomori* as a process, which corresponds to the painful transition of Japanese economy and society to a post-industrial structure. Consequently, Ishikawa Ryōko (2007: 44–71) has subdivided it into four phases: (i) social lethargy and apathy as observed in the 1980s, which can be traced back to Okonogi Keigo’s definition of the “moratorium people” in 1977; (ii) the rise in number of school refusals and the discovery and definition of their psychological conflict as *hikikomori* by Tomita Fujiya in 1995; (iii) the rising awareness of *hikikomori* as a new psycho-social issue, reflected in the growing media attention since 2000; and finally (iv) the emergence of the NEET in 2004, who is neither a *furitā* or temp nor unemployed, and who is often criticized as a *parasite* and feels the moral pressure to rejoin the workforce.

As even a normal Japanese member of the workforce feels pressure and compulsion, these terms are probably not precise when used in this context. In fact, the inner conflict and stress is much more complex in the case of *hikikomori*. Saitō Tamaki (1998: 208; also Wong 2009: 338) points out that the large majority of the *hikikomori* are male, obviously because expectations toward women are much lower and they are accorded a life at home, before and after marriage. In contrast, young men are caught in a paradox, which he calls the

“denial of castration” (*kyosei hinin*): They are expected to adapt to social constraints, but this adaptation or submission (or *amae*) is not regarded as what it is. In fact, *hikikomori* have a lot in common with Japanese children who dare to perform above the average, as they do not share the common value system and are therefore labelled as individualistic and selfish: “Many young *hikikomori* curse the ‘illusion of equality,’ which was imposed onto them at school. It is easy to recognise the trace of their resistance against the ‘denial of castration’” (Saitō 1998: 210).

In his book on media addiction, psychoanalyst Okonogi Keigo (2000: 258, 264) has discovered almost the same paradoxical conflict in the case of female *hikikomori*. He traces it back to the conflict between traditional postwar mothers and their daughters, raised in a climate of gender equality and with high career expectations. However: If a young woman’s career fails, she has disappointed her mother, and if she succeeds, her mother will be concerned about her marriage and motherhood. The “superwoman syndrome,” imported from the West, and the “I-haven’t-become-a-superwoman syndrome,” are actually two sides of the same coin. This dilemma often amounts to separation or divorce and to female *hikikomori*: typically a “twin-like” (*ichiransei*) relationship between mother and daughter, or a life at home as a parasite single.

Looking at young women, Okonogi uses the term *hikikomori* widely without any pathological connotation. In contrast, Ishikawa Ryōko (2007: 71) describes very clearly the escalation from school refusal to *hikikomori* and NEET, which is reflected in the respective concepts for healing and rehabilitation. While initially the target was the solution of the inner (*naimenteki*) conflict or the regaining of an emotional balance, the focus today is on the return to school, on social and economic reintegration. However, this utterly external (*gaimenteki*) view thwarts empathy and understanding. Following Western theories of the self, she interprets *hikikomori* not as a static condition of illness, but rather as a long-term and radical process of self-seeking (Ishikawa 2007: 151–152). This process destroys and erases the entire system of meanings (*imitaikei*) and values (*kachikan*) that used to constitute the norms of life and the self, and thoroughly reassembles these notions. As the *hikikomori* keeps questioning him/herself, return to a normative – and meaningless – social life and work in pursuit of a career is out of the question. Instead, *hikikomori* follow a trial-and-error-strategy of part-time jobs and short-term relationships, slowly groping for their self and their personal place in society (Ishikawa 2007: 192).

Together with the *furitā*, the *hikikomori* are clearly undermining outdated meanings, values, and images. Japanese society, unable to ignore this subtle attack, is developing strategies to deal with the *hikikomori* phenomenon. While treatment of *hikikomori* is increasingly medicalized, psychotherapy, family

counselling, and support are now also provided by the state. In addition, charity and other groups have developed what Victor Wong (2009: 344) calls the “*hikikomori* industry.” It includes books, Web sites, support groups, and alternative therapies. Communities have begun providing *rentaru onēsan* (‘rental sisters’), whose role is to attempt to befriend *hikikomori* in order to persuade them to leave the house, spend nights in dormitories, or even go on pilgrimages and walking holidays. As the *hikikomori* are becoming more sociable, their image has gradually improved. Like the *otaku*, they have even become eligible for a role in popular culture narratives: The manga *Welcome to the NHK* and *Mēteru no kimochi* invite their readers to share their lives and destinies.

5 The *hikikomori*’s career: the NEET learns to struggle in *Welcome to the NHK*

The *shōnen* manga *Welcome to the NHK* is based on a semi-autobiographical novel (2002) by Takimoto Tatsuhiko, born in 1978. Takimoto collaborated with visual artist Oiwa Kenji on the manga, which ran as a series in *Shōnen Ace* from 2004 to 2007 and as an animated television series in 2006. From 2006 to 2008, American publisher Tokyopop released all eight volumes in English. Marketed as the “Ultimate Non-Stop Hikikomori Action Comic!” it is a darkly humorous social commentary, focusing on the struggles of 22-year-old anti-hero Satō Tatsuhiro, a school drop-out who has spent four years trying to survive as a *hikikomori* in a tiny apartment in Tokyo. His parents have recently cut off his funding, and he openly refers to himself as a parasite, and as “a prime example of Japan’s social problems” (2008: vol. 1: 7–8). Satō is extremely cynical, but also naïve, repeatedly stating that he wants to die (usually when he is ashamed or embarrassed) and even attempting both an individual and group suicide – only to run away at the very last moment (2002: vol. 2: 173, vol. 4: 174).

Nakahara Misaki, a 17-year-old girl, provides an incentive for Satō to recover. As a member of the “NHK” (the letters suggest the public broadcaster NHK, however in this case refer to *Nihon Hikikomori Kyōkai*, the fictive Japanese *Hikikomori* Association), she is determined to rehabilitate him. Calling him Satō-kun, implying familiarity and also that he is childlike, she plays the role of the nurturing mother. Misaki insists that she has the cure for *hikikomori* and that she wants to adopt Satō as a project, although in reality she is also motivated by her attraction to him. He cannot recognize this or understand Misaki’s interest in him. Marc Hairston (2010: 316) argues that Misaki has problems of

her own, and focuses on Satō as a distraction from these, “believing if she can cure him it will improve her own low self-esteem.”

Indeed, Misaki does seem to find her life task (*ikigai*) in helping Satō. She persuades him to sign a “Contract Regarding Cure of *Hikikomori* and All Things Related” and they begin regular counselling sessions. As Hairston (2010: 320) observes: “Her counselling sessions are little more than lectures and inspirational aphorisms, but she provides him with the human contact he needs to come out of his shell.” One session is particularly humorous, and significant. Misaki attempts to psychoanalyze Satō’s dreams, and Satō, offended by her condescending attitude, invents dreams of snakes, swords, and pistols in order to embarrass her. Misaki retaliates by commenting on his lack of experience with women (2008: vol. 1: 118). This incident illustrates their unorthodox, but complementary relationship, which always has a sexual undertone and is at times reminiscent of the *amae* between mother and son. When Satō stops seeing Misaki, he returns fully to the *hikikomori* lifestyle, and readers are shown a full page picture of his room (“I’ve been a complete *hikikomori*,” 2008: vol. 1: 144).

Satō’s male friend Yamazaki Kaoru is a stereotypical *otaku*, a slight, geekish character, whose apartment is filled with images of girls and whose desires center on “a sexy maid robot” (2008: vol. 1: 34). Hairston argues that Yamazaki’s function in the text is to make fun of *otaku* culture, and this becomes particularly evident when the pair begin to design a *hentai erogēmu* (‘pervert erotic video game’), which draws attention to the ridiculous nature of the genre. Researching the game (which mainly involves looking at pictures of underage girls on the Internet) causes Satō to become addicted to these *rorikon* images, caricaturing another aspect of Japanese pop culture: “A *hikikomori* with a Lolita complex (a weakness for very young girls)? It can’t get any worse than that! [...] Lolicons are not even human!” (2008: vol. 1: 64). The nature of his amusing addiction raises questions about permissive Japanese attitudes to sex, and ridicules assumptions of the dangers of the Internet. Satō’s battle temporarily switches from *hikikomori* to his Lolita complex. In a scene featuring a complex interplay of voyeurism he asks Yamazaki to photograph him taking photos of schoolgirls to allow him to view and judge his own behavior, to see how disgusting he is. When Misaki catches him, his shame and embarrassment are inscribed vividly in his blushing face. This chapter also provides an opportunity for Satō to mention his old hopes and dreams: “When I was younger, I wanted to become a doctor and help people. That was always my dream. Now look at me! A *hikikomori* and a Lolicon [...] All I’d wanted was to live a clean and decent life” (2008: vol. 1: 68).

This episode implies that *hikikomori* are not necessarily selfish and lacking in ambition, and Satō, with his self-awareness and ambition to help others, is not depicted as a bad person. He is simply weak and irresponsible, stealing food from Yamazaki and spending money borrowed from a loan shark on *dō-jinshi* ('fanzines') and erotic anime. Satō is a loser with low self-esteem, he smokes, drinks, and takes legal mail-order drugs as a form of escapism. Therefore he also has a vivid imagination, and engages in seemingly uncontrollable fantasies about sexual situations. But the author's use of humor and empathy with his hero turn his *hikikomori* into an adventurous, almost positive experience, inviting the reader to sympathize. Satō's drug use amounts to hilarious hallucinations and revealing suspicions: The electrical appliances in his apartment come to life and explain to him that the broadcaster NHK is part of a plot to turn young Japanese into *hikikomori*, and that by broadcasting anime it "planted the seed of *otakuness* in so many of its viewers! They become socially awkward and ultimately ... a *hikikomori* is born!" (2008: vol. 1: 21).

Illustrator Oiwa Kenji's sinister visual style supports this view, depicting Satō's pale face and the piles of junk in his messy room on several occasions (2008: vol. 1: 144). This dynamic approach, sustained in the anime version, completely differs from the static one-shot perspective in Yamamoto Naoki's manga *Terebi bakari miteru to baka ni naru* ('Watching TV All The Time Makes You Stupid', 2000). Yet the effect on the reader is almost the same, making us gaze fixedly into the *hikikomori*'s private room from a hidden camera. This reflects the genuine public curiosity about the *hikikomori*'s space, and there are even web sites and blogs that feature this genre of photographs.

Welcome to the NHK is postmodern in tone, featuring a mix of sophisticated humor and childish gags that also function as social satire. As anti-hero Satō is commuting between NEET, *hikikomori*, and *furitā*, he is also a good object character for young males to identify with. In fact, his withdrawal prompts a number of entertaining adventures, mostly with others, and insights into his personal profile. On several occasions Satō decides to return to work as a part-time employee, "graduating from being a *hikikomori*" and "well aware of the poorly paying job" (2008: vol. 1: 23, vol. 8: 117). Author Takimoto soberly expresses regret and understanding for the labor situation of the young working poor in Japan, and the manga's entire artwork is designed to amplify Satō's extreme depressions and heightened emotional states, painstakingly depicting his excitement, embarrassment, and hallucinations. Precisely because all his plans fail – the media business with the *hentai erogēmu*, his intimate relationship, and even his suicide – he gathers sympathies as a dropout and an anti-hero, who never gives up. Satō makes the readers laugh about norms and expectations, and not despite, but rather because of his bad conscience as a

NEET, a parasite, and a *hikikomori*, he gains our confidence. This same turn of the tide from negative to positive can be observed in the manga *Mēteru no kimochi*.

6 The *hikikomori*'s autopsy: from victim to victory in *Mēteru no kimochi*

With the turn of the millennium, a significant number of female “shut-in” characters have drawn attention in fictional narratives in Japan, starting with Yamamoto Naoki's erotic one-shot manga *Terebi bakari miteru to baka ni naru* about a *hikikomori* who is sexually exploited and eventually commits suicide. Also widely known are the shy high-school girls Komori Kiri from Kumeta Kōji's manga *Sayonara zetsubō sensei* (‘Goodbye, Mr. Despair’, 2005) and Kuroki Tomoko from Tanigawa Nico's manga *Watashiga motenai nowa dō kangaetemo omaera ga warui* (‘No matter how I look at it, it's you guys' fault I'm not attractive’, 2012). Judging from their interactions and intentions, they are just socially inept “loners” in puberty, like their male counterpart Sakurada Jun in Peach-Pit's manga *Rozen Maiden* (2008), and are not radical enough to deserve the badge of a *hikikomori*.

In order to seriously challenge the social normativity of Japan, the manga world has to choose a male character. Consequently the three-volume *seinen* manga *Mēteru no kimochi*, first published in *Weekly Young Jump* from 2006 to 2007, centers on the life of 30-year-old *hikikomori* Koizumi Shintarō. The author Oku Hiroya, born in 1967, is most famous for his violent *Gantz* series, where, following their deaths, individuals are abducted to hunt down bizarre aliens. *Mēteru no kimochi* is a strange title and, hinting at the female character Maetel from Matsumoto Leiji's manga *Galaxy Express 999* (1977), it can roughly be translated as “motherly feelings.” Compared to *Welcome to the NHK*, *Mēteru no kimochi* is surprisingly sober and realistic in tone and includes some genuinely tragic moments. As one reader explains online: “This is a completely new *hikikomori* love comedy. [...] The pictures are beautiful and the heroine is extremely cute. This can be called a masterpiece both for *hikikomori* and for more serious people who say they can't understand *hikikomori*.”¹

On the first page Shintarō introduces himself as (at least) an *otaku* in his own room: “I love the Internet. I love *shōnen* manga” (2007: vol. 1: 1). But in

1 <http://www.amazon.co.jp/product-reviews/4088771966/> (accessed 12 September 2013).

fact, he has been *hikikomori* for 15 years. Being a former child prodigy, he confirms Saitō Tamaki's observation that *hikikomori* have a lot in common with individualistic children in Japan. Shintarō's father Yasujirō, 57 years old, supplies him with manga and food and communicates with him through his bedroom door. The image of them talking in this way is shown many times before the reader finally catches a glimpse of Shintarō's face. Yasujirō is obviously deeply saddened by his son's withdrawal, and frequently tries to engage him in conversation about manga, his main interest, or even girls. However, Shintarō typically responds with verbal abuse, indirectly blaming him for his mother's death, which triggered his encapsulation.

Oku clearly expresses the problems that *hikikomori* cause within the family. They are unable and unwilling to talk face-to-face, so written notes are passed under the door or, sometimes, electronically. Shintarō argues that his lifestyle is a sign of his intelligence, as he is still fed and looked after, without having to work or even leave his room: "You're the one that brought me into this world, so you should be the one that has to feed me" (2007: vol. 1: 11). Father Yasujirō has tried everything to help his son, including counselling and volunteers. Yet – as Okonogi Keigo explains in regard to Japanese mothers of the same age – he hasn't changed *himself*, and clearly represents traditional values and the "job for life" generation. This is apparent when he says to his son: "For someone older than 30 to be reading young boy comics happily [...] What do you think about that?" (2007: vol. 1: 9). He then states that 30 is an age to have children and a home, and that all Japanese citizens are required to work. His brother, Shintarō's uncle, exhibits even less understanding, arguing that he would have dragged him out of his room by force.

Therapeutic change enters the family with Yasujirō's cancer and a subsequent female intervention. A young, attractive office lady named Yoshinaga Haruka marries him, partly because he resembles her dead father and she wishes to comfort him before his death, and partly because she feels challenged by Shintarō's condition. Following Yasujirō's death during their honeymoon, Haruka reads his diaries and, heartbroken by the extent of his inability to help Shintarō, she is even more determined to intervene. She moves in and starts to care for Shintarō, introducing herself as "Mom," before opening his bedroom door and revealing him to the reader, in close up on a full-page slide. The narrator states: "The door has opened, the strange 'parent-and-child' living together has started!" (2007: vol. 1: 53–54).

From this point on, Haruka and Shintarō openly assume their roles as mother and son. Haruka nurtures and spoils him, makes food and cleans up. She encourages Shintarō to write down meal requests, and he chooses children's favorites such as curry rice and hamburgers. She also invents the idea

of a “trade diary” as a method of communication. Shintarō’s reaction reiterates his lack of social skills. He uses the diary to ask her what type of man she likes, and her bra size. She replies that she likes men like his father, and also scolds in a written note: “Shintarō-san, to sexually harass your mother is abnormal and perverted!” (2007: vol. 1: 79).

Their relationship is as ambivalent as that between Satō and Misaki in *Welcome to the NHK*. Shintarō is attracted to Haruka, and it is this attraction which prompts him to attempt recovery. He constantly wonders if she likes him, and wishes that they lived together like newlyweds. Shintarō also fantasizes and even kisses Haruka when she is sleeping, but he cannot overcome his nerves in order to reveal his true feelings. He is painfully aware of his own ineptitude and knows that his actions are abnormal. Visually these anxieties and struggles are apparent on every page, from his facial expressions, his long hair, his neglected clothes, and his body language. Oku frequently omits dialogue and also juxtaposes his characters on double pages (2007: vol. 1: 56–59, 99, 140–141, 160–161). His simple aesthetic style places emphasis on the interiority of facial expressions, as well as important bodily details such as Shintarō’s foot stepping over the threshold after years of inclusion (2007: vol. 1: 81), and later his shave and haircut (2007: vol. 1: 154–157). With these well-conceived perspectives the manga conveys ideas of patience and slow recovery, taking one step at a time.

Shintarō initiates a most depressing experience when he cuts his hair, dresses and washes, apparently preparing to impress Haruka. He is handsome, but ironically, thinking of the trade diary, he shaves his head to resemble his bald father. When Haruka is unable to disguise her surprise and amusement, and laughs at him, his extreme and painful embarrassment causes him to regress to complete isolation. This episode discourages Haruka, as does a telephone call from a *hikikomori* counsellor, who tells her that she is ignorant, and is probably worsening Shintarō’s condition. The counsellor is shown in a harsh light, as part of the *hikikomori* industry, which is emphasized when he insists that an outstanding bill be paid even when informed of Yasujirō’s death. When Haruka decides to abandon her plans and leaves, Shintarō calls after her to return, and her hope for progress is renewed. Very slowly, Shintarō’s psychological condition and his verbal communication skills improve, and he is eventually able to recover. On the last pages we learn that, years later, he is successfully running a noodle shop. He has even raised a family of his own and is now able to help out other broken members of society. When he encounters and recognizes Haruka, he asks her to call him “Shin-chan” (‘little Shin’) and concludes: “Thank you, mother” (2007: vol. 3: 180).

7 Conclusion: Japanese transition from seclusion to individuality

Hikikomori is a relatively new pattern of social deviance, which reflects the exhaustion of traditional career patterns and gender roles in contemporary Japan. As the *otaku* are indulging in media addiction and the *furitā* attack the Japanese promotion-by-age politics, the NEET and the *hikikomori* represent an even more radical questioning of traditional values. The two manga examined here fit into Ishikawa Ryōko's third and fourth phase of the *hikikomori* phenomenon, which began in 2000 and 2004, respectively. As fictional characters, both Tatsuhiko and Junichirō contribute to the new awareness of the psycho-social issues in the Japanese society. Like in real life, they find no direct way back to normal work and life. As young men, they are seen as parasites and feel moral pressure to make a living, but they continually dismiss these expectations, and instead choose a relationship with a motherly character. This alternative, non-consumerist lifestyle provides a vital space for them to thoroughly work on themselves.

While these manga openly reject the adapted masculinity of the *sararīman* and also criticize the conditions of temporary work, the cracks in the role of the nurturing mother and housewife are less obvious. Most female *furitā* will take on this role later anyway and therefore change rather than lose status. In both *hikikomori* manga, too, the young women are represented as kind-hearted and beautiful healers endlessly spoiling their patients. Although in reality every third *hikikomori* is female, the fictional narratives aiming at the social conflicts and distortions behind the phenomenon tend to build on male characters, who can then be nurtured and rescued by female siblings, carers, therapists, or nurses. However, on closer inspection, the manga heroines Misaki and Haruka do not simply take over the role of overprotective mothers either. Instead of paradoxically upholding traditional career expectations, they also undertake massive conflicts with their own mothers and openly act against their will.

Through these narratives, the tendency toward individualization and self-exploration in contemporary Japanese society can therefore be confirmed for both male and female gender roles. This strikes a chord with the findings of Ishikawa Satomi (2007: 24) in her interviews with Japanese youngsters in 1990s Tokyo, suggesting “a striking passion for self-knowledge, which was frequently referred to as *jibun sagashi* (self-seeking), *jiko shuchō* (self-assertion), *jiko jitsugen* (self-realisation), and *jiko hyōgen* (self-expression).” Using manga, anime, video games, and the Internet for their own ends, the *otaku*, *furitā*, NEET, and *hikikomori* have managed to attract attention, to gain understanding, and to

create a new and positive image of themselves. The manga *Welcome to the NHK* and *Mēteru no kimochi* depict *hikikomori* as a long-term process, or journey, of self-questioning and healing, and they also see in the withdrawal the chance of thorough re-definition. By allowing time, space, and the re-booting of an entirely informal communication style, the unequal couples in these recent *hikikomori* manga plead to overcome the ambivalence of parental care (*amae*) and (career) expectations, as outlined by Okonogi and Saitō, in favor of a stable, independent, and individual self. These manga replace the illusions of success by adaptation with a sense of humor and realism, emphasizing that the process of recovery will be painful and revealing, both for the individual *hikikomori* and for the Japanese nation.

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