

# アキバから、世界へ!

From Akiba to the World!

Striving to Become a Top Digital Content Hub

▶▶▶ <http://www.tjf.or.jp/takarabako/>



Four pages of *Takarabako* will be devoted to introducing and providing resources and information, mainly about the lives and culture of Japanese young people. Three pages will present ideas and teaching plans for using these materials in the classroom. In this issue we will take a look at Akihabara, which evolved from an electric parts retail district to an *otaku* mecca, and is now becoming a major hub of the IT industry.

## Basic Akiba Information



### What is Akiba?

Akiba is the nickname of Akihabara, the commercial area of approximately 500 meters square centered on Akihabara station (Chiyoda Ward, Tokyo) on the JR train line. There are roughly 600 shops of various sizes that carry household appliances, audio equipment, computers, and electronics parts, packed with customers from both

Japan and abroad. Recently, stores specializing in computer-game software and DVD's, as well as *anime*-related paraphernalia and character figurines targeting respective *mania* (enthusiasts) have been attracting attention.

JR Akihabara station is about five minutes by train from Tokyo Station on the Yamanote line.

### History

Electrical parts district → household appliance district → computer district  
→ *otaku* mecca → major IT industry hub

#### 1945-1954 (Showa Twenties)

□ The location of electrical parts wholesalers during the first decade following the end of World War II, Akihabara attracted retailers from various parts of the country with its low prices and easy accessibility by train. In the days when it became popular to build radios by hand at home and vacuum tubes were in high demand, street vendors selling radio parts gathered in Akihabara. With prohibition of open-air markets by the Allied Occupation in 1949, the vendors moved to spots under the train overpasses and in nearby buildings. This was the beginning of today's Akihabara.

#### 1955-1964 (Showa Thirties)

□ Black and white televisions, electric-powered refrigerators, and electric washing machines, the so-called three sacred treasures of modern convenience, became symbols of the comfortable life. The number of wholesalers and retailers of household appliances in Akihabara increased.

#### 1965-1974 (Showa Forties)

□ By 1970, 91.7 percent of Japanese households owned a black and white television set. Then color television was introduced, and the color television became one of the "new three sacred treasures," along with the air conditioner and automobile. The rapid economic growth period kicked off an era of mass production and mass consumption. As the needs of consumers diversified, household appliance stores in Akihabara grew bigger, and many new buildings were built.

#### 1975-1984 (Showa Fifties)

□ Japan's first "maikon" (personal computer) store opened in 1976, and the number of such stores steadily rose thereafter. Two oil crises (in 1993 and 1979) and the deterioration of the environment encouraged conservation and energy-saving. The label "Made in Japan" became a symbol of high-quality electric and electronics products, and tourists and businessmen from overseas began to shop

in Akihabara for Walkman portable stereos and household appliances to take home as gifts.

#### 1985-1989 (Showa Sixties)

□ Audio-visual equipment such as VCRs and CD players, as well as information-related household appliances including word processors and cordless telephones became a huge hit. With the burgeoning of the bubble economy, even expensive products sold quickly.

#### 1990-2005 (Heisei)

□ The appearance of the Windows computer set off the personal computer boom and stores specializing in personal computers (PCs) opened in Akihabara. In 1994, sales of PC-related products surpassed that of other household appliances, thus making Akihabara into a center of the PC retail market.

□ Mass retailers and discount stores carrying household appliances and computers opened in city centers like Shinjuku and Ikebukuro, and the suburbs. Akihabara lost its appeal as a unique electronics district where products were available for lower-than-market prices, and failed to keep customers.

□ There were many computer game fans among computer users, and these fans were also enthusiasts of the *anime* and *manga* related to these games. Although computer sales leveled off, sales of game software along with *anime* and *manga* goods continued going strong, and from around 1997, the number of stores carrying *manga*, fanzines, *anime* paraphernalia, figurines, and DVD software increased. Because of the many large-scale stores with wide selections of products and smaller stores carrying rare products with appeal to hobbyists, many *otaku* began to gather in Akihabara. Signs and posters depicting game and *anime* characters were found all over the area. Akihabara became an *otaku* hub.

□ With the redevelopment of the JR Akihabara station area, there is great hope that Akihabara will become a major hub of the IT industry, serving as a source of cutting edge technology and Japanese software to the rest of the world.

Source: Akihabara Electrical Town Organization Website (<http://www.akiba.or.jp/>)

# Akiba Map

## A. Main Street Area

Large-scale stores selling household appliances and computers, game software and DVD's, and *manga*- and *anime*-related goods line both sides of the main street in Akiba. On Sundays and holidays, the road is closed off to vehicles.



Main Street



PC store



Electronic parts on display

## B. Electronics District Area

The area just outside the JR Akihabara Station Denkigai (Electronics District) Exit. Underneath the overpass are stores selling electronic parts reminiscent of the stores in the immediate postwar era. There are also many duty-free shops catering to tourists from overseas. Of the shops in the Radio Kaikan building, which has been around for a long time, the majority once sold electric parts. With the passing of time, most stores carried household appliances and computers, and now, stores specializing in figurines and fanzines occupy most of the building.



Duty-free shop

# Akiba, the Otaku Mecca

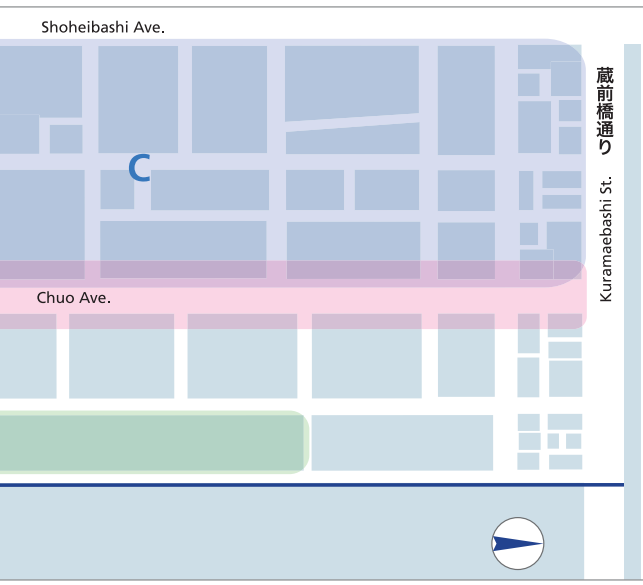
## Otaku [オタク]

Akihabara today is called Otaku Town. But what exactly is *otaku*? Its original usage is as a slightly honorific word used to address someone with whom one is not very familiar. In the early 1980s, the custom among *anime* and science fiction buffs of calling each other "otaku," morphed into a term referring to passionate fans of *anime*, live-action "special effects" TV dramas, *manga*, and/or computer games. Ever since this term was appropriated for this usage, there has been a biased perception of *otaku* as being introverted, gloomy, lacking in sociability, and exhibiting poor taste in clothes.

Today, however, *anime* and *manga* have become firmly estab-

lished as widely popular genres especially among youth, and it is difficult to come up with a typical *otaku* image. For example, at Comic Market (known also as *Comike*, a *manga* fanzine exhibition and sale held in Tokyo twice a year), approximately 35,000 amateur groups sell their work, and about 500,000 visitors attend the event during the three-day period. Both male and female *otaku* gather at *Comike* from all over Japan, but many participants appear to enjoy socializing with each other, and their fashion tastes are diverse.

Many of the Japanese *anime* and *manga* creators whose works are widely known around the world today are so-called *otaku*.



### C. Back Street Area

Small stores selling computer peripherals and parts, game software, and *manga* and *anime* fanzines crowd this area, a maze of buildings and alleyways. There are also many restaurants.



Shop selling computer peripherals



The road is closed off to vehicles, creating a "pedestrian paradise."

### D. Redevelopment Area

Among the new additions to the area are Akihabara Crossfield, which is striving to become a major hub of Japan's IT industry, the Tsukuba Express train line, which opened for service in August 2005, the newly opened Central Exit of JR Akihabara station, and the household appliance retailer, Yodobashi Camera, which opened in September 2005.



Radio Kaikan



Tsukuba Express entrance



Yodobashi Camera

For the very reason that they are *otaku*, or in other words, consumers with a critical eye, they are able to understand and express precisely what other consumers seek. It could be said that *otaku* are people who can become completely absorbed in particular things or ideas.



Comike



Figurines and dolls

## Akiba-kei [アキバ系]

*Otaku* who flock to Akihabara in search of electronic parts, computer parts, *anime* and *manga* fanzines, game software, and *aidoru* photo collections are known as “Akiba-kei (Akihabara-type *otaku*).”

In June 2005, the movie *Densha otoko* (Train Man) about an *Akiba-kei* character became a huge hit. Over one million people saw the movie. The book, *Densha otoko* (Shinchosha, October 2004), on which the movie was based, is a love story originating in bbs messages on the Internet, and has sold over one million copies. The book was also made into a television series aired July to September 2005, which showed viewer ratings of 20 percent, the highest of any television serial dramas aired during that three-month period. The show popularized an expression frequently used on Internet bbs sites, through scenes in which the characters scream “kitaaaa” (I’ve got it!) when they are moved or excited.



Anime-related goods store

キタ——(°▽°)——!!

(°▽°) is a smiley emphasizing the meaning of “Kitaa!”

## The Future of Akiba

### Akihabara Redevelopment

The Tokyo Metropolitan Government sold the former site of the Kanda Produce Market (approximately 16,000 square meters) located next to JR Akihabara station to private contractors for redevelopment, and now Akihabara is being transformed from an electronics district into a major hub of the IT industry. The redevelopment area is called “Akihabara Crossfield,”\* comprised of two high-rise buildings, Akihabara Daibiru (completed March 2005), a base for industry-university ties



New buildings

ups and information networks, and Akihabara UDX (to be completed in March 2006), equipped with convention halls and event space. The Daibiru offers space to universities and corporations. In addition, in April 2005, Digital Hollywood (Tokyo) opened the University of Digital Content, the first university established by a company. This university strives to nurture contents creators such as designers, producers, engineers, and game creators.

### Data

According to research conducted by Nomura Research Institute, the “*otaku* population (Japanese’s *mania* consumer population)” is defined as consumers who partake in consumption behavior dictated by their own individualistic values in placing priority on money and time. The study showed that in the five areas of comics, *anime*, games, *aidoru* (“idol” TV personalities), and PC assembly, they account for a market of approximately 290 billion yen. Furthermore, the study found that this population exerts a strong influence on the rest of society due to their high Internet usage and generation of information. They were also found to forge groups that span related fields. The *otaku* are an enthusiastic consumer population, and are said to be valuable driving force behind the next generation of technological innovations.

### Estimated Market of *Otaku* Population

Field	Population (thousand)	Market size (billion yen)	Major indices used
Anime <sup>*1</sup>	200	20	DVD sales per title
Aidoru <sup>*2</sup>	800	60	Size of concert audiences, sales of first-release CD’s
Comics <sup>*3</sup>	1,000	100	Number of participants in spot sales of fanzines, magazine subscriptions rate
Games <sup>*4</sup>	800	78	Number of hours spent playing games, circulation of magazines
PC Assembly <sup>*5</sup>	50	32	Sales at PC parts shops in Akihabara, circulation of magazines
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,850</b>	<b>290</b>	

\*1 *Anime* enthusiasts who spend their time watching *anime* films, TV animation, and OVA (original video animations).

\*2 Person who actively collects information on and participates in fan activities relating to a particular artist or media personality and gives high priority to those activities on a daily basis.

\*3 Persons who participate in comic coterie magazine spot sales and/or contribute to comic coterie magazines.

\*4 Heavy users of video games who spend the bulk of their time playing games (for home use, via PC, on networks, or in game arcades).

\*5 Persons interested in personal computers, not for their use in writing or other uses, but out of fascination with the assembly process.

Source: “The *Otaku* Group from a Business Perspective: Reevaluation of Enthusiastic Consumers” (Nomura Research Institute, Ltd., August 24, 2004)

With the founding of the university, Akihabara is likely to attract attention as an educational district. Furthermore, with the Tsukuba Express connecting Akihabara to Tsukuba Science City\*\* now in operation, Akihabara’s role as a base for industry-academia cooperation is expected to grow. The Akihabara station area has seen many other changes, including the recent opening of the large-scale appliance retailer, Yodobashi Camera, with Japan’s largest sales floor space at 23,800 square meters.



Tsukuba Express

Akihabara will continue to develop into an increasingly attractive city as it advances towards its goal of becoming a premier center not only of hardware such as electrical equipment, but also of digital content.

\*Akihabara Crossfield Website ► <http://www.akiba-cross.jp/>

\*\*The development of Tsukuba began approximately forty years ago. Currently in Tsukuba, there are close to 300 research institutes and corporations, both public and privately owned, and approximately 13,000 researchers. It is Japan’s largest repository of science and technology.

Photos: Hongo Jin, TJF