When the chimes sound at 10:30 am, the young men pour through the doors. First a few dozen. Then a few hundred. Then, in a matter of minutes, a few thousand. Mobile phones pressed to their ears, empty backpacks flapping on their skinny shoulders, they tear across the floor of the Tokyo Big Sight convention center as if pursued by demons.

"Hashiranaide!" cry the blue-shirted security officials. "Hashiranaide!"

Don't run! But it's no use. The collective force of so many men fed on a combo platter of anticipation and desire is unstoppable. Call it the running of the *otaku*. For what has stoked their fires isn't flesh or cash but stack upon precious stack of manga.

As you may have noticed, Japanese comics have gripped the global imagination. Manga sales in the US have tripled in the past four years. Titles like *Fruits Basket*, *Naruto*, and *Death Note* have become fixtures on American best-seller lists. Walk into your local bookstore this afternoon and chances are the manga section is bigger than the science fiction collection.
Europe has caught the bug, too. In the United Kingdom, the Catholic Church is using manga to recruit new priests. One British publisher, in an effort to hippify a national franchise, has begun issuing manga versions of Shakespeare's plays, including a *Romeo and Juliet* that reimagines the Montagues and Capulets as rival *yakuza* families in Tokyo.

Yet in Japan, its birthplace and epicenter, manga's fortunes are sagging. Circulation of the country's weekly comic magazines, the essential entry point for any manga series, has fallen by about half over the last decade. Young people are turning their attention away from the printed page and toward the tiny screens on their mobile phones.

Fans and critics complain that manga — which emerged in the years after World War II as an edgy, uniquely Japanese art form — has become as homogenized and risk-averse as the limpest Hollywood blockbuster. Pervading the nation's $4.2 billion-a-year industry is a sense that its best days have passed.

This spring I spent two months in Japan looking under the hood of the manga industry. I met with key players in the supply chain — from the artists who create the work and the editors who polish it to the retailers who sell it and the fans who devour it. I argued with manga critics in Tokyo, hung out at the country's only college manga department in Kyoto, and paid homage to the God of manga in Osaka. I was hoping to get a sense of why Japanese comics have become so insanely popular around the world. What I got instead was a tantalizing peek into what might be the future business model of music, movies, and media of every kind.
Manga isn't just for freaks and geeks. Ride the Tokyo subway and you'll see graying salarymen, twentysomething hipsters, and schoolgirls all paging through a manga weekly or a graphic novel.

Photo: Ofer Wolberger

To understand manga's place in Japan, you must begin with its ubiquity. Even though the popularity of manga has fallen in recent years, it still comprises about 22 percent of all printed material in Japan. In many parts of Tokyo, you can't walk more than two or three blocks without encountering comics. (Trust me. I checked.) Most omnipresent are the magazines—Weekly Shonen Magazine, Weekly Shonen Jump, Young King Ours, Shojo Comic, and countless others. They're teetering in messy piles at convenience stores, stacked in neat slabs at every subway station, and for sale just about anywhere someone might be inclined to pull a couple hundred yen ($2 to $4) from their pocket. Published on flimsy newsprint and often as thick as a Baltimore phone book, these magazines can contain 25 different serialized stories that run about 20 pages each. The most popular series then get repackaged as paperback graphic novels. These books dominate long stretches of Japanese bookstores, and their sales figures would make American authors and publishers weep with envy. One example among many: The paperback editions of Bleach, a series about a ghost-spotting teenager that has been running in Weekly Shonen Jump for the past six years, have sold some 46 million copies (in a country of 127 million people).

And manga, unlike most American comics, isn't reserved for freaks, geeks, and pip-squeaks. Ride the Tokyo subway and you'll see passengers peering at their mobiles. But you'll also inevitably spot gray-haired businessmen, twentysomething hipsters, and Japanese schoolgirls alike paging through a manga weekly or a graphic novel. The city of Hiroshima even has a bustling public library devoted entirely to manga.

Yet the role of manga in the broader economic ecosystem is perhaps more important than its actual sales figures. Japan's vaunted pop culture apparatus, it turns out, is really a manga industrial complex. Nearly every aspect of cultural productio— which is now Japan's most influential export — is rooted in manga. Most anime (animated) movies and television series as well as many videogames and collectible figures, began life as comics. Dragonball — now a multibillion-dollar international franchise comprising movies, games, and cards — debuted as an installment in Weekly Shonen Jump in 1984. Uzumaki Naruto, the protagonist of the mega-property that bears his name, first showed his blond ninja head in the pages of the same magazine eight years ago. Trace any of Japan's most successful media franchises back to their origins and you'll likely end up inside a colorful brick of newsprint, where 20 pages of exquisitely matched words and drawings tell the inaugural story.

But manga has become a bit like network television in the US. It reaches a wide but inexorably shrinking audience. Weekly magazine circulation is on a steep and steady downward slope; book sales are no higher than they were a decade ago despite a rise in population. Still, manga is more influential in Japan than network television is in the US. Comics occupy the center, feeding the rest of the media system. If they dry up, other media players risk losing their deepest and most vital source of material. If manga gets creaky, and by all accounts it is heading that way, it could undermine Japan's entire pop culture machine. What the industry needs is something that can rescue it from decline — a force that can reenergize its fans, restock its talent pools, and revive its creative mojo. The sound of those flapping backpacks may herald the arrival of that savior.
Amateur manga artists routinely remix characters and situations created by the pros (inset).

Photo: Ofer Wolberger

A few days after visiting Comic Ichi, I returned to Tokyo Big Sight for Super Comic City, another manga market, this one held over two days to accommodate even larger crowds. Although Comic Ichi was from Mars — the male-to-female ratio, by my rough count, was about 300 to 1 — and Super Comic City was from Venus, with several hundred women for every man, both markets were selling material from the same planet: nonprofessional self-published manga known as dojinshi. At Super Comic City, for instance, 33,000 amateur artists stuffed themselves into six huge halls, each the size of a professional basketball arena, stationed themselves behind card tables, and sold their own home-brewed comics.

Markets like these started to appear in 1975, when a few hundred fans with an artistic bent gathered to trade their work. Today, dojinshi has become a sprawling enterprise. The comics markets — comikets, for short — held in December and August attract about a half-million people. Most of the material for sale at those markets, as well as the ones I visited, have the look and feel of professional work. Their creators often spend weeks meticulously drawing and inking their comics. Then they typically scan those pages onto computers and refine them with Photoshop and other software. Finally, using one of an array of print shops that cater to dojinshi, they produce limited editions of the work (as few as 20 copies, as many as several thousand) on high-quality paper, bound between glossy covers.

I spent two days at Super Comic City. But an American intellectual property lawyer probably would not have lasted more than 15 minutes. After cruising just one or two aisles, he would have thudded to the floor in a dead faint. About 90 percent of the material for sale — how to put this — borrows liberally from existing works. Actually, let me be blunter: The copyright violations are flagrant, shameless, and widespread. For example, in both Japan and the US, one of the past decade’s most successful manga series is *Fullmetal Alchemist*. The story pivots around a group of people with the ability to transmute matter into new substances. The main character is Edward Elric, a young man who possesses these powers. Another character is a father-figure type named Colonel Roy Mustang. At Super Comic City, there were at least 30 tables where amateurs were selling 20- or 30-page stories in which perfectly drawn, instantly recognizable Elrics and Mustangs discover their forbidden love for each other. (In all, 1,100 Full Metal Alchemist dojinshi groups had registered to sell their wares.) In many of these comics, the drawings are so precisely rendered that the characters are indistinguishable from the originals. Some of these tales portray chaste affairs full of yearning and unrealized passion. Others depict sexual encounters grunting and graphic enough to make Larry Flynt blush. Though nobody was merely reproducing existing *Fullmetal Alchemist* stories, everybody — by swiping the characters without consent and selling the resulting work to others — was trampling intellectual property rights. And Japanese copyright law is just as restrictive as its American cousin, if not more so.

It was the same everywhere I went: acres of territory in which the basic tenets of intellectual property seemed not to apply. True, some dojinshi collectives, which are known as "circles" even if they have only one member, were selling works based on their own original characters. At Comic Ichi, one of the longest lines was for drawings of a rabbit-eared maid created by Ice and Choco, a circle made up of one woman named Naru Nanao. But most offerings plucked characters from popular manga series and dropped them into new scenarios. The authors told me they were uncovering hidden potential in their favorite stories — revealing themes, relationships, and plot lines that were gurgling just beneath the surface of the official narrative.
At the edge of one hall, I saw a young woman wearing a short skirt, white shoes, and stylish blue leggings pulled over her knees. She was sitting on a folding chair behind a card table greeting a modest but steady stream of customers. She is 24 years old and lives with her parents in the Kyushu region of southern Japan, about 500 miles away. She works at a bank. "It's a lame job," she said with one of her frequent giggles, "which is why I'm spending my life drawing these comics." Nobody at work or at home knows about her hobby; her parents think she came to Tokyo to visit friends. Because of that, she asked me to use only the first letter of her last name.

Three years ago Ms. O produced her first work, a story about Chibi Maruko-Chan, a sassy third grader — think Sally from Peanuts inflected with Lisa Simpson — who's a mainstay in a long-running kids' series. Since then, she has created nine more short books that reveal what happens in the alternative universe where the series characters actually age. Much of M O's oeuvre concerns an up-and-down love affair between a late-teen version of Chibi Maruko-Chan and another character. "It's so bizarre that Chibi Maruko could be grown up and think about women's things in the first place," she told me. "But we all know deep in her heart that she longs for this." Does Ms. O aspire to be a professional manga artist? "No. I'm happy just to draw." Is she making lots of money? "I don't make any money." What's driving her? "Nobody else is doing this. I had to show this aspect of Chibi Maruko and get it out there."

Guided by a 440-page catalog with tiny blurbs about each circle, buyers — many of them pulling wheeled suitcases — could find all manner of reimagined, copyright-defying manga peddled by people like Ms. O. Yaoi, or "boys' love," was popular among women. Hetero porn remixes were popular among the men. And although sex and romance titles predominated, buyers could also choose from action, adventure, supernatural, and other genres, most selling for 500 to 1,000 yen (about $4 to $8) apiece.

Now think back to our American lawyer — the one lying on the cement floor. After the smelling salts arrived, he no doubt would have picked himself off the ground, thumbed a cease-and-desist letter on his BlackBerry, and phoned in a temporary injunction to close down the joint. Imagine Disney's response if some huge comics convention in St. Louis or Houston were selling exquisitely rendered, easily identifiable comic book versions of Mickey Mouse and Goofy falling in love. Picture the legal department at United Feature Syndicate hearing about someone selling $6 books that show a buxom teenage Sally and a husky teenage Linus canoodling on a beach. The violations at Super Comic City were so brazen and the scale so huge — by day's end, some 300,000 books sold in cash transactions totaling more than $1 million — that just about any US media company would have launched a full-metal lawsuit to shut the market for good.

Why aren't Japanese publishers doing the same? I posed that question to two of the main organizers of Japan's dojinshi gatherings, Kouichi Ichikawa and Keiji Takeda.

"Obviously, there are copyright issues at play here," Ichikawa said. When the markets expanded beyond the clutch of early adopters in the 1980s and 1990s, publishers and authors made threatening noises, and some accused successful dojinshi circles of violating copyright law. But lately, as the markets have reached such enormous scale, the big publishing houses have taken a different approach.

"This is something that satisfies the fans," Ichikawa said. "The publishers understand that this does not diminish the sales of the original product but may increase them. So they don't come down here and shut it down."

"Is that something publishers have told you?" I asked.

No, he said, not exactly. "This is something very Japanese. It's an ancient sensibility — like the wabi-sabi of the tea ceremony."

In case you missed the wabi-sabi lecture back in high school, it means something like "aesthetic transience." I asked Takeda about it.

As recently as a decade ago, he told me, creators of popular commercial works sometimes cracked down on their dojinshi counterparts at Super Comic City. "But these days," he said, "you don't really hear about that many publishers stopping them."

"Why not?" I asked.

They have an understanding, he said, using a phrase I'd encounter again and again: anmoku no ryokai, meaning essentially "unspoken, implicit agreement."

"The dojinshi are creating a market base, and that market base is naturally drawn to the original work," he said. Then,
gesturing to the convention floor, he added, "This is where we're finding the next generation of authors. The publishers understand the value of not destroying that." And as the manga weeklies falter and decline, new talent is more important than ever. Meanwhile, Takeda said, the dojinshi creators honor their part of this silent pact. They tacitly agree not to go too far — to produce work only in limited editions and to avoid selling so many copies that they risk cannibalizing the market for original works.

"Obviously," Takeda said, "this is something that no one comes out with a bullhorn and states."

What's less obvious is that *anmoku no ryokai* isn't just a deft way to avoid conflict. It's also a business model, one that's exportable to the US.

**If you want to snag** your own little piece of Japanese cool, come to Mandarake. This chain of 11 retail stores sells tons (literally) of used artifacts — manga, trading cards, figures, games, posters, costumes, and dojinshi — that can satisfy the deepest pop culture urges. At the helm of Mandarake is its founder, a failed manga artist named Masuzo Furukawa. By Japanese standards, Furukawa is an iconoclast. His black hair is kinked into curls and colored brownish red. He wears a shiny tracksuit rather than a salaryman's coat and tie. He jokes about his many failures. He opened Mandarake 27 years ago, well before the dojinshi markets began growing more popular — in part to provide another sales channel for the work coming out of them.

At first, publishers were none too pleased with his new venture. "You think I didn't hear from them?" he tells me in a company conference room. But in the past five years, he says, as the scale and reach of the markets has expanded, the publishers' attitude "has changed 180 degrees." It's all a matter of business, he says.

To illustrate what he means, he reaches across the conference-room table and takes my notebook. On a blank page he draws a large triangle. "You have the authors up there at this tiny little tip at the top. And at the bottom," he says, drawing line just above the widening base of the triangle, "you have the readers. The *dojin* artists are the ones connecting them in the middle."

In other words, where there was once a clear divide between producers and consumers and between pros and amateurs, the boundaries are now murky. The people selling their wares at the comics markets are consumers *and* producers, amateurs *and* pros. They nourish both the top and the bottom. If publishers were to squash the emerging middle, they would disrupt and perhaps destroy, this delicate new triangular ecosystem. And remember: If manga craters, it could drag the entire Japanese pop culture industry down with it.

However, because permitting — let alone encouraging — dojinshi runs afoul of copyright law, the agreement remains implicit: The publishers avert their eyes, and the dojinshi creators resist going too far. This *anmoku no ryokai* business model helps rescue the manga industrial complex in at least three ways.

First, and most obviously, it's a customer care program. The dojinshi devotees are manga's fiercest fans. "We're not denying the viability or importance of intellectual property," says Kazuhiko Torishima, an executive at the publishing behemoth Shueisha. "But when the numbers speak, you have to listen."

Second, as Takeda put it at Super Comic City, "this is the soil for new talent." While most dojinshi creators have no aspirations to become manga superstars, several artists have used the comic markets to springboard into mainstream success. The best example is Clamp, which began as a circle of a dozen college women selling self-published work at comics markets in the Kansai region. Today, Clamp's members are manga rock stars; they have sold close to 100 million books worldwide.

Third, the *anmoku no ryokai* arrangement provides publishers with extremely cheap market research. To learn what's hot and what's not, a media company could spend lots of money commissioning polls and conducting focus groups. Or for a few bucks it could buy a Super Comic City catalog and spend two days watching 96,000 of its best customers browse, gossip, and buy in real time. These settings often provide early warnings of the shifting fan zeitgeist. For instance, a few years ago several circles that had been creating dojinshi for the series *Prince of Tennis* switched to *Bleach*, an indication that one title was falling out of favor and another was on the rise. "The publishers are seeing the market in action," Ichikawa says. "They're seeing the successes and the failures. They're seeing the trends."

Taking care of customers. Finding new talent. Getting free market research. That's a pretty potent trio of advantages for an business. Trouble is, to derive these advantages the manga industry must ignore the law. And this is where it gets weird. Unlike, say, an industrial company that might increase profits if it skirts environmental regulations imposed to safeguard the public interest, the manga industrial complex is ignoring a law designed to protect its *own* commercial interests.
This odd situation exposes the conflict between what Stanford law professor (and *Wired* contributor) Lawrence Lessig calls the "read only" culture and the "read/write" culture. Intellectual property laws were crafted for a read-only culture. They prohibit me from running an issue of *Captain America* through a Xerox DocuColor machine and selling copies on the street. The moral and business logic of this sort of restriction is unassailable. By merely photocopying someone else's work, I'm not creating anything new. And my cheap reproductions would be unfairly harming the commercial interests of Marvel Comics.

But as Lessig and others have argued, and as the dojinshi markets amply confirm, that same copyright regime can be inadequate, and even detrimental, in a read/write culture. Amateur manga remixers aren't merely replicating someone else's work. They're creating something original. And in doing so, they may well be helping, not hindering, the commercial interests of the copyright holders. Yet they're treated no differently from me and my hypothetical *Captain America* photocopies. The result is a misalignment between the emerging imperatives of smart business and the lagging sensibilities of old laws.

How to bring matters into alignment, without undercutting the "read only" protections, has been a vexing issue for American music producers and music studios as well as platforms like YouTube. One possibility, of course, is to change copyright law to make it flexible enough for a read/write culture. Good luck. In the past few decades, the copyright winds in the US have been blowing in the opposite direction — toward longer and stricter protections. It is hard to imagine Hollywood, Nashville, and New York agreeing to scale back legal protection in order to release the creative impulses of super-empowered fans, when the gains from doing so are for now only theoretical.

Another possibility is something akin to Lessig's Creative Commons licenses. Copyright holders could voluntarily reserve only some of their rights or perhaps create a special dojinshi license that allows fans to reproduce and remix works in limited ways. That's probably the ideal option. And perhaps some day Big Media will see its virtues. But the use of Creative Commons licenses so far has been extremely limited. Again, it's difficult to envision large publishers or giant movie and music studios relinquishing control over their products when the benefits are indirect, distant, and as yet unproven.

In *annoku no ryokai*, manga publishers might have found a tentative, imperfect, but ultimately more promising answer — business model that could help media companies in both Japan and the US begin to navigate these potentially treacherous new waters. Instead of rewriting a national statute or hashing out separate individual contracts or crafting special licenses, it leaves everything unsaid in order to simply give the new arrangement a test drive. It takes the situation out of the realm of law and plops it into the realm of economics and game theory. It places the established publishers and the dojinshi creators in something resembling the prisoners' dilemma: If they cooperate — that is, if they honor the terms of *annoku no ryokai* — they both gain. But if one overreaches — if publishers crack down aggressively or if dojinshi creators go too far — they both suffer.

Instead of negotiating a formal pact, both parties can advance their interests through the deterrent of mutually assured destruction. What that accommodation lacks in legal clarity, it makes up for in commercial pragmatism. If the experiment fails, then everyone reverts back to the legal status quo. But if it endures, and if everyone comes to realize that the interest of the copyright holders and the fans are aligned, it could become the prelude to wider adoption of Creative Commons-style licenses and a more coherent set of rules for a remix culture around the world.

**One afternoon in May,** I walked into K-Books, a third-floor bookshop in Akihabara, a neighborhood of flashing lights and moving bodies that is the epicenter of Tokyo's otaku culture. In one section of the store, I found graphic novels by Clamp, that circle of women who went from amateurs to best-selling pros. I bought a copy of *Chobits*, their series about a young man who has a friendly female android assistant; a volume of *xxxHolic*, about a high school student who works for a witch (despite the trio of x's in the title, it's not porn); and a hardcover edition of *Card Captor Sakura*, about a girl with magical powers. And in a nearby section of the store, I bought dojinshi versions of those same titles. For 210 yen ($1.80), I picked up another title, *Hacker Chobits*, in which the female android expands the frontiers of "friendliness." For 630 yen ($5.40) I bought a yuri, or lesbian, version of *xxxHolic* featuring the two main female characters of that series. And for another 630 yen, I purchased the 70-page, sprightly illustrated *Sakura Remix*, wherein the heroine encounters a strangely amorous frog and later discovers a hidden video camera in her classroom at an especially inopportune moment.

The official versions and the remixed versions weren't side by side. But they were for sale perhaps 10 yards away from each other. *In the same store.* Think about that in a US context. You walk in to Barnes & Noble and walk out with a copy of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* — as well as an unauthorized remix of a May-December romance between Hermione Granger and Professor Minerva McGonagall. Our American IP lawyer is starting to get woozy again.
A few weeks later, I tossed these books into my backpack, hopped on a train to the outskirts of Tokyo, and entered a castlelike building that is the headquarters of Clamp's media empire. There I met with Ageha Ohkawa, the very smart and refreshingly down-to-earth head of this monumentally successful manga machine. In the late 1980s, before they started to create original work, she and her colleagues produced some remixed versions of Captain Tsubasa, a series about a soccer team, and sold them at dojinshi markets. Today, she's on the other end of the annmoku no ryokai détente.

During our conversation, I reached into my backpack to show her the three Clamp dojin titles I'd bought at K-Books. Her handlers — a few managers and a guy from legal — winced and exchanged worried looks. But Ohkawa burst into a delighted laugh and then flipped through Sakura Remix and Hacker Chobits. "Any popular manga is going to have this treatment done," she told me. "It is by people who are truly in love with the work, and you have to respect that."

So, I asked, is Hacker Chobits actually good for the real Chobits?

She paused. "I think it's good because they are expressing love for the work. And, of course, we come from the dojinshi world, so I understand this." Fans even sometimes send her their dojinshi, and what she admires about these works is the dedication and the innovation they show. "There is originality here. There are new stories. It's not a copy."

Still, she's not entirely comfortable having the black-and-white world of manga governed by the gray zone of annmoku no ryokai. "It's very vague," she says. "It's always pushing the edge of whether it should be forbidden. Should someone actually make a pirate version instead of a remix, this whole thing could collapse." Yet she can't think of a better approach.

Holding up a copy of Hacker Chobits, she says, "It's not something I'm going to stand up and rail against."

The manga industrial complex has seen the future. And it works. For now.

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