

WHY 14-YEAR-OLD JAPANESE GIRLS RULE THE WORLD

Want to understand the future? Talk to a teen in Tokyo.

AS SHE DOES MOST WEEKENDS, SHE WENT DOWN TO HARAJUKU TO DO SOME STYLING. SHE PUT ON HER WHITE, TOP-STYLE WORK SHIRT with the yellow plastic trim and her orange and white Raggy Air-guns strapping shirt, and she painted her fingernails red and blue and purple and lined her eyes in a contrasting shade of green. The effect might have been accomplished as the looks on some of the other Harajuku girls—Mai had moved to Tokyo only 10 months ago, when she was 13, from way south in Hokkaido where there was absolutely zero going on—but she thought it would catch some eyes. Then she grabbed her three-inch, shimmer-saturated cell phone, held the pink box to lumbar off-screen with some ease, and with a shake of her electric-dandelion hair took the JR line to Harajuku, where Kaji Mizutani was waiting.

X *Charles C. Mann*
photography by KOGI NISITANI



MAI



MIZUTANI HAS BEEN PHOTOGRAPHING THE girls in Harajuku since the 1980s, but he got serious about it just two years ago. He likes to walk out of Lafont, a six-story boutique across 100 yards from the JR subway station. Right across the street from Lafont is a Gap, and in front of the Gap is a sunny corner with steps to sit on and some trees in planters—the kind of open space you don't see all that often in Tokyo—where the Harajuku girls congregate on weekends. There's something Minston likes about the girls' energy: the way they cheerfully scurry every known Western and Eastern cultural epoch into their own personal fashion mix tape. Sitting by the Gap (a store they wouldn't be caught dead in) she listens to pop on their MiniDiscs and dispatch their PostFits with messages to one another's cell phones. And they smile at the approach of Minston, a slight, scintillating man with a camera. After 15 years, she has not done in Harajuku. All around them in the crowd were photographers and clothes designers and market researchers and entertainment engineers and fashion editors and cool hunters and even some straight-male reporters. It was not as bad as Shibuya, one train stop south, where you could find half a dozen TV crews within a hundred yards of one another desperately looking for a scene. But it was no less than a few minutes after he met Mai. Another photographer shuffled him aside and grabbed a few frames of her look.

Most of the business and fashion people eying the crowd are Japanese, but increasingly they represent interests in Silicon Valley and South Avenue, Chelsea and the Champes D'Élyées. Richard Branson of Virgin personally checks out the scene when he's in town. Bill Gates plans to test his forthcoming Xbox game player in Tokyo (though not, of course, personally). A Sun Microsystems executive who prefers anonymity receives regular updates on the latest way Japanese kids use technology. Paul Smith, the British designer, visits Harajuku because the King's Road scene has lost its vitality. All of these people make their livingly-dancing-ahead-of-the-curve, and Japanese teenagers and reinvent-something may be the future humans on the planet when it comes to inventing and adopting and disseminating the new Next New Thing.

As a general rule, the science-fiction writer William Gibson argues, Japan is the "default setting for the future," a beta version of 21st-century life. But the Japanese farthest ahead on the way to tomorrow are the young, and the ones at the vanguard are the teenage girls. No smarter or wiser than their coevals in Rochester or Rome, teenage girls in Japan sometimes have what Gibson calls a "techno-cultural suppleness"—a willingness to grab something new and use it for their own ends—ratcheted by no other group on earth. Shuffling their tiny purses with electronic goodies unavailable anywhere else, they live, according to Susan Corbridge, a critic for the British street-fashion magazine *iD* in "a modern space odyssey waiting for the rest of the world to catch up."

Ultimately Minston believes the rest of the world will catch up to the girls in his viewfinder. In different forms, the techno-egg—as well as fashion and culture—trends epitomized by Mai and her friends will show up on Western shores, perhaps within two years. But even then, Americans won't fully have caught up. Minston suspects. Because by that time the Harajuku girls will be on to something else entirely.

NOT FAR AWAY FROM MAI THE AFTERNOON scene: Yuriko 17 and Eriko, 16. Yuriko wears her hair in four thick coils that stood up straight from her head and were wrapped in green and yellow yarn, green and yellow being probably the only shades in the rainbow not found in her capri pants, which she had made by cutting up an antique kimono. She was sitting on the steps, sipping from a bottle of Peaches n' Cream with Eriko, who had swapped her red tight-knee-high with purple doc-martens in a sort of Glaxo-meets-Powerpuff-Girls style. On the ends of Eriko's arms were garments with no entry in the sartorial dictionary—fully puffed hoodies like jubbies that dangled the backs of her hands and looped to her fingers with purple nylon laces. Both girls wanted to be in the fashion industry and had made their clothes. Japan being a nation where girls are still taught to sew.

None of this would have been of interest to Tobias Linka. What would have interested Linka about Yuriko and Eriko was in their purses. Compared with their U.S. counterparts, the girls in Harajuku are utter gadget freaks. They peek MiniDisc players with clip-on monitors, aftermarket headphones fashioned in blanking lights, digital cameras with built-in MP3 players, Cheki cameras like mini iPod-like, even the old handheld DVD viewer. But the one absolute must was the cellular telephone. Covered with fake, affordable jewels and Hello Kitty decals, dangling lanyards with charms and amulets and tiny plastic dolls, cell phones, according to the cell-phone company Index, sit in the purses and pockets of about 95 percent of all Japanese teenage girls—a statistic that if anything says they use the devices ubiquitously.

Mind you, these phones are not the ones familiar to Americans: stiff black badges of business-givers with black and white or black and green displays. Instead they are almost weightless, panel-band beauties with brilliantly sharp color screens. Unlike U.S. cell phones, the phones in the girls' purses are connected constantly to the Internet. The Japanese cell Net, moreover, doesn't look like the Internet familiar to Americans. It doesn't even look like the dull-rout of stock quotes, weather reports, and sports scores routed by wireless Web News in this country. When Yuriko and Eriko—and millions of other Japanese—switch on their phones, they are instantly plunged into a fantastical animated 3-D world of beat boxes, singing pans, and toddler samurai. And if Japanese consumer electronics combines have their way this whole different Net will be coming our way before the two girls finish high school.

Neither Yuriko nor Eriko knew it, but the cellular message in their purses opens its existence, at least in part, to Linka, general manager for the Media Media Life Center Center of the communications branch of Matsushita, the industrial giant in Yokohama. With his head-stuck-in-the-Internet, he and a handful of Japanese salarymen that he jokingly admits he isn't as qualified to manage as they are, "We understand that whenever we build what is smaller than 100 cubic centimeters, the size of a cigarette pack, and less than 100 grams [1.3 ounces], the weight of a Ziploc-type lighter," he says, "I harness first what's in the pocket when it's bigger or heavier than that."

TEENAGE GIRLS IN JAPAN HAVE WHAT WILLIAM GIBSON CALLS A 'TECHNO-CULTURAL SUPPLENESS'—A WILLINGNESS TO GRAB SOMETHING NEW AND USE IT FOR THEIR OWN ENDS



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Japanese are a few mouse clicks ahead of everyone else in what appears to people like him—the ones who are clever about guessing what customers will like, and who are backed by companies willing to show their ideas onto the market to see what happens. Back in 1988, Linka formed the idea that the personal computers and portable phones of the day were, when it came right down to it, a pain in the neck. They were too expensive and too hard to use and too big to carry around. The ideal, he decided, would be technology you could simply throw on your body clothes—a computer in a shell, a phone in a bracelet. But Matsushita engineers said what he called "wearable" communication was impossible: who reluctantly switched to communication devices that were "pocketable." He led a team of people who measured people's shirt pockets and everything carried in them. "We realized that whatever we built had to be smaller than 100 cubic centimeters, the size of a cigarette pack, and less than 100 grams [1.3 ounces], the weight of a Ziploc-type lighter," he says. "I harness first what's in the pocket when it's bigger or heavier than that."

The first pocketable phone debuted in 1996, but Linka's vision wasn't fully realized until February 1999, when NTT DoCoMo launched i-mode, the world's first commercial wireless Internet service. (DoCoMo is a labored acronym for "Data Communication Over the Mobile Net.") The i-mode was instantly, wildly successful. Today, according to the consulting firm Accenture, three-quarters of Japanese cell phone owners use their phones to connect with the Net, as opposed to about one out of 20 in the U.S.

From day one, Linka says, he insisted that the tiny new phones had to be "emotional devices," rather than "logical devices." Computer keyboards, he explains, are examples of logical devices—mechanisms directed to a specialized function. They are fast, efficient, and not much fun. Men and boys like them. Emotional devices, on the other hand, are expressive, customizable, and fanciful. They are for women and girls, although Linka believes that guys can pick up on their advantages, too. Following this logic, i-mode project head Matt Matsuzaki, a self-confessed techno-nerd, did not tout the real-time baseball scores available to i-mode subscribers. Instead, the spotlight went to... well, the God of Love.

The God of Love is based in the southwestern district of Setagaya, on the 13th floor of a building called the Canon Tower—the headquarters of Index, a Tokyo software startup. Staffed by a cadre of beach, sleep-deprived hackers who would not be out of place in Silicon Valley, Index has been churning out electronic diversions since its founding in 1997, but reached its current level only when it started supporting Wireless Link. Of its dozens of Web phone services, the most popular is the God of Love. For 40 cents a month, users can tap the birth date of a potential mate into their phones. Index's servers respond with a computer evaluation of the likelihood that lightning will strike.

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And so on, and so on, all of it to be tossed onto the market with the abundance that the girls show when they see up their wilder ideas and wear them down the street.

Despite Linka's enthusiasm, it's hard for the listener to pay full attention, because he is giving his eye to a host of miniature and stylish devices that resemble big American gadgets. This is the generation of diversions to come after the next generation—his original inspiration, wearable computers, which Matsushita engineers now say may be technically feasible. The badges are full-scale electronic gadgetry that people will take with them everywhere. They will catch on first with the cool kids, he says, then the rest of the kids, then the adults.

Linka has spent the last two years going around Shibuya and Harajuku, showing test drawings to kids on the streets, floundering, in part, on their reactions. Matsushita will decide which of his concepts to mass-produce. If the kids take up his products, the company may try them out in slower countries, such as the U.S. ("Whenever the Japanese shopper gets the rest of the world open seems to follow," says Waldemar Janaszak, art critic for the London *Sunday Times*.) Asked for the reasons he is sometimes mistaken for a fashion photographer, Linka simply shrugs. He does especially like to talk to the high school girls. He sometimes teaches art in a high school for girls. "The girls really know," he adds. "Wearable computing will happen here first."

GERMA GIRA IS A CHAIN OF 31 STORES, ALL but three of them in Tokyo. Because groups in the second Japanese comic book writers use to indicate laughing, the name roughly translates into "he-ha." The stores sell an unusual service that invites speculation as to the roots of Japan's love affair with technology. Indeed, Gera Gera invites consideration of what might be called the "Theory of the Lonely Child."

Japan is famous for its capsule hotels, which have coffee-tee bed-bunkers that are stacked three or four high. Gera Gera has something of the same flavor, except that instead of nesting an entire micro-bedroom, a sunnyside **CONTINUED ON PAGE 107**