

## The Public Perception of the *Bōsōzoku* in Japan

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### Keywords

Japan; *bōsōzoku*; motorized society; youth subcultures; juvenile delinquency; media discourse; cultural norms and deviance.

### Introduction

In Japan, whenever talk turns to my research interest in the *bōsōzoku* subculture, the reactions of my conversation partners tend to be surprisingly alike, ranging from amused curiosity to plain incomprehension why any respectable person could possibly be interested in these social misfits. I see this narrow range of reactions as an indicator of the significance of the *bōsōzoku* subculture as a social phenomenon in modern day Japan, as it emphasizes how efficient and resilient this subculture has been in establishing itself within the public consciousness as a focal point of dislike and anxiety. For regardless of my conversation partners' personal backgrounds, almost all of them seemed to agree that *bōsōzoku* are an altogether undesirable part of society – criminal, violent and dangerous.

Interestingly, I did not find a single one among them whose opinion about the inherently violent character of the *bōsōzoku* was based on actual first-hand experience. Nobody I spoke to had ever witnessed, let alone been the victim of, *bōsōzoku* violence, and no one had experienced any encounters with *bōsōzoku* that went beyond the two most common forms of *bōsōzoku* harassment, being forced to pull one's car over during a *bōsō* drive-by, or having one's sleep shattered by their motorbikes' insufferable noise. The few people I met who knew (or at least knew about) individual members of *bōsōzoku* groups tended to portray them as immature and unruly youths who had lots of hazardous and hare-brained ideas, yet they all dismissed the notion that the behaviour of these youngsters should be called criminal. But when it came to "the *bōsōzoku*" in general, these people, too, regarded them as intrinsically violent and dangerous.<sup>1</sup>

So if it wasn't personal experience that formed people's notions of the *bōsōzoku*

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<sup>1</sup> This attitude is far from exceptional, it can also be found, for example, in the statements of police officers and social workers about *bōsōzoku*, in Chūgoku 2003: 52-53.

subculture's inherent criminality, what was it then? Where did these notions come from? Generally, two sources of information stood out in people's narrations: One was plain hearsay, following the *urban legend* pattern,<sup>2</sup> with people referring to instances of *bōsōzoku* brutality and delinquency which, as they were quick to maintain, had actually happened to an acquaintance of someone they personally knew and whose credentials were, in their minds, beyond doubt. The other, far more significant channel for establishing and consolidating their opinions on *bōsōzoku* violence and delinquency was through the commercial media – articles in magazines, radio and TV reports and, most prevalent and influential, news reports in the country's daily papers. In short, people seemed to experience the menace of *bōsōzoku* violence more keenly in the virtual reality of their minds than they did out on the streets.

### 1. The *bōsōzoku* – an outline

So what exactly does the term “*bōsōzoku*” stand for, and how did the *bōsōzoku* subculture come to be the epitome of juvenile delinquency? In Japan's discourse on law enforcement (for example in the National Police Agency's annual white papers), “*bōsōzoku*” is used as a generic term for motorized groups of (mostly) male adolescents who engage in disruptive and dangerous conduct in traffic, disregarding traffic rules and endangering their own as well as other people's safety. Outside of the legal and administrative framework, though, the term carries a different set of connotations that focus less narrowly on issues of traffic violation and more on the above mentioned aspects of harassment, menace and the threat of physical violence.

According to Endō (2010: 106-107), the term “*bōsōzoku*” was coined in 1972, and it quickly gained nationwide circulation, but the motorized youth subculture that it refers to had been around at least since the late 1950s. When the first groups of young motorcyclists appeared on Japan's roads, their conduct on and off the roads was certainly not much different from that of their successors. But they were few in number and traffic on Japan's roads was a fraction of what it would be in later years, so while these early biker groups may occasionally have been perceived as a nuisance, they did not represent the challenge to society that later generations were to be. Unless they were involved in serious accidents, Japan's young motorcyclists were not likely to receive any media attention then.

But in the 1960s, this situation changed fast: rising income levels and mass motorization made small to medium size motorcycles affordable even on a young worker's wages or a student's income from part-time work, and accordingly, the number

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<sup>2</sup> For an exhaustive study into the characteristics and workings of urban legends, see Brunvand 2002.

of young drivers on the roads swelled exponentially. This was most apparent in Japan's inner city areas where on the weekends, hundreds of young drivers began to congregate with their cars and motorbikes, to show off their vehicles and their driving prowess, to engage in informal (and illegal) racing competitions, to see and to be seen.

Judging from the visual materials at hand,<sup>3</sup> the get-togethers of these *kaminarizoku* (as the press was quick to label them) were spectacular events: vibrant and noisy manifestations of youthful vitality that offered Japan's young generation a welcome opportunity to escape the narrow confines of their everyday life, to join in the competition for recognition among their peers and, maybe, to score with the opposite gender. In the cities of Japan, gatherings of noisy and unruly adolescents were nothing new, but motorization gave these events a substantially different quality: For one, vehicle ownership came to play a key role in the young generation's social competitive game. In addition, motorization allowed people a much wider active range, which meant that groups from far outlying areas were now able to join in the downtown night-time action. Consequently, the weekend gatherings in Japan's inner cities grew at an unprecedented scale, and soon, almost every town in Japan became the unwilling host of similar events. The ensuing media attention further raised the appeal of these meetings, and it did not take long for the authorities to decree that these noisy, disruptive and dangerous displays of adolescent disorderly conduct would no longer be tolerated.

Ironically, the authorities' heavy-handed response only served to aggravate the situation: on June 17<sup>th</sup> 1972, attempts by local police to put an end to the night-time racing meets in central Toyama City resulted in two days of intense rioting, with similar outbreaks of violence in numerous other cities throughout the following weeks (Endō 2010: 107; Nakabe 1979: 227-228). This, along with the increasing rivalries and turf wars between individual groups, led to a noticeably more aggressive climate among Japan's street youth. New groups emerged whose declared purpose was to seek fights with the police force or with other *bōsōzoku* groups. The groups' swelling membership numbers (see below) and the growing focus on provoking confrontation also brought about a new style of *bōsō* drives: instead of the high-speed inner city chases that had marked the early days, the groups now focussed on moving along the streets in mass convoys, with maximum noise production and at an irritatingly slow pace, causing serious disruptions, if not the complete breakdown, of all regular traffic. Due to their efficiency in raising attention as well as irritation, and due to the obvious difficulties that the police had in keeping these events in check, these *bōsō* convoys quickly became the mainstay of *bōsōzoku* activities. Throughout the next thirty years, they were to be a permanent fixture of Japan's road traffic, and the way that most Japanese would come to experience the *bōsōzoku* subculture.

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<sup>3</sup> Fukuda 1980; Toi 2005; Endō 2010; Zeroyon 2011.

In the mid 1970s, the rivalries between the ever larger *bōsōzoku* groups resulted in a series of epic clashes with hundreds of participants which caused Japan's lawmakers and law enforcement agencies to implement a series of urgent countermeasures, hoping to rein in the *bōsōzoku* groups and to curb their activities. Consequently, the groups' membership numbers declined visibly, but at the same time, the number of groups more than doubled, and Japan's *bōsōzoku* subculture became more populous than ever. In 1982, the police count reached an all time high, with 754 *bōsōzoku* groups that had altogether 42,510 members. From then on, the number of groups and of *bōsōzoku* members went into a slow but steady decline, and in 2011, the National Police Agency announced that for the first time since they began keeping statistics on *bōsōzoku* activities, the overall number of *bōsōzoku* on record had dropped below 10,000 individuals.<sup>4</sup> Today, the *bōsōzoku* problem is just a fraction of what it was thirty years ago, but as the residents of Nagoya, Hiroshima or the Shonan Coast will confirm, it still is far from over.

## **2. Japan's media and the *bōsōzoku***

In his landmark study of Japan's *bōsōzoku* youth in the 1980s, Sato Ikuya emphasizes the media's great influence on the public opinion regarding *bōsōzoku*, and he sees two decisive factors at work behind this influence. To him, one is the sheer volume of media coverage that accompanied the dramatic rise of *bōsōzoku* activities throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The other, he says, lies with the overly simplistic explanatory models on which the press reports usually rely. The media, Sato says, hardly ever take their analysis of the *bōsōzoku* phenomenon beyond simple "pathological interpretations" that reduce the complex and heterogeneous *bōsōzoku* issue to two simple stereotypes, "either as a cruel and abominable devil or as a pathetic victim suffering from chronic frustration and anxiety." (Sato 1991: 74).

Sato conducted his research during the heyday of *bōsōzoku* activity in Japan, and since then, the number of *bōsōzoku* has visibly declined. Consequently, *bōsōzoku*-related issues figure less prominently in today's headlines than they did throughout the 1970s and 1980s. But a look through Japan's newspapers reveals that Sato's conclusion at the end of the 1980s, that the *bōsōzoku* "have been 'exorcised' or 'expelled' from media reports" (Sato 1991: 193), was premature: Between September 1986 and May 2011, the term *bōsōzoku* figured in an altogether 5,569 articles (slightly more than four articles per week) of the Yomiuri Shinbun, while the Asahi Shinbun's writers were even more prolific, with 6,711 articles during this period, averaging more than five articles per week. Of course, these figures include numerous news reports with

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<sup>4</sup> Nikkei Shinbun on February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

only fleeting reference to the *bōsōzoku* topic, but when refining the search with additional keywords, the correlation of the term *bōsōzoku* with delinquency and violence in the media becomes obvious: Almost 50% of all articles (Asahi: 3,141 art.; Yomiuri: 2,642 art.) paired the term *bōsōzoku* with “arrest” (逮捕). Next in line were “offence” (違反; Asahi: 2,108 art.; Yomiuri: 1,604 art.) and “crime” (犯; Asahi: 1,416 art.; Yomiuri: 1,645 art.), followed by “injury” (傷; Asahi: 1,519 art.; Yomiuri: 1,274 art.) and “theft” (盗; Asahi: 1,148 art.; Yomiuri: 1,071 art.), while still about one in ten articles linked *bōsōzoku* with “murder” (殺; Asahi: 757 art.; Yomiuri: 647 art.)

Naturally, this focus on *bōsōzoku* brutality and deviance is only to be expected from Japan’s dailies – after all, it is in the papers’ nature to give priority to news items that deliver a catching headline and riveting reading. From a publisher’s point of view, this may make perfect sense, but for the common perception of the *bōsōzoku* topic in Japan, this focus has had lasting consequences. For with the fixation of the country’s main news sources on the criminal and violent aspects of the *bōsōzoku* subculture, it is no wonder that in Japan’s public discourse, the two terms “*bōsōzoku*” and “juvenile delinquent” have become virtually interchangeable.

Ultimately, the notion of the *bōsōzoku*’s inherently delinquent character has become ingrained in the public consciousness, and the media themselves have come to adopt it and, as Sato points out, have repeatedly used the label “*bōsōzoku*” to describe juvenile delinquents in incidents which, on closer look, had nothing to do with any *bōsōzoku* involvement (Sato 1991: 194-195). A corresponding tendency can be observed in the media’s use of the term “*bōsōzokufū*” (“*bōsōzoku*-like”), used in crime reporting to describe particular people or vehicles. Here, too, the mental association of *bōsōzoku* and juvenile delinquency in general is set to work both ways: simply by introducing the term “*bōsōzoku*” in the news item, the media steer their audience’s perception towards a whole train of connotations that go far beyond the described incident. Inversely, they also further consolidate their customers’ mental equation of *bōsōzoku* with juvenile delinquency, even though the described incident may not be *bōsōzoku*-related at all.

Similar tendencies marked a great part of Japan’s TV reporting on *bōsōzoku*, in particular in the so-called *wide shows* where the viewer was customarily treated to a barrage of tense images – close-ups of policemen’s determined faces in quick succession with shaky footage of young hoodlums running wild, replete with yells and curses, the infernal noise of their machines, provocative and intimidating postures, frightened bystanders, scuffles with the police, night-time high speed chases, and eventually the arrest of the cowed young misfits.<sup>5</sup> Usually, the dramatic visuals were augmented by a

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<sup>5</sup> TV source materials are much harder to come by than those in the newspaper sector. But recently, a growing number of video clips offering TV footage from the 1980s and 1990s have become available through online video channels. Unfortunately, many of these clips supply no hint at the original source, which makes it hard to utilize them in

deep and sonorous male voiceover that supplied facts and numbers and added the necessary documentary touch to the images of a youth out of bounds. But in view of the displayed violence and aggressive posing, the question needs to be asked how much of it was actually inspired by the presence of the media.

According to Sato (1991: 94-97), the idea of press and media attention was close to irresistible for many of his informants, and to read about their exploits in the papers was a source of personal pride and satisfaction to them. This eagerness for media exposure is also evident in Nakabe's interviews, in the hurt pride of two Osaka *bōsōzoku* over the media's exclusive focus on the Kantō *bōsōzoku* (Nakabe 1979: 60, 201). The appeal of media attention is closely linked with one of the core tenets of *bōsōzoku* action, summed up in the term *medatsu* – to be visible, to attract attention, to be publicly noticed.<sup>6</sup> For Nakabe's as well as Sato's *bōsōzoku* informants, *medatsu* serves as one of the driving forces behind their actions, and many of the core features of *bōsō* rides – the infernal noise, the risky driving manoeuvres, the spectacular design of the bikes and the choice of the routes down populated inner city streets – serve to increase the audience for their spectacle and thus enhance their experience of being at the centre of attention. For it is only through the presence of an audience that many of their activities gain meaning, and the fact that the attention of their reluctant audience is not based on admiration but on animosity and fear seems to be of little concern. On the contrary, to be seen as potentially dangerous is very much in their interest, as an established means to gain deference not only among their peers but also from society at large. Regarding the media's depiction of the *bōsōzoku*, both sides came to profit from such images of unbridled rage, the camera crews in search of thrilling footage just as much as the *bōsōzoku* who were well aware of the attention that a well-choreographed spectacle of violence and chaos could earn them<sup>7</sup>.

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an academic context. Nevertheless, they offer a good overall insight into the dramatization techniques that marked much of the crime reporting on Japanese TV throughout this period.

<sup>6</sup> However, in certain facets of the *bōsōzoku* subculture, public scrutiny is evidently not wanted. One of these concerns the sensitive relationship between *bōsōzoku* gangs and organized crime (Chūgoku 2003: 91), another is the identity of *bōsō* riders. Face masks that cover mouth and nose are a popular item during *bōsō* rides, as the majority of participants do not want to be identified. (Keisatsuchō 1994: 276). For Sato's informants, it is important that Japan's juvenile penal code prohibits the media from revealing their identities (Sato 1991: 160).

<sup>7</sup> Findeisen and Kersten (1999: 103-105) have identified the same phenomenon in the German media's approach towards youth violence: as spectacular events raise viewer numbers, and spectacular footage gets broadcast, focus is on the visual appeal of the events before the camera, and how to enhance it for maximum marketability. Should the events offer too little of this appeal, it may be necessary to amplify it through appropriate means. The video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzw6IjHCCg4> highlights a particularly obvious example of such viewer manipulation: Throughout the video's first minute, the commentator describes an unsettling scenario which is in stark contrast to the visuals where everything – the particularly gaudy bikes of the juvenile

But the news department was not the only media sector to profit from the attention which the images of destructive *bōsōzoku* anarchy were able to raise. From the mid 1970s on, the entertainment industry began to tap into this market with a steady release of *bōsōzoku*-themed films and TV dramas. Some of these, like the long-running *Shōnan Bakusōzoku* series, were blends of action and comedy. But for their greater part, from the Toei Studios' 1976 *Bakuhatsu!* feature films to the 2012 production *Bakugyaku Kazoku*, they focused on straightforward action, with an abundance of daring car and motorbike chases and confrontations between rivals that habitually end in spectacular outbreaks of violence. The *bōsōzoku* manga production was, if anything, even more prolific, with storylines that tended to follow one or the other of the above two patterns, either humorous adventures of a bunch of comical antiheroes or, more frequently, variations on the ever recurring pattern of epic clashes between good and evil, represented by *bōsōzoku* protagonists with greatly exaggerated physical features and a superhuman ability to withstand physical abuse.

The *bōsōzoku* film production often fed directly off the manga market, and it was common for successful manga storylines to be adapted quickly for the TV or cinema screen, generally under the same name as the original print version. Of the above productions, both *Shōnan Bakusōzoku* and *Bakugyaku Kazoku* are examples of this marketing approach. The common denominator for pretty much all of this *bōsōzoku*-themed entertainment was its fixation on the belligerent and criminal aspects of the *bōsōzoku* subculture, i. e. accident-prone reckless driving, petty crime, offensive language, aggressive posturing and grandstanding, and plenty of physical violence.<sup>8</sup> Usually, the cast lineup was similarly formulaic and one-dimensional, with little, if any, character development throughout the story. Both films and manga relied greatly on the reproduction of established notions about *bōsōzoku* brutality, delinquency and disrepute and, by doing so, essentially reinforced these notions among their readers and viewers. Nevertheless, the influence of *bōsōzoku* manga and films on the general attitude towards *bōsōzoku* was relatively small when compared to the impact of TV, magazines and the daily papers. This was due to the fact that both manga and films targeted a very specific audience of mainly young males with a certain affinity to *bōsōzoku*-related topics. So while these entertainment products may have reached a large audience in this particular age and gender bracket, their impact outside of this segment of society remained comparatively minor.

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drivers, their wide grins and their proud posing – points at the staged nature of this event.

<sup>8</sup> The one exception here is the 1976 film *God Speed You! Black Emperor*, a refreshingly unspectacular documentary about a Shinjuku *bōsōzoku* group's members and their bleak everyday lives between family quarrels, run-ins with law enforcement agencies, in-group conflict, sniffing glue, trying to make some money, but also the cordiality of their friendship, and the boundless elation during their bike rides (Yanagimachi 1976).

One more area of media production needs to be looked at is publishing for a *bōsōzoku* audience. This market segment which was formerly shared by the four magazines *Teens Road*, *Rider Comic*, *Young Auto* and *Champroad*,<sup>9</sup> is today the exclusive domain of the only surviving title, *Champroad*. This magazine is a monthly publication that covers pretty much all aspects of *bōsōzoku* interest, and with a press run of more than 25 years, it can look back on a longer lifespan than many other Japanese journals. The positive feedback from *Champroad's* target audience is evident in its great share of readership participation: Of the magazine's close to 300 pages, a large part is dedicated either to introducing the members of *bōsōzoku* groups from among its readership or to readers' contributions such as photos, drawings and stories. But what really sets *Champroad* as a publication for *bōsōzoku* apart from the above publications about *bōsōzoku* is its approach towards violence: in *Champroad's* articles, references to the violent aspects of the *bōsōzoku* subculture remain conspicuously muted. Whenever physical violence makes an appearance in the magazine, it does so either within a socially sanctioned context such as amateur boxing or martial arts, within the fictional (and thus "unreal") framework of manga, or through its negation, as in the frequent emphatic statements by *bōsōzoku* or *kyūshakai*<sup>10</sup> groups that they do not endorse violence, or in the habitual denouncements of violence in the magazine's interviews with present or former inmates of Japan's penal institutions.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, the fact that violence, which is so much at the centre of most other publications about the *bōsōzoku* topic, is so expressly rejected in the statements in *Champroad*, should not be taken as an accurate reflection of the magazine makers' or their readership's actual attitude. After all, the journalists behind the magazine know very well that any suggestion of *Champroad* promoting or endorsing violence might offer Japan's law enforcement agencies a legal handhold to restrict the magazine's distribution, or even to close it down.

But the illustrations that fill the pages of *Champroad* speak a different language: here, signifiers of potential violence are evident, in the ritualized intimidating postures of the *bōsōzoku* or *kyūshakai* members posing for the cameras as well as in occasional suggestive elements such as a baseball bat attached to a motorbike, or a *jutte* truncheon peeking from the hilt of a boot. Yet again, it must be asked what motivated these suggestive displays, whether they are due to people's actual inclination

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<sup>9</sup> For easier comprehension, the names of all four magazines (originally in katakana) are given in their English version.

<sup>10</sup> Recently, many groups particularly of middle age *bōsō* bike owners use the *kyūshakai* (vintage vehicle club) label to sidestep the negative connotations associated with the term *bōsōzoku*.

<sup>11</sup> It is hard to fathom how much of the inmates' statements is due to honest remorse, and how much of it is lip service so as not to impair their already precarious situation any further.

to act violently, or more to their perceived need to gain credibility among their *bōsōzoku* peers through a display of the essential tough guy / tough gal image. In short, the conflicting message between the belligerent markers in the visuals and the denouncement of aggressive conduct in the texts makes it difficult to come to a reliable conclusion about the violent potential in the *bōsōzoku* groups. To a great part, of course, this difficulty is also owed to the circumstance that there is no single, definite *bōsōzoku* identity. Rather, the *bōsōzoku* subculture has always consisted of a multifaceted array of communities with very divergent interests, from informal circles of friends who are only interested in their vehicles, to rigidly structured, highly hierarchical organizations whose foremost concern is the defence of their turf and the violent confrontation with their perceived enemies. But however great or small the real threat emanating from these groups may be, the images in *Champroad* show that by and large, intimidation rituals are still a crucial part of the *bōsōzoku* performance.

### 3. Today's situation – what has changed?

Recently, though, changes in the perception of the *bōsōzoku* subculture have become visible. Over the last ten years, there has been a noticeable increase in both film and print releases about *bōsōzoku* and related issues such as the *yankii* youth<sup>12</sup>, hinting at a renewed interest in this topic, but with a different focus.

Previously, almost all *bōsōzoku*-themed publications outside of the *bōsōzoku* fanzine market have treated the violence of the *bōsōzoku* subculture as a socially disruptive phenomenon which, in one way or another, needs to be taken care of. In the more recent publications, the focus is also on the violent aspects of the *bōsōzoku* subculture, but calls for finding an answer to this problem are noticeably less vocal. Instead, the *bōsōzoku* subject as a whole is being redefined as a constituent part of Japan's recent history, and the apprehensive tone that marked many former publications has largely vanished. Despite the fact that close to 10,000 active *bōsōzoku* are still on the road, the *bōsōzoku* issue is increasingly treated as a matter of the past.

Between 2004 and today, more than twenty DVDs about *bōsōzoku* have been released in Japan. Published by niche market video companies, they are on the whole rather basic fare: interviews with ex-*bōsōzoku* reminiscing about their *bōsōzoku* days, releases of archival photo and video footage, and low-budget dramatizations of celebrated *bōsōzoku* leaders' lives, or of the legendary gang fights of the 1970s. Released as documentaries or, in the latter case, as documentary re-enactments, they claim to

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<sup>12</sup> *Yankii*: groups of rebellious junior and (less frequently) senior high school students who display their contempt for school authority through confrontational behaviour provocative breaches open disregard of school regulations and open disobedience. Truancy, Many *bōsōzoku* members started out as *yankii*.

offer “authentic accounts” (*jitsuroku*) of the *bōsōzoku* subculture’s history, but with ex-*bōsōzoku* as both producers and narrators, it should be no surprise that this authenticity is strongly coloured by the *bōsōzoku* community’s view of events.

Like the reports in Japan’s mainstream media, these video productions also focus predominantly on the violent side of the *bōsōzoku* story. But whereas the mainstream media treat this violence as the *bōsōzoku* subculture’s most harmful and destructive feature, the *jitsuroku* videos employ it as one of the decisive components of their *bōsōzoku* narrative: for them, fighting is not only a valid means of settling conflicts between rival groups, it is also a key element for *bōsōzoku* groups to establish and maintain their internal structure, as it affords their members a chance to prove their value to the group and to display the qualities that are propagated as the core virtues of the *bōsōzoku* – fighting spirit, toughness, honour and loyalty. Couched in an appropriately elated language, the nihilist destructivism that coloured the stories of Nakabe’s interview partners (Nakabe 1979) now becomes a narrative of the heroic. Meanwhile, the less flattering aspects of the *bōsōzoku* issue such as traffic accidents, substance abuse or petty crime remain unmentioned. Given the low-budget character of these productions and their focus on a special interest topic, it is unlikely that they will ever receive much attention beyond their target customer group. But with several hundred thousand ex-*bōsōzoku* in Japan today, and countless non-*bōsōzoku* sympathizers, the potential audience for these productions with their idealized representations of *bōsōzoku* history is nevertheless substantial.

While catering to the same target group, the latest release by Harumoto Shōhei takes a markedly different approach: his two-volume manga *Carolaway* also harks back to the early *bōsōzoku* days, and it also dodges the *bōsōzoku* subculture’s more sordid aspects such as sniffing thinner or snatching handbags. But the focus on violent conflict which marks the *jitsuroku* videos as well as most other *bōsōzoku* manga is also missing. Instead, Harumoto offers his readers a mundane and down to earth impression of what it was like to be a teenage member of the 1970s’ *bōsōzoku* scene. His young protagonists experience no spectacular heroics but rather the adventures of the everyday – dating, hanging out with friends, running into (and running away from) an enemy gang, going to a rock concert and, of course, the simple joy of riding one’s bike.

The reason behind the popularity of Harumoto’s unpretentious stories is the same that has driven the growth in the number of *kyūshakai* – the changing demographics of Japan’s motorcycle community, including the *bōsōzoku* scene. For while the *bōsōzoku* groups find it more and more difficult to recruit young members, many middle-aged former *bōsōzoku* have returned to the arena, driven by a nostalgic desire to relive the excitement of their *bōsōzoku* youth. But with considerably more at stake in their present lives than during their teenage years, the reckless abandonment of their youth is not an option anymore, and they choose other, low risk versions of the

*bōsōzoku* experience, by living their desires out vicariously in the *jitsuroku* video reminiscences and Harumoto's manga, or in the non-controversial, law-abiding weekend rides with the *kyūshakai*.

But the return of these ex-*bōsōzoku* to their teenage pastime is only part of the picture. Outside of the *bōsōzoku* community, there is also an obvious growth in interest in the history of Japan's rebellious youth, with their peculiar customs and their provocative appearance. Catering to this interest are two publications from 2009, *Yankii Shinkaron* by Nanba Kōji, and *Yankii Bunkaron Josetsu*, edited by Igarashi Tarō. As the titles suggest, the main focus of these books is on the characteristics and the ideologies of the *yankii* youth, but as the *yankii* and *bōsōzoku* subcultures are virtually inseparable, there is also extensive coverage of the *bōsōzoku* issue. Both books are written for an interested, non-specialist audience with little prior knowledge, and while they both highlight the links between *yankii* and more recent youth subcultures in Japan, their main gist is that *yankii* and *bōsōzoku* are indeed a matter of the past. Accordingly, Nanba as well as Igarashi and his co-authors treat the *yankii* and *bōsōzoku* subcultures as a social phenomenon, not a social problem. At the same time, their message also differs markedly from the media productions for a *bōsōzoku* or ex-*bōsōzoku* audience. The latter are clearly promotional: they endorse *bōsōzoku* culture and locate it within a positive value system. Nanba and Igarashi, on the other hand, clearly do not endorse the ideology of either *yankii* or *bōsōzoku*. Their books are important contributions to a better understanding of this subculture and its at times surprising impact on present day Japan's society, but even with the insights that these two books offer, people outside of the *bōsōzoku* circles are not likely to find much to admire about the *bōsōzoku*.

The one exception to this rule is Japan's art community. Here, the distinctive style of *bōsōzoku* subculture has received a genuinely positive echo. For a better understanding of the art world's appreciation of *bōsōzoku* style, it may be necessary first to highlight several of its core characteristics: In the design of their outfit and of their vehicles, *bōsōzoku* display a unique aesthetic that ensures that they will be recognized and categorized immediately, by pretty much anyone. Their customary outfit is a bricolage of traditional Japanese and Western work clothes, military gear and university *ōendan* uniforms, adorned with symbols and slogans borrowed from a wide array of contexts including religion, the imperial military, right wing propaganda, American pop art and street slang, among others. With *bōsōzoku* motorbikes, many of their characteristic features such as the elongated backrest, the drawn back handlebar or the raised fairing were originally owed to a particular style of riding, but they soon took on a greatly exaggerated shape and size with form far superseding function.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> This is taken to an extreme at the *bōsōzoku* community's New Year's gatherings where vehicles are paraded whose grotesquely oversized backrests, fairings, spoilers

Again, these design elements serve as potent signals, instantly recognizable and highly charged with intimations of an irrational, brutal and bewildering power.

The first artists to focus on the rough-edged aesthetics of the *bōsōzoku* were photographers such as Yoshinaga Masayuki and Tsuzuki Kyōichi who, each in his own unique way, brought them from the streets into Japan's galleries and art bookshops: With Yoshinaga's studio portraits of *bōsōzoku* in full gear and with his *bōsō* drive action shots, the artistic quality lies more with the photograph itself, with its composition and the presentation of its subject. Tsuzuki's *bōsōzoku* bike pictures, on the other hand, carry a far more documentary appeal: here, the aesthetic quality lies not with the photographs as such but rather with their subject matter: extravagant and bizarre constructions that testify to a raw and unrestrained creativity within an area of Japan's society which, until then, had never been part of the discourse on art or aesthetics. With the success of Yoshinaga and Tsuzuki, the art market turned its attention also to the work of other, earlier photographers such as Fukuda Fumiaki, whose black and white photo anthology of Shinjuku's late 1960s' *kaminarizoku* scene has become a much sought after collector's item.

Finally, through the works of Tenmyōya Hisashi, *bōsōzoku* aesthetics have come to debut in fine art painting. Tenmyōya, a self-declared "neo nihonga" artist, blends traditional nihonga techniques with motives that are commonly regarded as garish, gaudy and vulgar, such as medieval warlords' coats of armor, *irezumi* tattoos and, over and over again, the visual language of the *bōsōzoku*. Tenmyōya's tenet is that throughout history, Japan's aesthetics have at all times contained strong undercurrents of the brash and the spectacular, and the idea behind his *Basara* exhibition in 2010 was to highlight these currents, linking Jōmon pottery design with Tokugawa era architecture and 20<sup>th</sup> century *dekotora* truck design, among others. Apart from Tenmyōya's own works, the *bōsōzoku* theme was also present there in an artwork designed by Nakajima Yasutaka, a typical *bōsōzoku* motorbike replete with elongated backrest and raised fairing which, instead of the usual cheap paintjob, carries a coating of top grade, intricately patterned *iro urushi*, and a seat with a *goza* surface.

With their contributions to the 2009 "Outlaw Aesthetics" (*autorō bigaku*) issue of the magazine *Bijutsu Techō*, Tenmyōya and Nakajima have become part of the ongoing debate about the borders of art, about which areas of Japan's creative landscape qualify as art and which do not, and who has the mandate to set the parameters for this distinction. Marrying lacquer art or nihonga painting, i. e. techniques which are considered quintessential elements of Japan's cultural heritage, with images taken from

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and exhaust pipes can reach several meters in size. These vehicles are often close to unmanageable for the driver, and they are by no means roadworthy. As the traffic police is out in force to seize these vehicles, outwitting the police and actually making it to the meeting ground is part of the challenge of these events.

what is generally considered one of the least desirable parts of Japanese society, they intentionally break down the arbitrary scholastic distinction between those areas of creative production that are promoted as culturally valuable and those that are not. For them, the *bōsōzoku* style with all its crude and unpolished connotations delivers the perfect counterpoint.

## Conclusion

Appealing to some but offensive to pretty much everybody else, the motorized subculture known as the *bōsōzoku* has been a constituent element of Japan's society for the better part of the last fifty years. Among Japan's youth subcultures, it easily qualifies as the most long-lived and most influential one, and it has left its imprint on people's lives in more than one respect. Laws have been changed,<sup>14</sup> festival calendars have been rearranged, citizens' groups have been founded and civic ordinances decreed (Chūgoku 2003), all due to the *bōsōzoku*. In the design of their attire and their vehicles, they have established a style which is not only unique but also, to put it in advertising terms, delivers instant brand recognition.

From a marketer's point of view, the *bōsōzoku* venture has been a great success: *bōsōzoku* are universally and instantly identified for what they are, they evoke an immediate emotional response, and they have developed extremely successful strategies to realize their objectives – drawing attention and imposing their will on others – at a comparably small risk for themselves and their organizations.

In their efforts to achieve this, their symbiotic relationship with Japan's media has been crucial. Not only did the media give extensive coverage to pretty much every *bōsōzoku* activity, but they made sure to communicate what the *bōsōzoku* wanted to convey: that they are violent, unpredictable and dangerous, and that it is best to let them have their way. This image of the *bōsōzoku* was the mainstay in pretty much every media sector, in news reports as well as in movies, TV programs or manga, with the only exception of the *bōsōzoku* insider magazines where the violent narrative was conspicuously absent.

But with the recent changes in *bōsōzoku* demographics, with shrinking recruitment numbers and a rising average age, along with an internal shift away from *bōsōzoku* groups towards the less controversial *kyūshakai*, the public perception of the *bōsōzoku* problem is beginning to change. With the diminishing number of *bōsōzoku* out on the roads, people outside the *bōsōzoku* community are less likely these days to have first hand encounters with the *bōsōzoku*. With this, *bōsōzoku* harassment becomes less

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<sup>14</sup> See for example the 1965 ban on riding pillion on highways, which was lifted only in 2005 (JAMA homepage).

of an issue on people's minds, and the discourse can move on towards other, less disagreeable aspects of the *bōsōzoku* subculture.

This is not to say that we are witness to a fundamental re-evaluation of the *bōsōzoku* stereotype – after all, images of “the *bōsōzoku*” still provide the typecast for violent juvenile delinquency. But as the focus of the recent publications about *bōsōzoku* for a non-*bōsōzoku* audience suggests, a growing interest in the non-violent side of the *bōsōzoku* scene is indeed apparent.

We obviously begin to acknowledge the aesthetic of the spectacular that they profess, the theatrics in their postures and their bellicose outfits, and the unrestrained creativity that shines up in the outrageous designs of their vehicles. But we do this from a distance, on paper and in exhibition halls, in the frozen moments of Yoshinaga's photos and in Tenmyōya's clinical surrealism. After all, when contemplating the *bōsōzoku*'s raw vitality and provocative aesthetic, we want to do so on our terms, not theirs. And in silence.

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