



# MORINOSUKE KAWAGUCHI

*Japan's Top Futurist*

by *Ain MC*

*Morinosuke Kawaguchi loves geeks. What's more, he fashions solid notions for tweaking technology and other products from his close observations of Japan's vast, inventive otaku (geek) subculture.*

## Capitalizing On His "Sixth Sense"

**M**orinosuke Kawaguchi is a Japanese futurist and innovation expert. He is the founder of Morinoske Company Ltd., a Tokyo-based management and design consultancy. His approach to geekdom and *monozukuri*—the creative process—and how they present a competitive advantage in R&D has made him an icon in Japan. He's renowned as a strategy expert in the management of technology, intellectual property and technology combined with innovation in telecommunications, electronics, cars and other businesses.

His latest English book, *Geeky-Girly Innovation: A Japanese Subculturalist's Guide to Technology and Design*, takes readers on a tour of Japan's Otaku sub-culture telling the story of why Japanese products are the way they are and how companies can tap into this idiosyncratic world to stay ahead. Kawaguchi's off-the wall ideas may be just what Japan needs to kick-start a creative revolution.

"In Japan we are always looking for what we don't have," he says "It looks like we don't have any culture but actually we have a lot. It was only when I started analyzing products from around the world, that I understood what it meant to be Japanese."

## Foreign Countries As Major References

Kawaguchi's work examining products removes much of the cultural baggage that comes with studying foreign countries. "The best way to understand a culture is to read foreign books or poems but language can be a real problem" he says. "For humans it's so hard to understand others, but consumer products have no language—like music—something beyond

spoken words, a meta-language. Once you get beyond language, culture is easy to understand. That is what I do. If you look at the products from different countries—even if you can't speak to their designers, you can learn so much."

His ideas are glaringly obvious when we think about it: in Tokyo there are vending machines that politely say "Arigato" or toilets that mask sounds and smells to avoid embarrassment, to the eccentric "manner-mode pen" with a built in volume control—so pen clickers can avoid annoying colleagues: these products could have only come from Japan. When tourists arrive at Narita airport they often remark about the efficiency of trains or the high levels of service, but to many Japanese these things are the norm. Kawaguchi thinks this is a good part of isolated island life, as the Japanese can incubate their culture away from others, but this can bring problems as "we can't see others and so we cannot compare."

"When we engineer products we have to break them down into specifics: lines, numbers, hard data. Otherwise we can't manufacture things, so products contain a database of local culture, via numbers. By breaking culture down and studying it, you can learn so much and gain a huge advantage" Kawaguchi explains.

Such analysis of products is not a unilateral process, other countries can apply it too, and by understanding the why behind innovation, engineers can see which direction markets are headed.

"They are the future, we have to adapt it into a strength, not a weakness. We really have no choice, it's our responsibility, we raised them, we made them—we have to be responsible for them."



“I keep only one foot in the Otaku world, if I go too far in I can no longer see clearly. I still keep a distance and try and understand them objectively. I can talk to the products because I am so childlike—I am living in a never-land!”

**His Career Being More Than Just A Passion**  
As a technology management consultant at Arthur D. Little Japan, with degrees from University of Illinois at Chicago and Keio University under his belt as well as a professorship at Tokyo Institute of Technology—he means business, but under his suit he is as wacky as the products he loves.

“I keep only one foot in the Otaku world, if I go too far in I can no longer see clearly. I still keep a distance and try and understand them objectively. I can talk to the products because I am so childlike—I am living in a never-land!” he jokes.

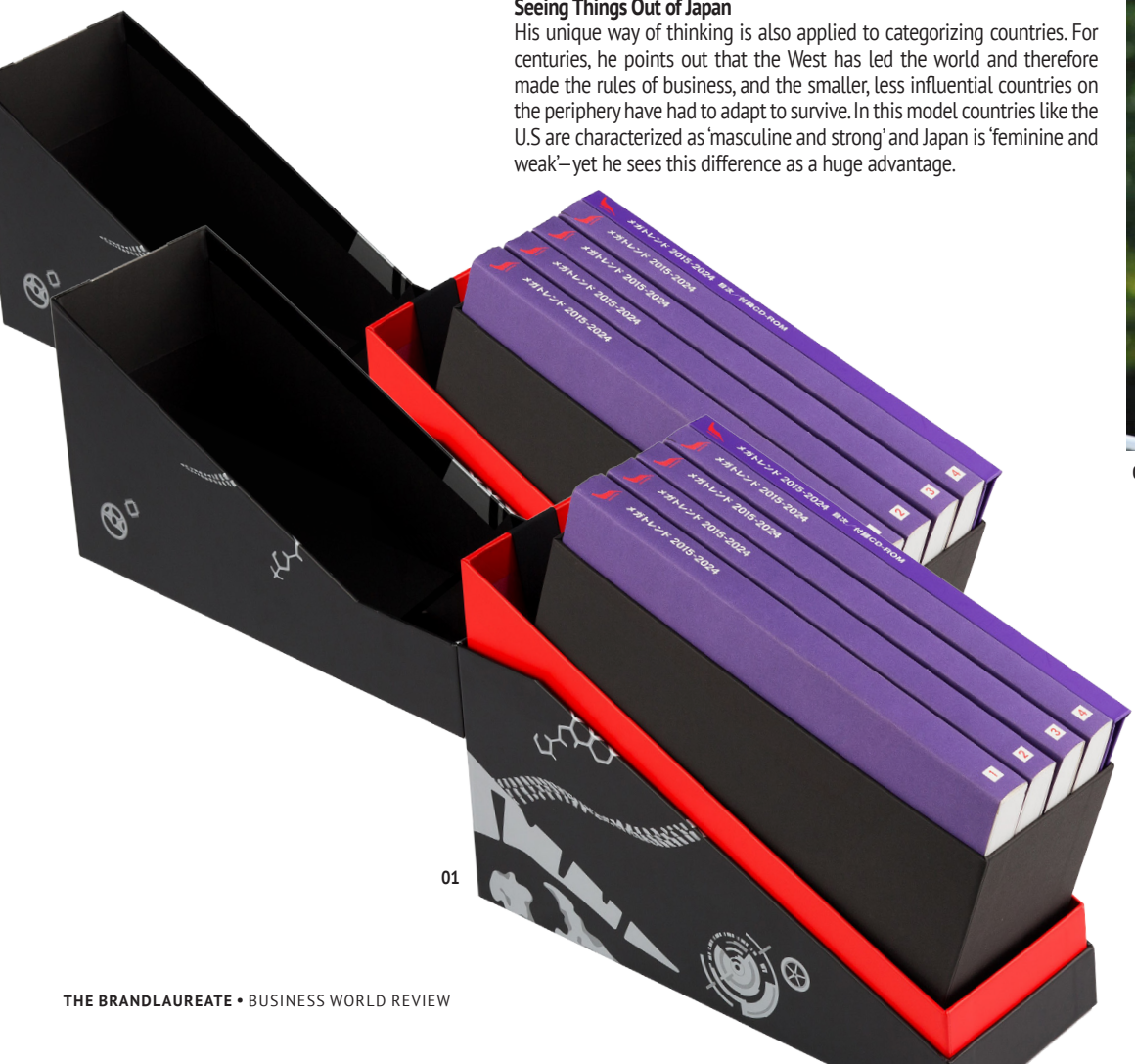
Kawaguchi’s enthusiasm for sub-culture is enough to cause the Japanese establishment to have a collective heart attack, but what does he say to those conservatives who reject the current youth trends?

“In any country, new culture is always disrespected, like hippies or punks, that’s because it’s new. If a new culture can survive for 100 years, it will become high culture. Look at Japan; even Kabuki was once a subculture, mocked in its time, Joruri puppets too, were made for kids or women—not for the samurai, now it’s high culture, simply because it survived.”

Kawaguchi’s years advising industry have given him an almost sixth sense when it comes to predicting business trends and he is determined that this geeky culture can point to a bright future for Japanese companies, but first they need to stop worrying.

“Japan is kind of stuck, people are worried, constantly asking ‘where can we go? What can we do?’ Our hope is the young people. Kids are really the future. I’m sick of people complaining. I heard that even in times of ancient Egypt or Greece adults would complain about the ‘pathetic generation of young people’, so it’s nothing new!”

**Seeing Things Out of Japan**  
His unique way of thinking is also applied to categorizing countries. For centuries, he points out that the West has led the world and therefore made the rules of business, and the smaller, less influential countries on the periphery have had to adapt to survive. In this model countries like the U.S are characterized as ‘masculine and strong’ and Japan is ‘feminine and weak’—yet he sees this difference as a huge advantage.



images :  
O1) Kawaguchi's future forecasting book, MEGATRENDS 2015-2024 adopted by Japanese government and multinationals for their future strategy.  
O2) Kawaguchi has been passionate about the Monozukuri culture.  
O3) Kawaguchi during one of his talks on future.  
O4) Kawaguchi's off the wall ideas in his successful book, Geeky-Girlly Innovation : A Japanese Subculturalists Guide to Technology and Design.

“It happens so fast in developing countries, the second generation of richer people love the Japanese sub-culture because the background of the culture is so similar, it’s a natural shift. Once people have enough food, housing and basic home comforts, then they naturally follow this model, maybe it’s because Japan is running just a little way ahead in pop culture. When this new generation adopts a culture, they become the role model in that society to aspire to, ‘I want to be like him’, ‘I want to dress like her’ the culture in the Far-East is so close knit, it’s natural.

This past decade, was such a turning point for technology across the whole world, but it’s not that Japanese scientists couldn’t keep up, a bottleneck has been reached across all industries. Take for example nano-technology, if only five machines in the world can see a carbon nano-tube, we have got to the point where it costs too much to go any further. This bottleneck is slowing progress down.

“We can do it,” he says “But business people always look for a return on investment, it simply costs too much to keep pushing boundaries.”

These limitations are being seen everywhere, buildings can’t get any taller, jets can’t go much faster and computer chips are struggling to take the next leap forward.

Until recently, science was chemical reactions in laboratory flasks, now it is apps and cloud computers. In the past, once you made a scientific discovery, getting a new product to market was not that difficult. In Edison’s time, he could make lots of new prototypes and products but today it is impossible for one person to even make a hard drive, it has become too complicated. Now there is no clear border between science and technology, it’s seamless. The biggest issue now in tech management is what the technology is handling.


The world of technology simply wasn’t prepared for this shift:

“What to do is much more difficult than how to do it. Before, how to make something was the real challenge. It used to be so clear, management of technology was clear, we knew what to do and the process of doing it was difficult. Now what to do is hard, the only advantage is speed.”

It is now up to the unmeasurable things, creativity, artistry and in particular medical products, as human feelings are much harder to quantify. In fact, we have incredible technology in our pockets—now we need the creativity to generate new ideas on how to maximize it.

**Happiness Is The Key**  
During his last visit to Malaysia, Kawaguchi expressed his love and hopes toward our nation in such a way that makes you believe more in the capability of the country to strive forward in technology advancement.

“Malaysia is a good country. It’s different and it’s moving so fast. I envy that. Malaysia is probably one of the very exceptional countries, you are multiracial with multi religions but you’re 1Malaysia. To be achieving this everyday, it’s already a miracle. If you compared the outside world, it’s miserable with all the differences. If you go to Korea or Japan, they are not as happy as you are. In the mass of this diversity and this miracle growth, you still keep this optimistic and that’s magic.”

Kawaguchi strongly believes that this is what Japan is lacking now, the ability to be happy with differences amongst the people. He hopes to have such harmony in Japan because if they can master this, a bright future sure awaits. 

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