

From Economic Collapse to Cultural Reflection: Neon Genesis Evangelion as a Lens on Japan's Lost Decade

Jingwen Shi^{1,a,*}

¹*Beijing No.4 High School International Campus, Beijing, China*

a. shi867201@outlook.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Following the collapse of Japan's asset price bubble in the early 1990s, the country experienced a prolonged period of economic stagnation, which influenced social dynamics and psychological well-being. This article examines the profound impact of Japan's "Lost Decade" on the cultural landscape, particularly through the lens of the iconic anime Neon Genesis Evangelion. The narrative complexity of Evangelion, with its themes of societal alienation, economic despair, and identity crises, resonates with the anxieties faced by Japanese youth during this tumultuous time. Utilizing a case study approach, this paper analyzes how the series reflects broader social pressures and personal struggles, particularly through its central characters—Shinji, Asuka, and Rei. Additionally, the article explores Evangelion's transformative influence on otaku culture and the anime industry, highlighting its role in popularizing the production committee model. Despite its significant cultural impact, this study acknowledges limitations, including a narrow focus on the series' immediate cultural context and a need for a more robust psychological analysis. The findings suggest that Neon Genesis Evangelion serves as a critical lens for understanding the interplay between economic hardship and cultural expression in contemporary Japan.

Keywords: Neon Genesis Evangelion, Lost Decade, Japanese culture, anime, media studies.

1. Introduction

Japan's rapid post-war economic growth, which had propelled the country to become the second-largest economy in the world by the 1980s, came to a dramatic halt in the early 1990s. The collapse of Japan's asset price bubble in 1991, which had been fueled by speculative investments in real estate and stock markets, marked the beginning of the "Lost Decade" (Heisei Recession). This period, spanning much of the 1990s and extending into the early 2000s, was characterized by prolonged economic stagnation, deflation, a sharp decline in asset values, and a banking crisis that crippled Japan's financial system [1]. Scholars note that the "Lost Decade" significantly affected Japan's social fabric, leading to increased stress, isolation, and shifts in family dynamics. These social strains were compounded by traumatic national events such as the 1995 Hanshin Earthquake and the Aum Shinrikyo sarin gas attack, both of which deepened the public's sense of insecurity and vulnerability. In this context, cultural expressions like anime became outlets for exploring the collective anxieties of the time. One notable example is Neon Genesis Evangelion, which resonated deeply with Japanese youth by addressing themes of economic pessimism, societal alienation, and psychological conflict

[2]. The series' narrative complexity and portrayal of characters grappling with personal and societal crises reflect the broader psychological and social challenges of the "Lost Decade" [3].

This article uses a case study approach to situate Neon Genesis Evangelion in the context of Japan's economic recession (the "lost decade") and explore how the anime reflects profound social, economic, and psychological themes. Drawing from formal studies in media, psychology, and Japanese cultural studies, this paper dissects EVA's representation of societal pressures, alienation, and Japan's search for identity. In addition, this article explores how Neon Genesis Evangelion influenced otaku culture and the anime industry, while linking Japan's economic difficulties to evolving patterns of media consumption.

2. Synopsis of Neon Genesis Evangelion (EVA)

Neon Genesis Evangelion (EVA), directed by Hideaki Anno, is widely regarded as a cultural and psychological reflection of Japan's socioeconomic conditions during the 1990s, particularly the challenges that emerged during the "Lost Decade." Released in 1995, the anime quickly became a cultural milestone, resonating deeply with audiences both in Japan and abroad. At its core, EVA uses its sci-fi narrative—centered around teenagers piloting giant mechs to protect humanity from mysterious beings called Angels—to delve into complex psychological and societal issues. The series tackles themes of psychological trauma, isolation, and existential dread, mirroring the personal and collective struggles brought on by Japan's prolonged economic uncertainty.

In EVA, the world is depicted as struggling to recover from a cataclysmic event known as the "Second Impact." Occurring fifteen years before the events of the series, the Second Impact was a global catastrophe that wiped out half of humanity and caused massive geopolitical, environmental, and social upheaval. This disaster, framed as the result of a failed scientific experiment involving an alien entity, unleashed devastating tsunamis, earthquakes, and drastic climate changes, leaving the world in disarray. The aftermath of the Second Impact serves as an allegory for Japan's own economic turmoil in the 1990s following the collapse of the asset price bubble, known as the "Lost Decade." Like Japan's struggle to recover from widespread financial ruin, EVA's world grapples with the lingering consequences of a global disaster as it attempts to rebuild itself from overwhelming destruction and loss. The anime centers on Shinji Ikari, a teenage boy who is recruited by a secretive organization called NERV to pilot a massive biomechanical robot known as an Evangelion (Eva). Shinji's mission is to defend humanity from mysterious and powerful beings called Angels, whose attacks threaten the survival of the human race. While EVA's narrative initially appears to revolve around thrilling mecha battles and apocalyptic stakes, it delves deeply into psychological and existential themes. Shinji's role as a reluctant pilot reflects broader themes of alienation, fear of failure, and the weight of societal expectations, resonating with a generation that grew up during Japan's economic downturn.

3. EVA Reflection of Socioeconomic and Psychological Struggles in the Real World

3.1. NERV and Japan's Bureaucracy: A Reflection of Societal Distrust

NERV, the shadowy organization central to the narrative, reflects the increasing distrust in Japan's bureaucratic institutions during the economic downturn. Much like Japan's real-world government and corporations, NERV operates with a utilitarian ethos, prioritizing survival over individual welfare [3]. Scholars have drawn comparisons between NERV's opaque operations and the Japanese government's slow, inadequate response to economic and social crises during the 1990s.

NERV's extensive global reach and its partnerships with international organizations reflect Japan's reliance on global markets and foreign investments as crucial components for its economic recovery. The organization operates behind closed doors, making decisions that impact the fate of humanity

without public oversight or accountability. This lack of transparency mirrors the Japanese government's handling of economic policies during the "Lost Decade," where citizens often felt sidelined as bureaucratic decisions were made without their input or understanding. Moreover, the prioritization of political power and strategic interests over personal welfare within NERV resonates with the growing concerns in Japanese society regarding governmental and corporate accountability. Throughout the 1990s, public trust in institutions diminished significantly due to perceived failures in addressing pressing social issues, such as rising unemployment, increasing mental health crises, and the plight of the "lost generation"—young people who struggled to find stable employment and meaningful opportunities in a stagnant economy. NERV's leaders, much like government officials at the time, are depicted as more concerned with preserving their authority and maintaining the status quo than with the well-being of individuals affected by the crises. This dynamic reflects a broader societal sentiment that the powers that be were more invested in managing their own interests than addressing the needs and struggles of the populace.

3.2. Tokyo-3: A Reflection of Resilience and Isolation in Modern Society

After the destruction of Tokyo-1 (reflects real world Tokyo), Japanese government transferred capital function to Tokyo-3. In Episode 2, at the 11:40 mark, viewers are introduced to this futuristic city, meticulously designed as a fortified refuge to protect humanity from the assaults of the mysterious beings known as Angels [4]. This city features retractable buildings that can descend into underground facilities, serving as a powerful metaphor for both the resilience and vulnerability of humanity in the face of existential threats. While Tokyo-3 exemplifies advanced technological achievements and urban planning, it also presents a starkly cold and isolating environment. This duality reflects the growing sense of alienation prevalent in modern Japanese society, particularly during the tumultuous period of the 1990s. Despite the impressive advancements in technology and infrastructure, the economic instability experienced during the "Lost Decade" resulted in widespread social disconnection. Many citizens found themselves feeling increasingly isolated, grappling with feelings of uncertainty and anxiety about their futures.

3.3. Reflection of Hideaki Anno's Personal Experience

As discussed by Rizzaro, EVA deeply reflects director Hideaki Anno's personal struggles. Before the production of EVA, Anno already acquired his reputation in the industry. However, after the sequel of Royal Space Force was canceled due to financial problem, Anno was mentally depressed and sealed himself for around 4 years. During this period of isolation, Anno grappled with feelings of depression and despair, mirroring the emotional turmoil faced by the show's protagonist, Shinji Ikari, who frequently seeks to escape his responsibilities. Ultimately, Anno resolved to confront his challenges rather than flee from them, a sentiment echoed in a famous line from the series. He reflects on this transformative decision in his writing, stating: "I tried to include everything of myself in Neon Genesis Evangelion — myself, a broken man who could do nothing for four years. A man who ran away for four years, one who was simply not dead. Then one thought. 'You can't run away,' came to me, and I restarted this production. It is a production where my only thought was to burn my feelings into film [5]." This candid admission reveals how deeply personal experiences influenced the narrative and thematic depth of EVA.

4. The characters and important symbols in EVA reflect real life

Neon Genesis Evangelion delves into the psychological struggles of its characters, particularly Shinji Ikari, Asuka Langley, and Rei Ayanami. These struggles are emblematic of the mental health crises and identity conflicts experienced by Japanese youth during the Lost Decade [3]. According to the

setting, Evangelions (Evas), giant robots used to fight against angels, must be driven by young pilots. The pressure placed on the young pilots, particularly Shinji Ikari, to sacrifice their well-being for the sake of humanity, echoes societal pressures faced by youth in Japan and beyond.

4.1. Shinji Ikari and the Burden of Responsibility

Shinji's reluctance to pilot the Evangelion and his strained relationship with his father, Gendo, who's also the commander of NERV, are central to the series' critique of generational expectations. The pressure on Shinji mirrors the real-world expectations placed on Japanese youth during the economic downturn. As economic prospects dwindled, young people were expected to conform to societal roles while facing limited opportunities [2]. Shinji's resistance to piloting the Evangelion symbolizes his rejection of these imposed responsibilities, representing a broader societal trend of youth resistance to traditional norms.

The strained relationship between Gendo Ikari and his son, Shinji, serves as a poignant representation of the broader theme of generational conflict within Japanese society. Gendo as a prominent figure of the older generation. His character is often viewed as emblematic of the traditional values and expectations that have shaped Japanese culture, emphasizing sacrifice and adherence to social norms. This perspective reflects the pressures faced by the older generation to maintain stability and order, often at the expense of emotional connection and familial relationships. In stark contrast, Shinji represents the younger generation's struggle against these established norms. He embodies resistance, emotional vulnerability, and a profound sense of alienation, rejecting the responsibilities imposed upon him by his father and society at large. This conflict is further exacerbated by the socio-economic challenges of the "Lost Decade," which created an environment where young people felt disillusioned and disempowered.

4.2. Asuka Langley's Pursuit of Validation

Asuka Langley Soryu's character arc in EVA illustrates the destructive nature of pride and the intense desire for recognition that can accompany it. As a highly skilled pilot of the Evangelion, Asuka initially presents herself as confident and brash, driven by a need to prove her superiority over others. This façade of strength, however, masks deep insecurities rooted in her childhood experiences and her tumultuous relationship with her mother. Asuka's relentless pursuit of validation reflects a societal pressure prevalent in Japan, where success and achievement are often equated with personal worth. Her inability to cope with failure after her defeat symbolizes the fragility of self-worth in the face of societal pressures to succeed [2]. Asuka's emotional unraveling serves as a microcosm of the growing mental health crisis in Japan during the Lost Decade, a period marked by economic turmoil and social dislocation. The stigma surrounding mental health in Japan often exacerbated feelings of shame and inadequacy, making it difficult for individuals to seek help or express their vulnerabilities [6].

4.3. Rei Ayanami and the Question of Identity

Rei's character represents the existential question of identity in a society undergoing rapid change. Unlike other anime from the same period, such as *Ghost in the Shell*, which drew heavily from Western sci-fi influences like *Blade Runner* to explore themes of cyborg existence, Rei's narrative diverges by presenting her as a clone rather than a cybernetic being. This distinction invites viewers to contemplate deep philosophical inquiries about the essence of individuality, self-determination, and the implications of conformity in a society that often prioritizes collective identity over personal uniqueness.

Rei's existence as a clone, created for the specific purpose of piloting the Evangelion, challenges traditional notions of identity and autonomy. She grapples with her sense of self in a world where her

worth is measured by her utility and connection to others, particularly to Gendo Ikari and Shinji. Her character raises significant questions about what it means to be truly "human" when one is manufactured and lacks a conventional origin story. The Lost Decade's social and economic pressures led to a questioning of Japan's cultural identity and the role of the individual within a collective framework [3].

5. Analysis of the impact of EVA on Japanese society

5.1. EVA and the Rise of Otaku Culture

Neon Genesis Evangelion (EVA) played a pivotal role in shaping Japan's otaku culture, which thrived during the Lost Decade as a response to economic and social stresses. EVA became a symbol of resistance against societal norms, offering a refuge for individuals struggling with personal and societal pressures. Its influence extended globally, impacting anime culture worldwide. In 2019, its availability on Netflix sparked renewed interest. Otaku culture, characterized by a retreat from traditional responsibilities, aligned with youth disillusionment. Otaku culture represented a retreat from traditional social responsibilities, aligning with the broader trend of youth disillusionment during the Lost Decade [7]. While EVA critiques the societal pressures faced by individuals in Japan, it simultaneously fosters a sense of community for those who feel alienated by the country's rigid social structure. This is evident in the enduring popularity of Evangelion character cosplay and fan art, which have become staples at anime events across Japan over the years. Through these creative expressions, fans find a shared identity and connection, allowing them to navigate their feelings of isolation and create meaningful bonds with others who resonate with the series' themes and characters.

5.2. EVA's Successful Merchandising

The EVA franchise has achieved remarkable success in merchandising, evolving into a cultural phenomenon that extends far beyond the anime itself. Since its launch in 1995, the franchise has generated substantial revenue through a diverse array of products, including action figures, clothing, posters, and even pachinko machines. The success of Evangelion merchandise can be attributed to its deep narrative themes and striking visual design, which continue to resonate with fans. Nowadays the official Evangelion Store offers a wide variety of products, from collectible figurines to themed clothing and accessories, making it a go-to destination for fans globally. Each product line reflects the series' iconic imagery and complex characters, allowing fans to engage with the world of Evangelion through everyday items.

Furthermore, collaborations with prominent brands, such as UNIQLO, have significantly bolstered EVA's presence in mainstream consumer culture, seamlessly blending otaku culture with broader pop culture. These partnerships have allowed the franchise to reach a wider audience, transcending the traditional boundaries of anime fandom. The merchandising success of EVA serves as a testament to the series' lasting popularity and its unique ability to resonate with both dedicated collectors and casual fans alike.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, Neon Genesis Evangelion has left an indelible mark on both Japanese culture and the global anime industry. Its exploration of societal alienation, psychological trauma, and economic despair resonated deeply with audiences, particularly those who had experienced the effects of Japan's Lost Decade. EVA's success also transformed the anime industry by popularizing the production committee model, which allowed multiple investors to share the risks and rewards of anime production. This article delves into the personal struggles of characters represented by Shinji,

Asuka, and Rei. Through their experiences, this article analyzes how Evangelion critiques the pressures of social expectations, intergenerational conflict, and the search for identity in the context of profound change and trauma. By situating NERV in the broader context of Japanese bureaucratic distrust, portraying Tokyo 3 as a metaphor for resilience and isolation, and drawing on Hideaki Anno's personal journey, Evangelion becomes a cultural artifact that resonates deeply with audiences. This analysis finds that Evangelion has a lasting impact on individual identity and mental health during Japan's economic and social crises, making it an important lens for understanding the complexities of contemporary Japanese society. As Evangelion continues to influence otaku culture and the anime industry, its exploration of these themes remains relevant.

However, this study is not without limitations. The analysis primarily focuses on the series' immediate cultural context and may overlook broader global influences on Evangelion's reception. Additionally, the subjective interpretation of characters' psychological struggles could benefit from a more rigorous psychological framework. Future research could explore comparative studies between Evangelion and other cultural artifacts that address similar themes, both within and outside Japan.

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