Beyond Hello Kitty

A Study of Merchandise Figures in Contemporary Japanese Society

The Japanese, like other societies, have always used images to communicate ideas and information. Traditional woodblock prints and *ukiyo-e* (floating world pictures) captured moments in time with messages of beauty and tranquility. A modern imaging phenomenon in Japan and other parts of the world has been the use of cartoon characters with a more practical goal of communicating marketing information. By affixing images of cartoon characters, companies have been able to create a market of character goods. Since the 1940s, the Walt Disney Company has been one of the top sellers of character goods. Kellogg's "Tony the Tiger" has appeared not only on cereal boxes, but also on t-shirts and toys. Geico's "Gecko" is a very clever character image for that company. "Hello Kitty" is Japan's most well-known character to emerge in the market.

Characters can be categorized into three types. The first type consists of characters from movies, television shows, books, or comic strips. Characters from each Walt Disney movie have always had a fan group eagerly waiting to purchase the associated merchandise. Fans already entranced by the stories, characters, and music have formed an easy target and an easy market to fill. Company mascots such as Tony the Tiger are the second type of characters, also generating a merchandising market that companies can take advantage of. Tony the Tiger has a distinct personality based on the goals for marketing the cereal product. When most people think of this type of character, they immediately also think about the company. People who don't like the Kellogg's cereal most likely are not going to buy Tony the Tiger products. These two types of

characters do not stand alone. They always have ties back to something bigger than just the images. The third type of character, however, does not have previous ties to media or products. "Hello Kitty" is an example.

Most people have heard of the great Hello Kitty. Yet when asked which company Hello Kitty represents, they are stumped. At the birth of Hello Kitty in 1974, there were no movies, television shows, books, or comic strips to draw information from. Hello Kitty was not a created as a mascot for a product such as a cereal or an insurance company. Nevertheless, Hello Kitty is a merchandise character. Merchandise characters are termed in Japanese as "キャラクターグッズ用キャラクター群," which can be literally translated as a "character group for the purpose of character goods." A merchandise character is pure imagery with very little story behind the characters, leaving it up to the consumer to decide what they mean. There are no movies, comics, etc. to draw upon for a large amount of story or character development, and the characters' simple appearance on merchandise is the main selling point. In *Hello Kitty: The Remarkable Story of Sanrio and the Billion Dollar Feline Phenomenon*, Ken Belson and Brian Bremner explain the concept of merchandise characters with the example of Hello Kitty,

> "… Japan has also produced one of the world's most successful commercial images, a demure cat called Hello Kitty. Mickey Mouse and Snoopy may be more famous and lucrative characters, thanks to a string of Disney movies and the long-running Peanuts comic strips. But Hello Kitty is pure imagery. With few exceptions, her creators at Sanrio Ltd. have purposely shied away from developing any story to her life, instead leaving her personality to the eyes and minds of the beholder. This Zen-like technique, intentionally or not, has allowed Kitty to become at once the

princess of purity to toddlers, a cuddly playmate for young girls and a walk down memory lane for adults yearning for another taste of childhood."[1]

Bill Hensley, who is the marketing manager for Sanrio in San Francisco, terms this marketing strategy of using merchandise characters as "retail first" which he explains as having the characters "debut on products, rather than using the characters who start their lives in books, comics strips, cartoons, or films and then move onto products."[2] While these characters have no prior celebrity and have harsh competition with other characters, they do not drown in the market and "Hello Kitty is the most popular and best known character in Japan's commercial and consumerist landscape."[3]

Hello Kitty is not the only one of its type. In fact, she is one of 450[4] characters created by Sanrio Co., Ltd. Sanrio also is not Japan's only company creating characters such as these. San-X Co., Ltd. is its biggest competitor for these types of products. Other companies include Kamio Japan Co., Ltd.; Q-Lia Co., Ltd.; Crux Co., Ltd.; and Beans Style/Passport. Other countries, such as South Korea, have also taken a stab at trying their own character inventions.

These characters are designed to make ordinary objects into something more special. Hello Kitty can be found on everything from stationary to toasters. The main point of these characters is that a customer can buy a boring black toaster, or the customer can buy a cute toaster with Hello Kitty on it. Products with these merchandise characters are of average quality and thus are not particularly expensive. They are not

---

[1] Ken Belson and Brian Bremner, *Hello Kitty, The Remarkable Story of Sanrio and the Billion Dollar Feline Phenomenon*, (Singapore: John Wiley & Sons (Asia) Pte Ltd, 2004), 4.
[2] Brian McVeigh, "How Hello Kitty Commodifies the Cute, Cool and Camp," *Journal of Material Culture*, 5 no. 2 (July 2000), 232.
[3] McVeigh, "How Hello Kitty Commodifies the Cute, Cool and Camp," 232.
[4] The Board Room, "Shintaro Tsuji, CEO, Sanrio," CNN, 10 December 2007, http://edition.cnn.com/2007/BUSINESS/12/07/boardroom.tsugi/index.html#cnnSTCText.

designed to be the best version on the market; however, they are also made so that they will not fall apart.

Sanrio began the merchandise characters phenomenon in an environment with perfect conditions for its development. People in Japan are most drawn to this type of character for reasons concerning communication, identity, and in most cases, escape. The unbelievable success of these characters based on image alone is baffling. Kazuo Rikukawa, president of Character Databank, is fascinated that Hello Kitty, unlike other characters, does not originate from animation, a picture book, a comic, or a video game. "'Hello Kitty was made exclusively as a character to sell products,' Rikukawa said. 'It is amazing such a character will sell for 35 years' without the help of TV broadcasting or comic books pitching its name. Normally, character products only sell about four years at the most, he said."[5] It seems implausible that just an image is able to sell so well.

II. Setting the Stage

The character goods boom of Japan can trace its origins in the 1970s and 1980s to several factors. Various aspects of Japanese culture with regard to the arts and gift-giving traditions united with increased economic wealth and the new trend towards all things cute. These traits crafted the perfect launch spot for merchandise characters.

Japan has always had a visual culture. The Japanese are famous for their images captured in wood block prints. The written language is more like pictures than typical alphabet letters. It is only natural that Japanese people would be drawn to images on products, regardless of their underlying meaning. Gift-giving has always been a vital part

---

[5] Kanako Takahara, "Pawing in enough to be a fat cat, Famed feline has parlayed cute into mega-yen empire leaving fans purring for more," *The Japan Times*, 10 June 2008.

of Japanese culture. No favor is left unpaid as Japanese people trade small tokens of

appreciation with their peers. With the Japanese love for small and intricate aesthetic

objects and the strong desire to be thankful to their peers, it was easy for the market to be

filled with small, cute, and inexpensive products.

By the 1970s, almost three decades after the end of World War II, Japan had

made a lot of progress in creating economic wealth. Young people had excess money

which they could use to buy small trinkets for themselves or as gifts for friends. It was at

this time that a new trend emerged, an entire pop culture centered on one word, "kawaii."

It is impossible in to walk around Japan today without being surrounded by cute

images. "*Kawaii* or 'cute' essentially means childlike; it celebrates sweet, adorable,

innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak, and inexperienced social

behaviour and physical appearances."[6] Sharon Kinsella attributes the origin of the

cuteness trend in the 1970s with a new childish handwriting style called "*burikko ji*,"

which can be translated as "fake-child writing."[7] She explains,

> "Previously Japanese writing had been written vertically using strokes that vary in thickness along
>
> their length. The new style was written laterally, preferably using a mechanical pencil to produce
>
> very fine even lines. Using extremely stylised, rounded characters with English, katakana and
>
> little cartoon pictures such as hearts, stars and faces [were also] inserted randomly into the text..."[8]

The new trend was not just in handwriting. Cuteness was appearing in speech-

patterns as well. In 1970, an article featured in the newspaper, Mainichi Shimbun,

described how the common word *kakkoii*, meaning "cool" or "good," became to be used

---

[6] Sharon Kinsella, "Cuties in Japan," *Women Media and Consumption in Japan*, ed. Lise Skov and Brian
Moeran (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995), 1.
[7] Kinsella, "Cuties in Japan, " 1.
[8] Kinsella, "Cuties in Japan, " 1.

in a childish manner by deliberately mispronouncing it as *katchoii*, as if to mimic the speech of a child incapable of adult pronunciation.[9]

Surprisingly, the media was not responsible for making cuteness fashionable. However, it did not take very long for businesses to catch on, and luckily for those companies, the *kawaii* fashion trend is still booming after more than 30 years. In 1992, the word "*kawaii*" was estimated to be "the most widely used, widely loved, habitual word in modern living Japanese."[10]

Kawaii merchandise is sometimes termed as "fancy goods." Kamio Japan defines "fancy" as a feeling of enjoyment in the present.[11] Kinsella describes fancy goods as items that are not of traditional Japanese style, but instead have an atmosphere of foreign-ness. Fancy goods are small and dreamy looking because of their soft colors. They are sold in small complementary shops, such as stationary shops. [12]

All of these factors created the perfect environment for a character craze. Sanrio started the madness by recognizing an opening in the market for putting characters on fancy goods. The characters designed for fancy goods fit perfectly into the cuteness trend by having a small, soft anatomy, sometimes without mouths or defined bodily appendages such as arms, in order to appear insecure, helpless, or bewildered.[13]

---

[9] Kinsella, "Cuties in Japan, " 2.
[10] Kinsella, "Cuties in Japan, " 1.
[11] "会社情報," カミオジャパン, http://www.kamiojapan.jp/company/index.html.
[12] Kinsella, "Cuties in Japan, " 2.
[13] Kinsella, "Cuties in Japan, " 3.

III. History of Merchandise Characters

Shintaro Tsuji, the president of Sanrio, is the mastermind behind the origin of merchandise characters. Sanrio was the first company to make character fancy goods and take advantage of the new market. Soon after, other companies caught on and created their own characters. However, Sanrio has continued to stay at the lead of the merchandise character business.

Shintaro Tsuji was born on December 7, 1927, in Kofu, Yamanashi prefecture, an area close to Tokyo, but isolated and landlocked by mountains.[14] In order to produce anything in Yamanashi, an old saying goes, "you have to be either strong or clever."[15] Therefore, instead of struggling to produce the little amount of rice possible, the people of Yamanashi produced luxury items such as silk and fruit.[16] Certainly this was on Tsuji's mind when he thought about products for his own company, then named Yamanashi Silk Center Co., Ltd. (The company name was changed to Sanrio Co., Ltd. in April 1973.[17]) Tsuji, being clever in selling his products, discovered that if he attached a flower or embellished the product with a design, such as a strawberry, the product no longer was an ordinary item and sold better. He explained, "If you attach value or design to the product[s], they sell in a completely different way."[18] However, Tsuji soon realized that adding a flower or strawberry design wasn't enough. He needed actual characters for the best effect. Commissioning artists was expensive since then the company would have to pay royalties, so Tsuji decided that if his company had its own

---

[14] Belson and Bremner, 33.
[15] Belson and Bremner, 33.
[16] Belson and Bremner, 33.
[17] "サンリオのあゆみ," サンリオ, http://www.sanrio.co.jp/corporate/about/history.html.
[18] Belson and Bremner, 39.

original characters, he could expand to "a new set of businesses with the copyrights."[19]
Thus, Tsuji began the merchandise character business. After many attempts at creating a
popular character, the company conducted research on what types of characters were
most appealing to its Japanese audience. Tsuji explains, "According to our own research,
the most popular animal character was a dog, then a white cat, and the third one was a
bear. Snoopy already existed as a dog character -- that's why we went for the second most
popular character. We asked [our] artists to design a character based on a white cat."[20]
Thus, Hello Kitty was created in 1974 and from then on, Tsuji was easily able to
dominate the merchandise character goods market.
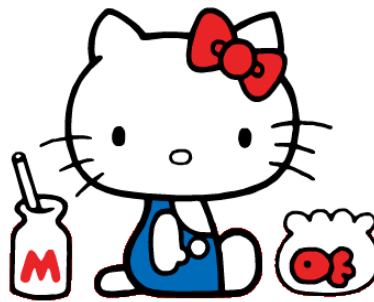
Hello Kitty (first design, 1974)[21]

With the success of Sanrio, it wasn't long until other companies followed suit.
San-X, initially Sanrio's largest Japanese merchandise character competition, was
founded by Kyozo Chida in April 1932, under the name of CHIDA HANDLER (the
name was changed to San-X in May 1973).[22] The company, a producer of paper products,
began to add original characters to their products at the start of the 1980s. However, their
first success wasn't until 1987 with their character Pinny-Mu, a brown bear who likes

---

[19] Belson and Bremner, 39.
[20] The Board Room, "Shintaro Tsuji, CEO, Sanrio," CNN, 10 December 2007,
http://edition.cnn.com/2007/BUSINESS/12/07/boardroom.tsugi/index.html#cnnSTCText.
[21] "Design Collection 1974-1979," ハローキティ, http://www.hellokitty.ne.jp/kt_design74-79.html.
[22] 会社概要, "サンエックスってどんな会社？" San-Xネット, http://www.san-x.co.jp/company/comp01.html.

potato soup and baseball,[23] and their major entrance into the market wasn't until 1995

with Tarepanda, a lazy panda with sleepy eyes.
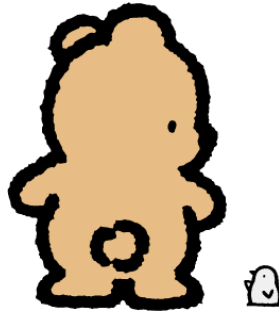
Pinny-Mu[24]

More and more companies began to enter the merchandise character market, such

as Kamio Japan in June 1987,[25] Crux in Janurary 1992,[26] and Q-Lia in November 1996.[27]

Sanrio clearly had a major head start on all the other companies, and to this day Sanrio's

most successful character, Hello Kitty, is the most widely known merchandise character.

IV. Appeal

Merchandise characters fill a void in the market as well as a void in Japanese

society. People use the characters for social communication, identity, and most of all,

escape. The simplicity of the characters allows for a wide range of uses. Images of the

characters are applied as decals to products and the figures are sold as stand-alone items.

Thus they serve two purposes: to promote products and to be products themselves.

---

[23] RM Enterprises, "Pinny-Mu Profile," http://www.rmlicensing.com/ENG/Sanx/pinnymu.htm.
[24] "とれたて！情報局　ハイパー: ピニームー," San-Xネット, http://blog.san-x.co.jp/toretate/cat37/.
[25] "会社概要," カミオジャパン, http://www.kamiojapan.jp/company/outline.html.
[26] "会社情報," クラックス, http://www.crux.jp/crux.html.
[27] "会社紹介," QLia-Web, http://www.qlia.com/CompanyInfoAndMap.html.

Bad Batsumaru[28]

Many different merchandise characters are available to the Japanese people. The characters appeal to a wide age group: adults (mainly young women), teen-agers, and children. It may seem that these characters are only meant for children and young girls, but the companies have created characters for everyone. For example, even teenage boys adorn themselves with Sanrio's Bad Batsumaru, a tough guy penguin. Charms featuring a favorite character dangle off the cell phones of salarymen who are usually "indistinguishable with their gray suits and cigarettes."[29]

While initially characters were marketed to younger age groups, as the customers grew older, they still loved the characters and still wanted to collect character merchandise. Because they are so widely available, it is easy to be a collector of a specific character or group of characters.

Merchandise character products are used for social communication when they are given as gifts. People who closely identify themselves with certain characters may wear clothing and accessories that portray the characters. These people are considered fans of the characters and form a group known as a "fandom." However, it is not necessary for the receiver to be a fan of the character but can regard it just as a cute image. It is easy

---

[28] "All About: Badtz Maru," Sanriotown, http://blog.sanriotown.com/blog/2006/12/22/all-about-bad-badtz-maru/.

[29] Mary Roach, "Cute Inc., What can you say about a high-powered exec with an Elmo charm on his cell phone? He gets it," *Wired* 7 no. 12 (December 1999): 1.

just to use these characters for escape into a simple fantasy world because this does not require watching a movie or television series or reading comics about the characters. They have minimal background stories so they do not require much effort to get involved with them.

Unlike movie or television characters, merchandise characters are not made to speak. However, Douglas McGray comments that while Hello Kitty has no mouth, she is able to communicate with a "global audience and say different things to different people."[30] Because Hello Kitty was designed to be just like an English girl, Japanese people give her the attribute of "Western" and like her for that reason. She is very popular with Americans and Europeans partly because she is a cute white cat but also because she is from Japan. As a result, McGray remarks, "Hello Kitty is Western, so she will sell in Japan. She is Japanese, so she will sell in the West."[31] Thus people all over the world can enjoy merchandise characters such as Hello Kitty.

A. Social Communication

Merchandise characters can be used for different types of communication. They can be used as gifts, as communication from afar, and as a non-confrontational method of communication within families.

Shintaro Tsuji describes his character merchandise as "social communication."[32] Tsuji's "social communication" business plan is an initiative to create a variety of "relatively inexpensive fancy goods," usually less than $10, which can be used as "small

---

[30] Douglas McGray, "Japan's Gross National Cool," *Foreign Policy*, (May / June 2002): 49.
[31] McGray, "Japan's Gross National Cool," 50.
[32] "ソーシャルコミュニケーション." サンリオ, http://www.sanrio.co.jp/corporate/about/spirit.html.

tokens of friendship" to create connections with others or even satisfy a social obligation.[33] Tsuji further explains,

> "Selling something which people want to buy is one of the ways of doing business. But I thought, goods that I want are also something other people want. So we wanted to make goods which people want to send to somebody else as a gift. The idea is that goods are for social communication purposes and that has been accepted worldwide.
>
> In addition, to give Hello Kitty goods as a present is very thoughtful. Our three concepts of friendship, cuteness and thoughtfulness have been reaching out to people. It conveys the importance of being friendly. Such gestures are necessary for the Japanese nation. You care about other people by sending some gifts. Those concepts have been accepted worldwide."[34]

Since Japan has such an important gift giving culture, fancy goods serve a vital purpose. Japanese people feel that they must repay any sort of favor from a peer with a gift of some sort, and their gift-giving system can be very complicated. If someone gives something that is expensive, the gift receiver then feels obligated to give another gift back as a "thank you" for the first gift. If the second gift is also expensive, because the receiver does not want to insult the giver, then the giver may feel obligated again. This system can easily become a ferocious cycle of gift trading. Belson and Bremner explain, "The trick [is] to find a good balance between quality and price. Expensive gifts have several potential pitfalls. The receiver might feel obligated to buy something of equal value in return, an awkward position for someone without the means. Or they might feel they are being bribed, particularly in a business setting."[35] Gifts in the form of merchandise character goods set the correct tone and still make the receiver feel adequate. However, this creates a new dilemma as to what character gift to give. Luckily, character

---

[33] Belson and Bremner, 10.
[34] The Board Room, "Shintaro Tsuji, CEO, Sanrio," CNN, 10 December 2007, http://edition.cnn.com/2007/BUSINESS/12/07/boardroom.tsugi/index.html#cnnSTCText.
[35] Belson and Bremner, 42.

goods created from these merchandise characters do not need to convey any background knowledge or prior fandom in order to be given. Thus, giving a Chiizuikka (translated as "Cheese Family") item is easy and worry-free since the giver does not have to consider the likes and dislikes of the receiver. Therefore, these merchandise character goods serve a perfect purpose with regard to the Japanese gift-giving culture. Who wouldn't like cute little cheese slice figures with big eyes?

Chiizuikka[36]

Japanese people are shy by nature and in most cases confrontation of any sort is terrifying for an individual. Thus, merchandise characters can be used to communicate from afar. If a person has a character that is a clothing accessory, such as a Mamegoma seal, fluffy and with big eyes, dangling from a cell phone, it is a signal that the person is most likely not to be threatening. With these accessories, Japanese people are able to communicate on a different level without words.

Mamegoma[37]

Wearing cute accessories and clothing with cute characters on them make people look cute too. Yuki Moorman, a Montgomery County, Maryland, teacher of Japanese language and culture, explains that the Japanese desire to look cute comes from a lack of

---

[36] "チーズ一家," San-Xネット, http://www.san-x.co.jp/newcha/new52.html.
[37] "まめゴマ," San-Xネット, http://www.san-x.co.jp/newcha/new160.html.

social skills and a desire to appear innocent and non-threatening to others.[38] She says, "Hello Kitty is like some Japanese people. As she has no mouth, she is silent. While she has a brain, she doesn't speak. To Japanese people, being voiceless and silent is noble."[39] Japanese people also feel more comfortable when people are silent and prefer expression using other means. Thus communicating by adorning oneself with innocent and cute characters can speak to the people around oneself without the use of words or voice.

Merchandise characters can also replace daunting communication between family members. Kayama explains that mothers use characters as symbols in order to avoid face-to-face confrontation with their children. She says,

でも、もしお母さん側に、成熟したコミュニケーションがとりづらいという未熟さがあって、移行対象のようなものがないと相手と向き合えないのだとしたら、ちょっと問題です。「目の前の子どもという現実にも向き合えない」ということになるんですから。息子とコミュニケーションをとる目的ではなく、「○○ちゃんは昔、いい子だったのにね」と息子の前で独白調にプーさんに話しかけたりするようになってしまうと、よくないと思いますね。

[Japanese] mothers find direct, mature and meaningful communication with their children to be a daunting task, [as a result of family structure and the scarcity of such events]. Consequently, mothers will frequently use intermediary objects to avoid having to communicate face to face with their children. Mothers find themselves in a situation where "they cannot face the intensity of direct eye-to-eye contact with their children." It appears that they are not aiming to communicate with their children; instead, they seem to conduct an imaginary dialogue with [a character toy] instead. The result is a form of monologue.[40]

---

[38] Yuki Moorman, teacher of Japanese language and culture, Interview.
[39] Yuki Moorman, Interview.
[40] 香山 リカ, *87%の日本人がキャラクターを好きな理由―なぜ現代人はキャラクターなしで生きられないのだろう?*, Japan: 学習研究社, 2001, 45.

Whether they are used for returning a favor, acting as an accessory to communicate that one is not threatening, or as a replacement for intimidating communication within a family structure, merchandise characters are able to fit the need for communication in society.

B. Identity

In addition to wearing the characters in order to communicate, people embellish themselves with cute merchandise characters in order to assert their identity. As a uniform society, Japanese people do not have many opportunities to uniquely express themselves. With everyone looking similar, particularly salarymen and students, there can be a loss of identity. Merchandise characters can create uniqueness and identity focused around the concept of cuteness.

It is easy to associate oneself with merchandise characters because the entire background story of most of the characters consists of only a sentence or two. Since the characters have little or no personality, it is up to the consumer to decide on the rest of their stories. For people who cannot dedicate their time to a 100 episode television series, a 20 volume comic series, or even one Disney movie, merchandise characters allow for an easy and almost effortless alternative. All they require is some imagination.

Yuko Yamaguchi, a designer for Hello Kitty, explains that girls or young women try to "project themselves into the character and consider Kitty their alter ego."[41] Since she doesn't have a mouth, customers are able to decide for themselves what Hello Kitty is like. Yamaguchi says, "They yearn to be Kitty. I guess they can put themselves into the

---

[41] Maya Kaneko, "Longevity-wise, Hello Kitty seems to have 10 lives," *The Japan Times*, 26 August 2004, 2.

character all the more because the cat has no facial expressions, with its mouth not drawn."[42] When a person likes the look of the character and perhaps the little blurb as well, they can easily begin to associate themselves with it.

Rilakkuma[43]

For example, it is easy to become attached to a Rilakkuma cell phone strap just from seeing it in a Lawson convenience store because the pure image of Rilakkuma requires nothing back from the customer. The customer is able to decide instantly if he or she wants to have the item be associated with his or her identity as a fashion accessory, since that is all it is.

Adding an accessory to an otherwise boring outfit changes not only the appearance but also the atmosphere of the person. Adorning oneself with cute characters also makes the consumer have an atmosphere of cute – an image some girls may want to give off. Many Japanese men are interested in the type of girl who acts childish and garnishes herself with cute clothing and items. The idea of women being cute and innocent ties into a major fashion style in Japan called Lolicom, short for "Lolita complex" (a surprise to those familiar with the Nabokov novel), which is attractive to

---

[42] Kaneko, "Longevity-wise, Hello Kitty seems to have 10 lives," 1.
[43] "リラックマ," San-Xネット, http://www.san-x.co.jp/newcha/2007/new246.html.

many Japanese men.[44] Some Japanese girls are able to get the attention they desire by creating a cute identity with these cute characters.

Many girls take on an identity of being a shojo, meaning a young or juvenile girl. John Whittier Treat says that while shojo girls are associated with being cute and the Lolicom culture, there is also an unmistakable correlation to consumerism and buying the cute accessories. He explains,

> The word most often associated with this *shojo* culture is kawaii, or "cute." This aesthetic value is directly linked to the consumer role that *shojo* exist to play. A kawaii girl is attractive, and thus valorized, but lacks libidinal agency of her own. While others may sexually desire the *shojo* – and indeed, another phenomenon in the Japan of the 1980s was talk of the *rorikon* "Lolita complex" of adult heterosexual males – the *shojo's* own sexual energy, directed as it is toward stuffed animals, pink notebooks, strawberry crepes, and Hello Kitty novelties, is an energy not yet deployable in the heterosexual economy of adult life in Japan. But as a master-sign for economic consumption, the *shojo* is indeed of immediate and profitable use: in some sense, anyone who consumes in Japan today is to that extent a "*shojo*."[45]

A more specific type of girl, termed as *kogaru*, also uses Hello Kitty and other merchandise characters for identity. According to Tadashi Suzuki and Joel Best, *kogaru* (or *kogal*) refers to "stylish, high-school age girls in Japan."[46] The term is not a demographic category but rather a "social type," and the girls deemed as such pay particular attention to fashion and also set the trends themselves.   The importance of

---

[44] Roach, "Cute Inc., What can you say about a high-powered exec with an Elmo charm on his cell phone? He gets it," 1.

[45] John Whittier Treat, "Yoshimoto Banana Writes Home: Shojo Culture and the Nostalgic Subject," Journal of Japanese Studies 19, no. 2 (Summer 1993), 363.

[46] Tadashi Suzuki and Joel Best, "The Emergence of Trendsetters for Fashions and Fads: Kogaru in 1990s Japan," The Sociological Quarterly 44, no. 1 (Winter 2003), 62.

Hello Kitty to this fashion identity was shown in the spring of 1997, when there was renewed interest in the character after *kogaru* began favoring it.[47]

From the marketing perspective, the characters are naturally made to attract customers. With so many people in Japan wanting to have fashion with references to the West, the merchandise character goods usually contain some English or even French phrases to make them more appealing. As a direct result of the cute trend, Kinsella noted that along with the new styles of handwriting, students began to write horizontally from left to write instead of the traditional vertical writing from top to bottom. Young girls also started including English words such as "love" or "friend" into the new cutesy handwriting, possibly portraying rebellion from traditional Japanese culture in order to be more fashionable with Western themes.[48] As a result, the character businesses began to incorporate these messages directly into their products. Hello Kitty was specifically designed as a European character. Her full name is Kitty White and her story says that she was born in London, has a height of five apples and a weight of three, and enjoys baking cakes and making friends[49] – the "typical" lifestyle of a British girl to the Japanese. Yamaguchi explains, "When Kitty-chan was born, in those days it was very rare for Japanese people to go abroad . . . so people yearned for products with English associations. There was an idea that if Kitty-chan spoke English, she would be very fashionable."[50]

Brian McVeigh suggests that people who identify with characters such as Hello Kitty actually lack an identity. He discusses evidence that fans of Hello Kitty lack a self

---

[47] Suzuki, "The Emergence of Trendsetters for Fashions and Fads: Kogaru in 1990s Japan," 62.
[48] Kinsella, "Cuties in Japan, " 2.
[49] "ハローキティ," サンリオ, http://www.hellokitty.ne.jp/kt_family.html.
[50] McGray, "Japan's Gross National Cool," 49.

in "How Hello Kitty Commodifies the Cute, Cool and Camp." He explains that some

people who like Hello Kitty do not have their own identity and turn to characters to

obtain one and must rely on "superficial, silly, and immature props."[51]

Others believe that the wide usage of character products has lead to a society of

"mechanical people."[52] However, other people believe that "Hello Kitty actually

represents an independent spirit which is seen in her enigmatic facial expression."[53] As

merchandise characters have little story or information, the beholders are truly able to

create the personalities of the characters and at the same time define their own.

C. Escape

The most common reason that the merchandise characters are appealing to

Japanese people is for escape. People use the characters as resistance against the

pressures of society and for distraction and comfort from industrialized Japan.

i. Resistance

Many Japanese women are rebelling from the traditional society of Japan. Instead

of quickly finding a husband and quitting their jobs in order to begin a family, women are

playing more, working as an OL ("office lady") longer, and refusing to submit to the

harsh pressures around them. Kinsella explains,

> "For their part young women had, even more than young men, reasons to desire to remain free,
>
> unmarried and young. Whilst a woman was still a shoujo (adolescent girl) outside the labour
>
> market, outside of the family she could enjoy the vacuous freedom of an outsider of society with

---

[51] McVeigh, "How Hello Kitty Commodifies the Cute, Cool and Camp," 239.
[52] McVeigh, "How Hello Kitty Commodifies the Cute, Cool and Camp," 239.
[53] McVeigh, "How Hello Kitty Commodifies the Cute, Cool and Camp," 240.

no distinct obligations or role to play. But when she grew up and got married the social role of a young woman is possibly more oppressive than that of young company men. In the role of an unmarried woman she was pushed to the margins of society but still able to work as an OL (office lady) on a temporary contract in company offices, spend her money on herself and her friends and socialise in urban centres."[54]

Women following this trend are turning to merchandise character goods to retain their freedom. Instead of spending money on a family, they are using their money for luxury items such as trendy clothes, travel, and cute character products. Kinsella also says, "These young women both savoured their brief years of freedom as unattached urban socialites through decadent consumption and expressed their fears of losing their freedom and youth through the cute aesthetic." [55] The affection towards cute character goods becomes more and more intense as the women become older and "particularly in the period immediately prior to marriage their fascination with and immersion in cute culture becomes still more acute."[56] Women are postponing marriage as long as possible and replacing the comforts of the family with the comforts of luxuries, including character goods.

ii. Distraction and Comfort

Some Japanese people use merchandise character goods to help combat depression and loneliness, many times caused by the alienation of industrialized Japan. The daily suicides carried out by jumping in front of trains are sad evidence that there are many depressed people in Japan. Despite the everyday stresses of contemporary Japanese life, people are able to escape and feel comforted by these characters. With new

---

[54] Kinsella, "Cuties in Japan, " 9.
[55] Kinsella, "Cuties in Japan, " 9.
[56] Kinsella, "Cuties in Japan, " 9.

characters and designs being released each month, some people are able to forget their

loneliness and immerse themselves into a character dream world. The characters are

designed specifically to be calming and promote relaxation for the beholders. Placing

cute character items in the household and around the work space can create an

atmosphere of whimsy to decrease stress. Additionally, the childish characters create a

connection for the longed for childhood.

Part of what makes character goods so easy to escape to is that there are so many

characters. There are over 1000 to choose from, including Sanrio's standard kitty, bear,

and bunny characters and San-X's more unique characters, including a character called

Tissue-san which is a tissue box with other tissue friends. San-X releases 2-3 new

characters each month for a total of about 30 new designs per year.[57] With so many

different characters to choose from and so many different new designs coming out each

week, people can fully immerse themselves into the character culture.
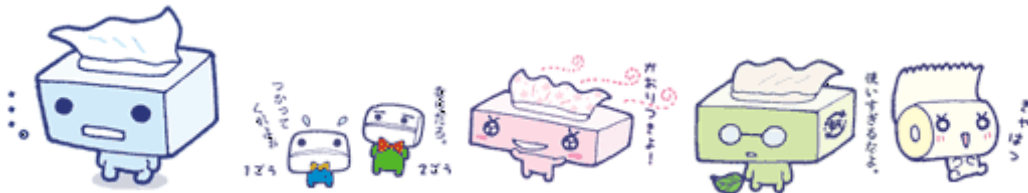
Tissue-san[58]

The companies creating the characters also release new designs based upon

current events to keep the consumers interested. For example, when celebrities started

becoming more open and publicly announcing whom they were dating, Yamaguchi

created Hello Kitty's boyfriend, Daniel.[59]   Also, in 2004, "Yamaguchi released Kitty's

pets – a Persian cat named Charmmy and a hamster called Sugar – based on the recent

---

[57] "San-X Profile," San-X Direct, http://www.san-xdirect.com/about/sanx/.
[58] "ティッシュさん," San-Xネット, http://san-x.co.jp/newcha/new68.html.
[59] Kaneko, "Longevity-wise, Hello Kitty seems to have 10 lives."

pet boom in Japan."[60] Sanrio spends extensive time and resources in making sure the company's characters are up to date with the latest fashion trends and products.[61] The products and characters are designed to keep customers satisfied and entertained. Kinsella explains,

> "Cute style gives goods a warm and cheer-me-up atmosphere. After the production process had de-personalised the good cute design could re-personalise it. Consumption of lots of cute style goods with powerful emotion inducing properties could ironically disguise and compensate for the very alienation of individuals from other people in contemporary society. Cuteness loaned personality and a subjective presence to otherwise meaningless – and often literally useless – consumer goods and in this way made them much more attractive to potential buyers."[62]

With their simple and non-threatening designs, people have found themselves comforted and reassured in the presence of the characters. Belson and Bremner say that "Unlike American cartoons, which tend to be bold, full of aggressive colors and sharp lines, Sanrio's characters are more subtle, with rounder features, more pastel colors and a kind of coziness that strike a chord in Japan."[63] Kayama Rika explains that the fact that characters such as Hello Kitty, cannot argue or talk back is key to their comforting and reassuring natures. She argues that a relationship with a character is safe since the character won't deny the existence of its owner. She believes that Japanese women do not have a sense of self-affirmation. They may even become lost when taking care of their family when they are never thanked for all of their work and care. However, characters can be used as replacement to find that much needed affirmation.[64]

---

[60] Maya Kaneko, "Longevity-wise, Hello Kitty seems to have 10 lives," 2.
[61] Belson and Bremner, 81.
[62] Kinsella, "Cuties in Japan, " 3.
[63] Belson and Bremner, 63-64.
[64] 香山, 74-75.

An important attribute of these characters is that they look very safe. Mary Roach points out that "The cute characters themselves often display elements of passivity and little-girl helplessness. They frequently lack a mouth, for example, and have tiny, rounded stumps for limbs."[65] A relationship with these types of characters is safe and isn't going to change. Shintaro Tsuji explains, "…people of all ages love the chronically cute cat because her soft features and inviting colors put them at ease. The cat, you see, has the right blend of whites, pinks and reds. Her poses are simple, yet seductive. Her blank look and lack of a mouth engender comfort and let people project on to her whatever they want."[66] Sanrio also does not license its characters to what the company perceives to be the wrong sorts of products. "Hello Kitty is a character from dreamland, and the company will not sully her image by lending it to products like knives, which are associated with danger, or cigarettes and ashtrays, which are associated with bad health."[67]

In September 2003, San-X released a new character, Rilakkuma (shown on page 16), whose name is a combination of the words "relax" and "*kuma*" ("bear" in Japanese).[68] With so many people in Japan stressed out from overwork, the concept for Rilakkuma was "healing" and the product was designed for the promotion of relaxation. Masaru Saneshige, a managing director at San-X, explains that healing through relaxation "has become a necessary element for Japanese characters," and that "Japanese characters feature a sort of gentleness. They make people feel cozy and a little happy. That's the

---

[65] Roach, "Cute Inc., What can you say about a high-powered exec with an Elmo charm on his cell phone? He gets it," 1.

[66] Belson and Bremner, 30.

[67] "HELLO KITTY, WAY TO GO! A Superstar of the Character World Turns 30," *Trends in Japan*, Web Japan, 2 April 2004, http://web-japan.org/trends/arts/art040402.html.

[68] "リラックマ," San-Xネット, http://www.san-x.co.jp/newcha/new112.html.

secret of their popularity.'"[69] Kayama further explains that company workers use the characters as a means of escape by creating a barrier with them that is similar to the barrier people create when they send email on their phone while riding on the train.[70] She says that the characters are used for encouragement and as a healing backdrop for doing their work. As she explains,

> この方のように、ビジネスという厳しい大人の世界から、生産性の低い子どもっぽい世界に一時戻ることで羽を休める。そのためにキャラクターを利用する人が増えていると言います。表情のないキャラクターに自分の感情をぶつけ、自分が悲しいときは慰めてもらったり、うれしいときは一緒に喜んでもらう。キャラクターは、自分を励まして厳しい仕事の場に再び出て行けるようにしくれる。複雑化したストレス社会に生きる私たちにとって、キャラクターを癒し系グッズとして用いる風景は容易に想像できます。
>
> Occasionally, people feel the need to escape from the harsh adult business world to the more stress-free environment of a less productive childish world. This is why I believe more and more people are associating with characters. They can project their own emotions onto the vacant plains of expressionless characters: in sorrowful times they can wipe away their worries, in joyful times they can rejoice. The characters provide encouragement, which again consoles them and enables them to remove themselves from the harsher reality of their work. Anyone living in today's increasingly complicated and stressful world can understand how these characters (character-based toys) can easily transform from playthings into a sort of therapeutic product.[71]

Due to Japan's rapid development and increase in economic wealth following World War II, many people were left to feeling lonely in the huge industrialized cities. Simple comforts such as "cozy homes and down-to-earth cities" disappeared and were

---

[69] "Foreign and domestic brands, entertainment, sparkle for Tokyo show." Hong Kong Trade Development Council. 20 November 2003, http://info.hktdc.com/imn/03112003/tradefairs033.htm.
[70] 香山, 55.
[71] 香山, 54.

replaced with quickly sprouting skyscrapers and "impersonal apartment blocks."[72] Many

women were at a loss for comfort in the concrete apartment buildings and found that a

nurturing character could help them escape the "hostile, industrialized urban world."[73]

Belson and Bremner explain that the development of nurturing characters "was kind of

Japan's answer to the fact that with the arrival of an industrialized, mass consumption

economy life gets faster, less connected to nature, more depersonalized and somewhat

alienating."[74] Thus, Japanese people could surround themselves with cute objects which

could "offset that a little, bringing some whimsy and comfort into one's life."[75]

Tarepanda[76]

While it is true that in most cases women are the ones who use characters for

comfort, in some situations both men and women or even dominantly men use the

characters as a means of comfort and escape. After the start of the financial crisis in 1997,

San-X's first big hit, Tarepanda (loosely translated as "lazy panda"), became popular

with stressed out Japanese people. Initially, the adorable character was popular with

children and young women, since it was released around the time of the acquisition of a

---

[72] Belson and Bremner, 65.
[73] Belson and Bremner, 65.
[74] Belson and Bremner, 19.
[75] Belson and Bremner, 19.
[76] "たれぱんだの基礎知識," San-Xネット, http://www.san-x.co.jp/suama/chishiki.html.

new panda in Ueno Zoo in Tokyo,[77] but its charm soon began to win the affection of male office workers.[78] Takuya Shinohara, the manager of a shop selling Tarepanda goods in Ikebukuro's Sunshine City, said, "Our main customers are female office workers, but we often see men shopping here with a smile, too."[79] Takuya Hamashima says that Tarepanda, "a giant panda that lies on the ground looking dead tired," became part of a new "virtual healing" initiative, one of many businesses' "weird and wacky ideas to help relieve anxiety."[80] San-X attributes the success of their first major popular character to the economic situation. "'Many office workers felt exhausted thinking about the dark cloud hanging over the economy, which had grown unhindered until that time,' said Kenji Sone of San-X. 'I guess they saw a little bit of themselves in the worn-out panda character, so they were sympathetic toward it.'"[81] Tarepanda became a source of peace and comfort for the drained office workers.

Characters also have an image of powerlessness. Hikaru Suemasa, designer of Tarepanda, explains that San-X designed Tarepanda to be non-threatening and vulnerable. She says, "It's not just being cute. There is something different – a relaxed look, powerless,"[82] concerning her design for Tarepanda who cannot even walk and must roll instead. She continues, "At first we worried because it doesn't look like it's alive. … But this turned out to be one of the elements that made it sell."[83] Also designed around that

---

[77] Roach, "Cute Inc., What can you say about a high-powered exec with an Elmo charm on his cell phone? He gets it."

[78] Takuya Hamashima, "Stressed out? You need 'virtual healing,'" *The Daily Yomiuri*, Yomiuri Shimbun, 27 November 1999, 1.

[79] Hamashima, "Stressed out? You need 'virtual healing,'" 1.

[80] Hamashima, "Stressed out? You need 'virtual healing,'" 1.

[81] Hamashima, "Stressed out? You need 'virtual healing,'" 1.

[82] Roach, "Cute Inc., What can you say about a high-powered exec with an Elmo charm on his cell phone? He gets it," 1.

[83] Roach, "Cute Inc., What can you say about a high-powered exec with an Elmo charm on his cell phone? He gets it," 1.

time was Buru Buru Dog who is a "huddled, visibly quivering puppy with the slogan 'Anoko dakewa nigatenano' ('That kid is hard to deal with')."[84] Buru Buru Dog is terrified of everything and shakes all the time.

Buru Buru Dog[85]

Characters give comfort for reasons connected to childhood. Yamaguchi of Sanrio says, "There seems to be this feeling of always wanting to be at that level, of never wanting to move on, to grow up and leave it behind."[86] For many Japanese people, the times from very young childhood when life was carefree are some of their most cherished times and also some of their most often reminisced times. Merry White, an anthropology professor at Boston University and author of *The Material Child: Coming of Age in Japan and America,* says that "Childhood, in Japan, is a time when you were given indulgences of all kinds – mostly by your mother, but by society too." [87] She says that in the United States people want to return to youth, while "in Japan, it's childhood, mother, home that is yearned for, not the wildness of youth."[88] Becoming an adult means succumbing to the pressures of strict Japanese society and gaining heavy responsibility for a family, as well as, perhaps a company.

---

[84] Roach, "Cute Inc., What can you say about a high-powered exec with an Elmo charm on his cell phone? He gets it," 1.

[85] "ぶるぶるどっぐ," San-Xネット, http://www.san-x.co.jp/time/new01.html.

[86] Roach, "Cute Inc., What can you say about a high-powered exec with an Elmo charm on his cell phone? He gets it," 1.

[87] Roach, "Cute Inc., What can you say about a high-powered exec with an Elmo charm on his cell phone? He gets it," 1.

[88] Roach, "Cute Inc., What can you say about a high-powered exec with an Elmo charm on his cell phone? He gets it," 1.

Kinsella conducted a study upon the meaning of "kawaii" to Japanese individuals and discovered that a relationship with cute images creates emotions from early childhood. She observed that

> "It is quite apparent from these statements that for its fans cute sentiments were all about the recovery of a childlike emotional and mental state. This childlike state was considered to be innocent, natural and unconscious. And this childlike state was one in which people expressed genuine warm feelings and love for one another. But most of the time this expressive emotional state was hidden trapped inside each individual and something that was not often visible to other people. For its fans cute people and things seemed to be in a state of happy, naive, and natural unconscious unity with life and other people."[89]

With cuteness pouring out of these round and soft characters, it is only natural that Japanese people would be able to relate them to their childhoods and feel comfort in them. Kinsella found further, "The idea underlying cute was that young people that had passed through childhood and entered adult life had been forced to cover up their real selves and hide their emotions under a layer of artifice."[90] Additionally, mothers who do not want to face current realities may project onto their children their memories from the past of being surrounded by their character toys and stuffed animals. In these situations, the characters are possibly used as psychological props.[91]

V. International Appeal

---

[89] Kinsella, "Cuties in Japan, " 7.
[90] Kinsella, "Cuties in Japan, " 7.
[91] 香山, 34.

In countries outside of Japan and other parts of Asia, in most cases, cute things are just for children. Nevertheless, a trend for cute Japanese items has entered into fashion in foreign countries not as cute, but as cool. Merchandise characters have a different appeal in Western countries compared to Asian ones. In most cases, character goods are used only as fashion accessories, which Sanrio discovered in the 1970s when the company had to modify its character designs for Western audiences. More recently, international celebrities have created a following for the Japanese versions of these characters, Hello Kitty in particular, and have revolutionized their meaning in Western culture. These days, Sanrio characters are quite popular among Western youth, whereas San-X and other company characters have never had the same popularity. An explanation stems from the fact that San-X characters, until recently, have been heavily based upon motifs with Japanese themes and cultural aspects. However, interest in Japanese culture resulting from the Japanese animation and manga fan bases has created new international markets for even the most obscure characters.

Merchandise characters have a different role in foreign countries compared to Japan. Sanrio discovered this when the company released character and products to the American market almost simultaneously with their release in Japan. Sanrio found that the company had to change its product designs to suit such a different audience. In many cases, Sanrio had to design two Hello Kitty products, "one for Japanese and one for Americans."[92] Sanrio also discovered that Americans were more interested in action than cute and that American children needed to be entertained. Mari Yakushiji, Sanrio's Tokyo-based head of design for US products explains that since "American girls like

---

[92] McGray, "Japan's Gross National Cool," 49.

moving action-type characters," while Pochacco, Sanrio's "sports-minded pup," was not much of a success in Japan, it became a top seller in the United States.[93]

Pochacco[94]

Sanrio also had problems getting their character products to appeal even to consumers in the Asian countries surrounding Japan. According to Shunji Onishi, Sanrio's head of marketing for Asia, when Sanrio tried to market Hello Kitty in Taiwan and Hong Kong by dressing her in local clothes with local surroundings, the strategy was a flop. He said, "They know Kitty is from Japan. That's why they like it."[95]

At the present time in the United States, merchandise characters are major fashion icons, led by Hello Kitty. "Today, the fabulous feline is embraced by Parisian fashion houses, U.S. pop divas such as Mariah Carey and Christina Aguilera, and legions of fashion-conscious women in rich world markets."[96] With unexpected celebrity endorsements, a following for Hello Kitty was immediate. "Mariah Carey, the Hilton sisters, and other celebrities began to pop up in the pages of magazines with their Hello

---

[93] Roach, "Cute Inc., What can you say about a high-powered exec with an Elmo charm on his cell phone? He gets it."
[94] "ポチャッコ," サンリオ, http://www.sanrio.co.jp/characters/detail/pochacco/index.html.
[95] McGray, "Japan's Gross National Cool," 50.
[96] Bremner, Brian. "Kitty Glitter: Saving Hello Kitty," Business Week, 23 June 2006, 1.

Kitty clothing and bags."[97] Unasked, the celebrities have been advertising Hello Kitty in a way which Sanrio could never have predicted. "Mariah Carey has been seen carrying a Hello Kitty boom box, Cameron Diaz has a Hello Kitty necklace, and figure skater Michelle Kwan has been photographed with a Hello Kitty purse dangling from her shoulder."[98] Some celebrities became so fascinated with Hello Kitty that they completely incorporated her into their image. For example, "[l]ongtime Hello Kitty devotee Lisa Loeb even put the mouthless feline on the cover of her latest album, aptly titled 'Hello Lisa.'"[99] In addition to accessories, Hello Kitty clothing is very popular. Hello Kitty quickly entered the fashion world with a store in Times Square, New York City, opened in 2000 by Sanrio.[100] "In April 2003, under a contract with the designer of a new US brand, Heatherette, models appeared in Hello Kitty print dresses for the second time at a fashion show in Los Angeles."[101]

Hello Kitty has a different image in the United States than in Japan. Instead of being cute and cuddly, she is hip and cool, leaving many members of the Sanrio company puzzled. "'Our characters are all intended to look cute,' said Kazuhiro Suzuki, assistant manager of Sanrio's import and export department. 'But these people seem to think of Hello Kitty as something 'cool' and we haven't exactly figured out why. Kitty wouldn't be cool if we meant her that way.'"[102] In any case, the popularity of Hello Kitty is undeniable. "Licensees in Japan, the U.S., and Europe have plastered the cutesy image

---

[97] "HELLO KITTY, WAY TO GO! A Superstar of the Character World Turns 30."
[98] Tomoko Otake, "Hello Kitty, Pokemon, Doraemon battle for global supremacy," *The Japan Times*, 9 September 2003.
[99] Otake, "Hello Kitty, Pokemon, Doraemon battle for global supremacy."
[100] "HELLO KITTY, WAY TO GO! A Superstar of the Character World Turns 30."
[101] "HELLO KITTY, WAY TO GO! A Superstar of the Character World Turns 30."
[102] Otake, "Hello Kitty, Pokemon, Doraemon battle for global supremacy."

on 20,000-plus products worldwide – everything from waffle makers to diamond-studded luxury watches."[103]

While merchandise characters such as Hello Kitty may be treated just as fashion icons, they are also proving that people around the world are becoming more interested in Japan from a new perspective with respect to pop culture. Belson and Bremmer believe that "[Hello] Kitty is proof positive that Japan's cultural influence and relevance globally is on the rise. Japan's ability to project military force abroad may be hemmed in by a war-renouncing constitution, and its economic prowess greatly diminished since the 1980s, but Kitty and other cultural exports represent … 'soft power.'"[104]

The question needs to be asked about why Sanrio characters have an overwhelmingly larger following than characters from companies including San-X and Bean Style. Looking at the characters, it is clear that both companies followed different routes for formulas for cute. Sanrio stayed with traditional cutesy animals, particularly focusing on kitties, bears, and bunnies. San-X, however, seems to have an array of characters with all sorts of influences. Some of San-X's characters have been created in response to the expression, "You're so cute I could eat you up," which explains why so many of San-X's characters are based on food.

Kogepan, a bread bun nobody wants because he was burnt accidentally in the oven and who spends his days becoming drunk from milk,[105] for example, takes the definition of kawaii to mean something along the lines of so pathetic and helpless that it is adorable. Sianne Ngai explains, "Kogepan's obvious state of abjection and

---

[103] Bremner, "Kitty Glitter: Saving Hello Kitty," 1.
[104] Belson and Bremner, 9.
[105] "こげぱんの仲間しょうたい," San-Xネット, http://www.san-x.co.jp/pan/nakama/.

simultaneous potential for acts of cruelty to less than fully formed Kogepans suggests that the ultimate index of an object's cuteness may be its edibility."[106]

Kogepan also raises the issue of cultural differences between Japan and the United States. In Japan, drinking alcoholic beverages is part of a major social normal and its acceptance can be seen by vending machines selling beer right next to regular juice machines, while the United States is much more strict regarding alcohol. Thus having a character like Kogepan who drinks away his sorrow, while it is with milk, is still most certainly an allusion to drinking beer due to depression. This is considered amusing in Japan, whereas it would be frowned on in the United States.
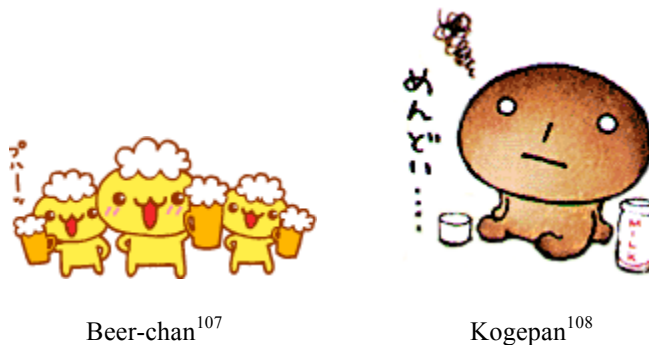
Beer-chan[107]   Kogepan[108]

Moreover, if Kogepan's image is too subtle, Beer-chan's would be over the top for an American audience. As the figure of yellow beer with beer foam for hair, big, starry, intoxicated eyes, and flushed cheeks, Beer-chan looks like he could be motioning for customers to drink, not something American parents would understand for their teenagers. Beer-chan clearly states he can drink because he is twenty years old (as the drinking age in Japan is 20) and he even denies his friend Chibi-Beer-chan drinks since

---

[106] Ngai, Sianne. "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde." *Critical Inquiry* 31 (The University of Chicago, Summer 2005): 820.

[107] "ビアーチャン," San-Xネット, http://www.san-x.co.jp/newcha/new61.html.

[108] "こげぱんハワイアンサマー," San-Xネット, http://www.san-x.co.jp/pan/new16.html.

he is not of age.[109] However, as characters like these, when not a part of clothing fashion, are treated as children's toys in the United States, parents would most likely not approve of a Beer-chan stuffed animal for their five-year-old.

Sanrio clearly had an edge over the other companies by going straight to the international markets at the same time releasing products in Japan, but even now, while other companies are able to compete with the company in Japan, Sanrio still takes the lead in foreign markets. When looking at San-X's or Bean Style's characters, the answer becomes obvious. While characters such as Beer-chan cannot be marketed very well in the United States, many other San-X characters have more traditional Japanese cultural meanings.

Nyanko Matsuri[110]   Nyanko Onsen[111]

One character, called Nyan Nyan Nyanko, is a group of cats who become things, from traditional Japanese food items to pastimes. The image Nyanko Matsuri features

---

[109] "ビアーチャン," San-Xネット, http://www.san-x.co.jp/newcha/new61.html.
[110] "にゃんこまつり," San-Xネット, http://www.san-x.co.jp/newcha/new01.html.
[111] "にゃんこ温泉," San-Xネット, http://www.san-x.co.jp/nyanko/n_20.html.

the cats dressed as *takoyaki* (octopus dumpling balls) and Nyanko Onsen has the cats swimming in the hot springs of Japan's mountainous countryside.

Omusubiyasan[112]

Another San-X character is a set of *onigiri* (rice balls), called Omusubiyasan (translated as "rice ball shop"). With clever names created from puns on the types of *onigiri*, it's obvious what market the characters are made for. Unfortunately, foreigners who have not studied Japanese culture or visited Japan probably won't be able to get a kick out of these adorable little rice creatures.

Hannari-tofu[113]

Beans Style's Hannari-tofu or Onsenmanju-kun also probably are not going to be a hit outside of Asia. Hannari-tofu, which are square tofu characters, and Onsenmanju-kun, loosely translated as "little hot springs rice cake," have little hope of selling outside of Asia.

---

[112] "おむすびやさん," San-Xネット, http://www.san-x.co.jp/newcha/new149.html.
[113] "はんなり豆腐," BEANS STYLE / PASSPORT, http://www.beans-style.jp/hannari/index.html.

Clearly, trying to market characters such as these to people in an international market who do not have a greater than average interest in Japanese culture probably will not be very successful. Characters made from Japanese foods or other Japanese culture items that sometimes overlap with similar ones in other Asian countries may have no chance outside of Asia.

However, with recent fashion trends incorporating Tokyo styles and increased interest in all things Japanese, people in other parts of the world are beginning to become more interested in these types of products, particular people in the Japanese animation (anime) and manga scene. At anime conventions, where large numbers of Japanese animation fans gather, booths selling those strange Nyan Nyan Nyanko products (among others) can be found right next to manga booths in the dealer rooms. Stores such as WizzyWig and KawaiiGifts attend the big anime conventions, such as Otakon, as an easy market for selling these anime-looking products. It's effortless for the anime fans to float from a manga booth to the WizzyWig next door to pick up some super "kawaii" accessories. Because WizzyWig and KawaiiGifts have been attending the conventions for years, it follows that their popularity has been increasing over time. Fans of Japanese animation and manga have quickly found a new love for these anime-esque creatures. It has become only natural for fans to adorn themselves with accessories from a popular anime show, such as Fruits Basket, alongside Nyan Nyan Nyanko products.

VI. Merchandise Characters Not Originating from Japan

       With so much success in Japan, it wasn't long before South Korea got the hint and began to develop their own merchandise characters. The first major character to emerge from Korean artists was Mashimaro, the cynical and perverse rabbit. He was created in 1999 by Kim Jae-In, a Korean cartoonist,[114] and by 2000, Mashimaro was popular in Japan, China, Hong Kong, Europe, and the United States.[115] A possible reason for such success could be that followers of Mashimaro love him precisely because of the rebel atmosphere attributed to him. "'Good girls want to be 'bad,'' explains Shu Qiao, a graduate student at Shanghai's Fudan University. 'They want to be rebellious and make crude jokes.'"[116] Unfortunately, the producer did not predict success for the character and thus did not perform the proper procedures for trademarking it at the beginning. As a result of its popularity, Chinese companies began mass producing so much fake Mashimaro merchandise that the origin of the character became lost in the confusion and the trademark application was rejected.[117]

Mashimaro

[114] Valentine Ding, "Goodbye Kitty," *Time*, 11 March 2002.

[115] "Korea Makes Big Strides in Global Character Industry," *The Chosun Ilbo*, 21 August 200.

[116] Ding, "Goodbye Kitty," 3.

[117] "Korea Makes Big Strides in Global Character Industry."

Lee Seong-hun, "Korean-born Characters Make Global Hits," *Korea Focus*, 20 August 2007.

Kim Bu-gyeon founded Vooz Co., Ltd. in 1999[118] and created the character,

Pucca, in 2000,[119] without making the same mistakes as Mashimaro's Kim Jae-In. Like

Hello Kitty and other Sanrio characters, quality control is key to success. Pucca

designers keep changes to the character design to a minimum.[120] Similar to the San-X

character strategy, there are also many versions of Pucca released, including a Christmas

version, a Hansel and Gretel version, and a Hangeul (Korean alphabet) version of

Pucca.[121] However, a major difference from the Japanese merchandise characters is the

break-away from soft, pastel colors. Instead, Pucca's color is a vivid red, which has

created a strong reaction in the markets.[122]
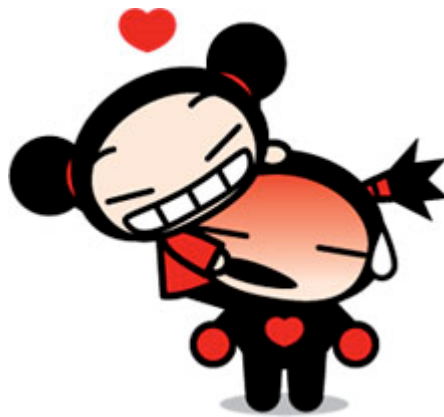
Pucca and Garu[123]

Pucca was a smash hit and gained instant popularity throughout South Korea and

particularly in Europe. She is overwhelmingly more popular in Europe than the United

States, partly because a British company licensed her and her story and friends for a

television series. In 2006, the television show about Pucca and the other characters in her

---

[118] Jung Hyung-mo, "How high will the Pucca man fly his babies?" *JoongAng Ilbo*, July 26, 2008.
[119] "Pucca is…" Vooz Character System, http://www.vooz.co.kr/2007_vooz/kr/html/pucca.html.
[120] Jung, "How high will the Pucca man fly his babies?" 2.
[121] "Creator of 'Pucca' Vooz," *KBS World*, July 10, 2007,
http://world.kbs.co.kr/english/economynit/econit_company_detail.htm?font_size=0&No=1036.
[122] "Creator of 'Pucca,' Vooz."
[123] Pucca Club, http://www.puccaclub.com.

world began airing on British and European TV stations.[124] By 2008, Pucca merchandise could be found in 150 countries.[125]

While Pucca is distinctly Asian, her image is popular for just that reason. According to Lee Jae-kwang, head of the marketing team at Vooz, Pucca became popular to Western audiences because the company accented her "Oriental features."[126] As all things Asian are becoming much more mainstream and cool, having Pucca items is certainly part of fashion and pop culture trends. However, Kim Bu-gyeon, Pucca's creator, claims that Pucca is not from a specific country and that it is up to the consumers to decide what it is. He says, "Pucca and Garu don't have a nationality. Pucca is the lone daughter of a Chinese restaurant owner who loves jjajangmyeon (black bean paste noodles) and Garu is a martial arts trainee. That's about it as background information goes. The rest is totally up to the imagination of the consumers."[127]

VII. Conclusion

Merchandise characters are images and their associated consumer goods that have become a large part of contemporary Japanese society. The characters have no ties to television shows, comics, or movies and were not created as company mascots. Instead, the characters were first created in order to make ordinary, everyday objects more special for the users. Later character goods called "fancy goods" were created as objects on their own. The most well-known character is Hello Kitty.

---

[124] "Creator of 'Pucca,' Vooz."
[125] Jung, "How high will the Pucca man fly his babies?"
[126] "Creator of 'Pucca,' Vooz."
[127] Jung, "How high will the Pucca man fly his babies?"

The last few decades created the perfect stage for the unveiling of merchandise characters into society. Japanese gift-giving traditions as well as a history for all things aesthetic and beautiful combined with a trend to cuteness to allow the merchandise character business to boom.

The Sanrio Company first dived into the new business, creating high standards and precedents for others to quickly follow. Companies such as San-X, Bean Style, Q-Lia, and Crux have followed in Sanrio's footsteps and have succeeded in carving out their own niche.

The characters are used for social communication, identity, and escape. Japanese people use character goods in order to communicate with others due to their shy personalities. In some cases, families even use the characters to communicate love and caring when words are too intimidating. Characters can also be used to create identity, either as someone who is cute and innocent or even as someone who has become like a child. However, in most cases, characters are used for some form of escape. With so many pressures of modern day society, Japanese people want to hide from the stresses of everyday life. Women who are refusing to marry into the male hierarchy and instead are working and playing longer are the some of the major consumers of character goods. The characters are also used for comfort and escape. With industrialization and less comfort in everyday life, people turn to the characters to fill the void. In addition, workers decorate their accessories such as cell phones with character goods as a touch of whimsy and for mental healing. They are able to find comfort and relaxation in the cuteness of the characters.

These uses are particularly relevant to merchandise characters because of what merchandise characters are. They are simple, easy, and cute. The consumer does not have to watch hours of a television series or read volumes of comics in order to become attached to the characters. In one glance, someone can decide if the character is for him or her or not. The merchandise character sells itself solely as an image. Additionally, these characters can be easily liked by all with no strings attached because their limited background stories leave most of their personalities up to the imagination of the individual consumer.

While the most common uses for merchandise characters in Japan are related to communication, identity, and escape, outside of Japan different uses have developed. For example, in the United States, merchandise characters have flourished in the fashion industry. The characters can be found on all types of clothing, and all types of people, including celebrities, use them to make fashion statements.

While Sanrio characters have prospered in Western countries, characters from other companies have not been so successful. A possible explanation for that is that the characters are based too much upon aspects of Japanese culture. Sanrio's characters are typically based upon universal animals while characters from San-X, for example, include themes of Japanese foods that are unknown to Westerners. However, with new fashion trends and interests based on Asian culture, there is a new emerging market for these types of characters.

The creation of merchandise characters is not just limited to Japan. Characters created by Koreans have also found a place in the market, even outside of South Korea.

Merchandise characters have established their place in the world markets. The fact that these characters are able to compete with well established characters from movies and mascot figures is incredible. With Sanrio at the lead, other companies are not far behind and with recent trends and events will most likely catch up. As their popularity increases, new uses for merchandise characters besides communication, identity, escape, and fashion will most certainly emerge. The masterminds of these characters will undoubtedly continue to astonish.

Works Cited

"All About: Badtz Maru." Sanriotown. http://blog.sanriotown.com/blog/2006/12/22/all-about-bad-badtz-
    maru/ (accessed December 13, 2008).

Belson, Ken, and Brian Bremner. *Hello Kitty, The Remarkable Story of Sanrio and the Billion Dollar*
    Feline Phenomenon. Singapore: John Wiley & Sons (Asia) Pte Ltd, 2004.

"ビアーチャン." San-Xネット. http://www.san-x.co.jp/newcha/new61.html (accessed November 28,
    2008).

Bremner, Brian. "Kitty Glitter: Saving Hello Kitty." Business Week. June 23, 2006.
    http://www.businessweek.com/globalbiz/content/jun2006/gb20060623_770391.htm (accessed
    November 21, 2008).

"チーズ一家." San-Xネット. http://www.san-x.co.jp/newcha/new52.html (accessed December 8, 2008).

"Creator of 'Pucca,' Vooz." KBS World, July 10, 2007. http://world.kbs.co.kr/english/
    economynit/econit_company_detail.htm?font_size=0&No=1036 (accessed December 17, 2008).

"Design Collection 1974-1979. " ハローキティ. http://www.hellokitty.ne.jp/kt_design74-79.html
    (accessed December 7, 2008).

Ding, Valentine. "Goodbye Kitty." Time. Mar. 11, 2002. http://www.time.com/time/
    magazine/article/0,9171,216356,00.html (accessed October 26, 2008).

"Foreign and domestic brands, entertainment, sparkle for Tokyo show." Hong Kong Trade Development
    Council. November 20, 2003. http://info.hktdc.com/imn/03112003/tradefairs033.htm (accessed

November 28, 2008).

Hamashima, Takuya. "Stressed out? You need 'virtual healing.'" The Daily Yomiuri, Yomiuri Shimbun,

November 27, 1999.

"はんなり豆腐." BEANS STYLE / PASSPORT. http://www.beans-style.jp/hannari/index.html

(accessed December 6, 2008).

"ハローキティ." サンリオ. http://www.hellokitty.ne.jp/kt_family.html (accessed November 27, 2008).

"HELLO KITTY, WAY TO GO! A Superstar of the Character World Turns 30." Trends in Japan. Web

Japan. April 2, 2004. http://web-japan.org/trends/arts/art040402.html (accessed November 28,

2008).

Jung, Hyung-mo. "How high will the Pucca man fly his babies?" JoongAng Ilbo, July 26, 2008.

http://joongangdaily.joins.com/article/view.asp?aid=2892805 (accessed October 26, 2008).

"会社概要," カミオジャパン. http://www.kamiojapan.jp/company/outline.html (accessed December 7,

2008).

"会社情報," クラックス. http://www.crux.jp/crux.html (accessed December 7, 2008).

"会社情報." カミオジャパン. http://www.kamiojapan.jp/company/index.html (accessed November 26,

2008).

"会社紹介." QLia-Web. http://www.qlia.com/CompanyInfoAndMap.html (accessed December 7, 2008).

Kaneko, Maya. "Longevity-wise, Hello Kitty seems to have 10 lives." The Japan Times. August 26, 2004.

    http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20040826f1.html (accessed November 29, 2008).

香山, リカ. *87%の日本人がキャラクターを好きな理由–なぜ現代人はキャラクターなしで生き*

    られないのだろう? Japan: 学習研究社, 2001.

Kinsella, Sharon. "Cuties in Japan." Women Media and Consumption in Japan. Edited by Lise Skov and

    Brian Moeran. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995.

"こげぱんハワイアンサマー." San-Xネット. http://www.san-x.co.jp/pan/new16.html (accessed

    November 28, 2008).

"こげぱんの仲間しょうたい." San-Xネット. http://www.san-x.co.jp/pan/nakama/ (accessed

    November 28, 2008).

"Korea Makes Big Strides in Global Character Industry." The Chosun Ilbo. August 21, 2007.

    http://english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200708/200708210019.html (accessed October

    26, 2008).

Lee, Seong-hun. "Korean-born Characters Make Global Hits" Korea Focus. August 20, 2007.

    http://www.koreafocus.or.kr/design1/Essays/view.asp?volume_id=64&content_id=101719

    &category=G (accessed October 26, 2008).

"まめゴマ." San-Xネット. http://www.san-x.co.jp/newcha/new160.html (accessed December 8, 2008).

McGray, Douglas. "Japan's Gross National Cool." Foreign Policy (May / June 2002): 44-54.

McVeigh, Brian. "How Hello Kitty Commodifies the Cute, Cool, and Camp." *Journal of Material Culture*
5, no. 2 (2000): 225-245.

Moorman, Yuki. Teacher of Japanese language and culture. Personal interview. October 5, 2008.

Ngai, Sianne. "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde." Critical Inquiry 31 (Summer 2005): 811-847.

"にゃんこまつり." San-Xネット. http://www.san-x.co.jp/newcha/new01.html (accessed November 28,
2008).

"にゃんこ温泉." San-Xネット. http://www.san-x.co.jp/nyanko/n_20.html (accessed November 28, 2008).

"おむすびやさん." San-Xネット. http://www.san-x.co.jp/newcha/new149.html (accessed November 29,
2008).

Otake, Tomoko. "Hello Kitty, Pokemon, Doraemon battle for global supremacy." The Japan Times.
September 9, 2003. http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nb20030909a6.html (accessed
November 29, 2008).

"Pinny-Mu Profile." RM Enterprises. http://www.rmlicensing.com/ENG/Sanx/pinnymu.htm (accessed
December 7, 2008).

"ポチャッコ." サンリオ. http://www.sanrio.co.jp/characters/detail/pochacco/index.html (accessed
December 17, 2008).

Pucca Club. http://www.puccaclub.com (accessed December 7, 2008).

"Pucca is…" Vooz Character System. http://www.vooz.co.kr/2007_vooz/kr/html/pucca.html (accessed

December 7, 2008).

"リラックマ." San-Xネット. http://www.san-x.co.jp/newcha/2007/new246.html (accessed December
13, 2008).

Roach, Mary. "Cute Inc., What can you say about a high-powered exec with an Elmo charm on his cell
phone? He gets it." Wired 7, no. 12 (December 1999).
http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/7.12/cute.html (accessed October 26, 2008).

"San-X Profile," San-X Direct. http://www.san-xdirect.com/about/sanx/ (accessed December 17, 2008).

"サンエックスってどんな会社？" San-Xネット - 会社概要.
http://www.sanx.co.jp/company/comp01.html (accessed December 7, 2008).

"サンリオのあゆみ." サンリオ. http://www.sanrio.co.jp/corporate/about/history.html (accessed
December 7, 2008).

"Shintaro Tsuji, CEO, Sanrio." The Board Room. CNN. December 10, 2007.
http://edition.cnn.com/2007/BUSINESS/12/07/boardroom.tsugi/index.html#cnnSTCText
(accessed November 1, 2008).

"ソーシャルコミュニケーション." サンリオ. http://www.sanrio.co.jp/corporate/about/spirit.html
(accessed November 28, 2008).

Suzuki, Tadashi, and Joel Best. "The Emergence of Trendsetters for Fashions and Fads: Kogaru in 1990s
Japan." The Sociological Quarterly 44, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 61-79.

Takahara, Kanako. "Pawing in enough to be a fat cat, Famed feline has parlayed cute into mega-yen
   empire leaving fans purring for more." The Japan Times. June 10, 2008.
   http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20080610i1.html (accessed November 29, 2008).

"たれぱんだの基礎知識." San-Xネット. http://www.san-x.co.jp/suama/chishiki.html (accessed
   November 29, 2008).

"ティッシュさん," San-Xネット. http://san-x.co.jp/newcha/new68.html (accessed December 18, 2008).

"とれたて！情報局　ハイパー: ピニームー." San-Xネット. http://blog.san-x.co.jp/toretate/cat37/
   (accessed December 7, 2008).

Treat, John Whittier. "Yoshimoto Banana Writes Home: Shojo Culture and the Nostalgic Subject."
   Journal of Japanese Studies 19, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 353-387.