

Kawaii and the Cultural Rise of Cute



This is a true story. One Saturday night I was sitting with a friend in a trendy downtown bar, when two grown women casually strolled past in ruffled dresses, bonnets and parasols, wheeling matching baby carriages. Out of these peeked little poodles wearing complementary pastel baby clothes. We were of course in Japan, but still, what on earth was going on?

Yes, I had once again been confronted by the strange, fascinating world of *Kawaii*, or cute culture. Visits to Japanese cities reverberating with the squeals of 'kawaaiiiiiiii!!!' may make it easy to dismiss as another exoticism of the East. Yet the presence of costumed adults lining up for London's own Comic-Con¹, Swarovski-encrusted Hello Kitty worth thousands of pounds², and the profiling of Lolita fashion from magazine articles³ to the V&A⁴, show that cute culture is not just spreading beyond Asia, but it's here to stay. And it means business.

So, what is *kawaii* and why here and why now? As the Japanese word for cute, *kawaii* has connotations of shyness, embarrassment, vulnerability, darlingness and lovability. Think babies and small fluffy creatures. In many cases, it is a signifier for innocence, youth, charm, openness and naturalness, while its darker

aspects have led it to be rather brutally applied to frailty and even physical handicap as a marker of adorability. You may not have noticed, but look carefully and Hello Kitty has no mouth.

As *kawaii* suggests, cute culture first originated in Japan, emerging out of the student protests of the late-1960s. Rebelling against authority, Japanese university students refused to go to lectures, reading children's comics (*manga*) as protest against prescribed academic knowledge. As the economy progressed through the 1970s and 1980s, so did consumer subcultures, and cute as a style began to be expressed through childish handwriting, speech, dress, products, shops, cafes and food. Meanwhile, as Japanese women became more visible at work, so the '*burikko*' or childlike woman emerged, portraying an innocence and adorability that alleviated the threat of female emancipation, increasing her appeal as a potential marriage partner.

¹ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3884818/A-host-Harley-Quinns-pack-Jokers-Chewbacca-Thousands-gamers-sci-fi-fans-movie-buffs-descend-London-s-Comic-Con.html>

² http://www.swarovski.com/Web_GB/en/5174647/product/Hello_Kitty,_Limited_Edition_2016.html

³ http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/inside-the-magical-world-of-lolitas

⁴ <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/i/japanese-street-style/>

By the 1990s Japan's Lost Decade(s) of economic crisis was well-underway, and many Japanese subcultures fled into the international market. Banks⁵ and commercial airlines⁶ began to explore cute as a strategy to increase their appeal, and cultural forms followed in the footsteps of the once invincible Japanese corporate machine, spreading the soft power of Japanese modernity. Where Nissan, Mitsubishi, Sony and Nintendo had carved a path, so tread Japanese anime, film and music. The 1990s too saw the re-refresh of the ultimate *kawaii* brand, Hello Kitty, expanded to include products aimed at teens and adults rather than pre-adolescent girls.



As part of the '90s spread of Japanese culture, *kawaii* is undoubtedly indebted. However, its persistence well into the 21st century shows that something else is now afoot. Cute culture is everywhere and claimed by everyone, regardless of age, gender and nationality. More than the fuzzy dice hanging from the car rear-view mirror, it is the collectable branded official merchandise of cartoons and comics, the endless animations and superhero films⁷, the doll-like dresses of 'Lolita' fashion and the phone-clutching clusters of *Pokemon Go!* players⁸. Importantly it does not seem to rely on Japan, but has become homegrown, with global participants consuming and contributing in equal measure. At first glance it appears these childlike adults, like the proverbial Peter Pan, don't want to grow up, but how convenient for business that they can whip consumers into a frenzy, reducing grown men and women into childish, irrational desire. Cute culture is



capitalism disguised, repackaged and covered in glitter.

Looking at the adult landscape, with its pressures of debt, competition and endless lack, it is no wonder that people want to escape into the infinite time, space and promise of childhood. Cute becomes a way of resisting the adult world, of not just escape and denial, but also resistance against the curtailment of

⁵ <https://www.cardpartner.com/cobrand/app/hello-kitty>

⁶ http://www.dailymail.co.uk/travel/travel_news/article-2751742/Making-fur-fly-Taiwanese-Hello-Kitty-plane-makes-Paris-debut-honour-cute-cartoon-character-s-40th-birthday.html

⁷ <http://marvel.com/movies/all>

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/jul/12/pokemon-go-becomes-global-phenomenon-as-number-of-us-users-overtakes-twitter>

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possibility. Japanese women too used cute culture as a denial of female sexuality and all the subjugation implied, and in the West what we see is perhaps the continuation of this as possibilities for Millennials retreat into the Golden Age of the late-20th Century.

So, what is cute culture? Is it good or bad? Perhaps both and neither. A legitimate subcultural form and a soporific soother, it is a form of resistance and a capitalist pacification. Symptom and cure, it is ultimate allowance and refusal. Childhood means the luxury of not growing up, but also denial of adulthood and the refusal of responsibility. But while *kawaii* may seem like a closing of one door, held in its small furled fist is a key that opens another. To be simultaneously adult and child means to straddle both worlds, a symbol of resistance and boundless possibility.

