FROM HELLO KITTY TO COD ROE KEWPIE
A Postwar Cultural History of Cuteness in Japan

By Kumiko Sato

The cute characters and commercial goods emerging from contemporary Japanese popular culture have quickly spread around the globe, capturing the attention of teenagers and adults, most of whom were not even considered as target consumers of these products. Their popularity is much more than a passing phenomenon of fashion-conscious people looking for the latest thing. In fact, the steady development of cute culture in Japan since the 1970s signals more than even the most avid consumer of "cute" may realize. Cute culture reflects the changing modes of social, economic, and political conditions, especially young women's ideas about work and marriage and young male perceptions about their future. Learning about the history and contexts of cuteness in Japanese culture, from classical aesthetics to the economic growth that led to recession, will help readers understand the many meanings underlying the seemingly simple concept of "cute."

The Shōwa Emperor, who was the symbol of wartime Japan's military aggressiveness and dictatorship, passed away in 1989, and thousands of Japanese people gathered in the front yard of the imperial residence to pray for his peaceful rest. Among these people were groups of teenage girls, who commented, quite unexpectedly, that the emperor was cute.[1] At the time, this youthful obsession with cuteness seemed mysterious,

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like some sort of psychopathological disease unique to adolescence. Then *Hello Kitty*, an emblem of cute merchandise, recorded a $96 million profit for North and South America in 2002.[2] Somewhat perplexed by the success of "cute," *Business Week Online* reported on "Japanese cute" in an article entitled "In Japan, Cute Conquers All,"[3] which was soon followed by a flood of articles and news coverage about the rise of *Hello Kitty* and cute characters in North America. Students quickly caught on to this trend.

Youth culture captures student interest, leaving many teachers behind. In fact, the increased demand for teaching about "cute" has deeply confused me, even though I have taught courses on Japanese popular culture and literature. What do we gain, teachers or students, from researching and studying about this seemingly frivolous culture driven by teenagers and young women? How do we extract values and morals, or any cultural meanings, from the phenomena wedged in marketing strategies and elusive youth subcultures? In this article, I will present an overview of the history of cute culture, hoping to place cuteness in historical, political, and social contexts in order to help teachers and their students build a better understanding of Japan.

While the visual signal of cuteness has an almost universal effect on humanity, people's reactions to, and definitions of, cuteness greatly differ across cultural borders. "Cute cues are those that indicate extreme youth, vulnerability, harmlessness, and need," Natalie Angier states, citing scientists in her article "The Cute Factor".[4] The concept and culture of cuteness in modern Japanese language has uniformly been ascribed to the single word, *kawaii*, an adjective fairly similar to the English word, cute. In general use, kawaii is made up of two *kanji* (Chinese characters) that respectively signify "able" (可) and "love" (愛), meaning in combination "lovable." The same kanji can be used for another adjective, *kawaisō*, which signifies pitiful or pitiable. *Kōjien*, the Japanese dictionary, presents three definitions of kawaii, which are 1) *itawashii* (pitiable), 2) *aisubeki* (lovable), and 3) *chiisakute utsukushii* (small and beautiful). The Japanese idea of cuteness in fact emphasizes the sense of pathos that the powerless and helpless object inspires in the observer's mind. The emotion of sadness associated with beauty may sound familiar to those who have studied classical aesthetics of Japan, of which *mono no aware* is especially representative.

Whereas mono no aware arouses pity toward things that are passing, such as cherry blossoms, kawaii suggests a pity for things loved and protected. These two aesthetics point to opposite ends of the spectrum: people appreciate beauty in falling petals of cherry blossoms or samurai's death, but do not find dying kittens and babies beautiful. Sei Shōnagon's *Pillow Book* lists things that are utsukushi, an adjective that shares common meanings with modern kawaii, i.e., a baby face written on a melon, children wearing baggy kimono, chicks, sparrows, doll furniture, bird eggs, glass pots, and the like.[5] These are all fragile, small, and vulnerable things that need the observer's sympathy and benevolence to survive, and it seems that the value of kawaii things lies in the observer's attachment to the life of the weak object rather than its death.

Different cultures have developed different perspectives on cute products, and in Japan's case, the 1970s witnessed the rise of the kawaii as commercial culture in a way unseen before. This particular cute culture first formed around stationery goods and handwriting that quickly spread among students in the late 1970s.[6] Generally known as *maru-moji*, this round calligraphic style was associated with the emergence of
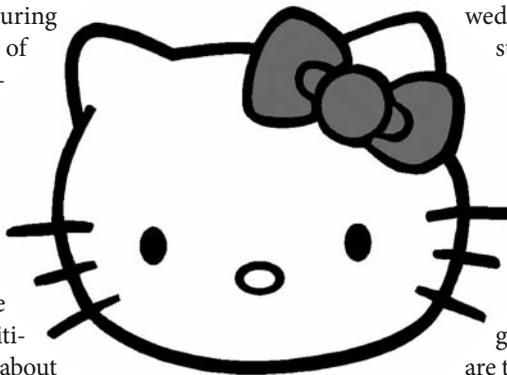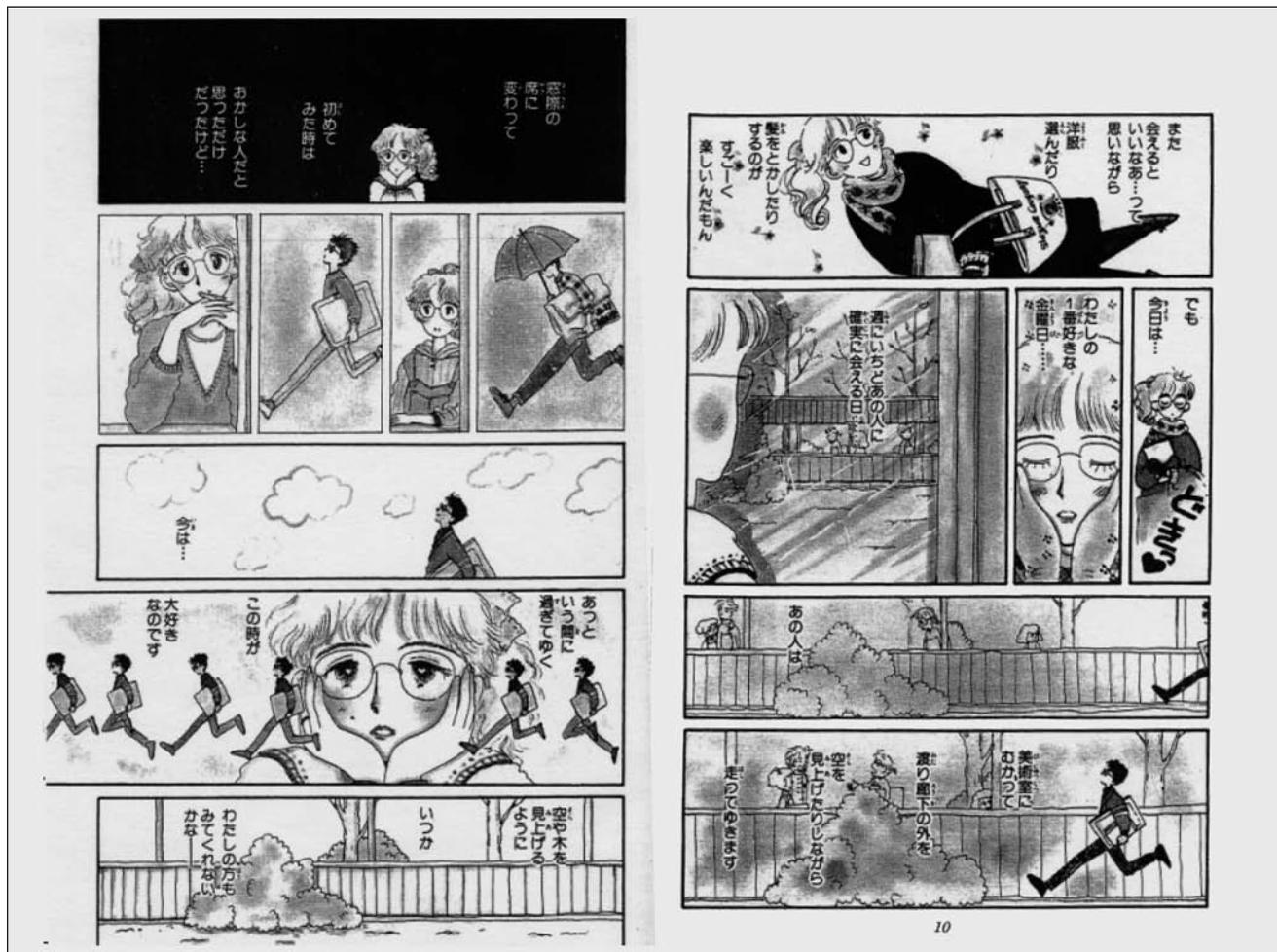
Figure 1

An excerpt from Mutsu A-ko's *Days of Roses and Roses* (*Bara to bara no hibi*) published *in Ribbon* in 1985. Reprint in *Mutsu A-ko Jisenshū*, Volume 1, published by Shōeisha in 1996. In this example you can see the sentiment and imagery of romantic "otome" identity for adolescent girls.

certain merchandise in the marketplace, especially mechanical pencils and character-printed stationery. The personalization of the unique handwriting style had close connections with the culture of letter and diary writing among girls.[7] Much like today's Internet and cell phone culture, creating a personal "MySpace" through communication tools was the essence of youth culture in this period. Sanrio, the company that began selling *Hello Kitty* products in 1975, successfully established its business at the intersection of youth culture and commercial goods by developing cute characters for notebooks, pens, and other writing goods which are called "fancy goods" (*fanshī guzzu*) in Japanese.

Concurrently, the girls' manga magazine *Ribbon* invented *furoku*, a sort of supplement to manga magazines, which normally consisted of stationeries and paper folders featuring pretty characters from manga. Illustrations by Mutsu A-ko, whose "otome-chikku" (maiden-tic, a composite of otome translates to maiden and romantic) drawing style of manga crazed girls (see Figure 1), decorated *Ribbon*'s furoku from 1975 until the mid-80s.

In the 1970s, the political consciousness of the sixties leftist student movements waned, and cultures of fashion and mass media flourished. To many observers, this change mirrored Japan's shift from political idealism to postindustrial consumerism, from men's ambition to women's fancy, from the dream of progress to the desire for difference, and from consumption of things to consumption of images.[8]

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The cute fad continued into the 1980s and saturated mainstream culture through popular idol singers, especially Matsuda Seiko.[9] Her fashion, hairstyle, speech, and gesture came to acquire the name *burikko*, a term supposedly originating from *kawaiko burikko*, a child or a girl who pretends to be kawaii. Kinsella describes burikko as young people "dressing themselves up as innocent babes" who refuse to become adults and take social and familial responsibilities.[10] What predominates the idol culture of cute is women's pretension to be small children by means of childish talk, pastel-colored fashion, and their love of cute stationery goods and fluffy animals. This 1980s trend of women's denial to grow up is often represented by the popular term *shōjo*, "females between puberty and marriage"[11] who provide the cultural model of girls as carefree consumers rather than as producers.[12]

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One of the reasons women choose to stay in the interim period of shōjo is the limited range of alternative paths available for women who aspire to pursue a career after completing education. Women thus embrace the harmlessness and innocence of shōjo by enthusiastically consuming cute merchandise, while delaying their roles as wives and mothers.

The culture of shōjo and kawaii declined toward the late eighties to early nineties, as Sanrio "fancy goods" disappeared from stores. The first half of the 1990s also saw stagnation in both the idol culture and anime industry. In the meantime, more self-conscious portrayals of young women's identity associated with kawaii caught critical attention in publications such as Yoshimoto Banana's *Kitchen* (*Kicchin*, 1988), which illustrates a new concept of family from a shōjo's perspective. Some representative works of shōjo manga also challenged existing family norms by portraying daughter figures who refuse to be passively cute and dependent.[13] Contrary to the eighties notion of kawaii that linked pretentious cuteness with the sense of self-pity, these female characters struggle to achieve family bonds and youth freedom, a trend that set the stage for the nineties revival of kawaii culture.

A new wave of kawaii arrived with the protracted economic crisis. The *Hello Kitty* revival happened in the mid-nineties when the value of the Japanese yen fell drastically and major Japanese banks went bankrupt. In 1998, San-X's character business started with the unexpected success of *TarePanda* character goods (see Figure 2). At the same time, media entertainment businesses targeted youth through character-oriented marketing methods that cut across media, including anime, games, and manga. These media-mix projects, such as *Pokemon* and *Tamagotchi* (a hand-held digital pet), put the characters' appeal over story or setting. NHK, the public broadcasting system, aired a children's song about three sweet rice dumpling brothers, *Dango sankyōdai* (see Figure 3), that became the national favorite in 1999.

Figure 2
TarePanda, or the drooping panda that is so lazy that it simply lies on the floor. This lazy panda's popularity coincided with the trend word *iyashi* (heal, solace) and the nation's overall mood for *ganbaranai*, or "don't work hard."

Companies that used to promote their formal and serious business style as a marketing strategy, such as NEC (Japan Electronics Corporation), NHK, and many banks, began using cute mascots for their advertisements in order to soften their public images. In this period of financial struggle, the range of "youth" targeted by this cross-media entertainment and "soft-image" bureaucracy extended especially toward men and women in their thirties and beyond, including mothers who had purchased "fancy goods" in the seventies and eighties and seniors who needed easily accessible icons to handle computerized systems. The cute craze that has spread to the world since the late nineties seems to stem from this revival of "cute" that emerged against the struggling economy and aging population in Japan.

The kawaii culture at the turn of the century returned with several variations unseen in the 1970s or 1980s . *Hello Kitty's* original tendency for primary colors, such as blue and red, were replaced by pink and purple. *Charmmy Kitty*, added to the family in 2004 as Kitty's pet cat, features gorgeous pink fringed with black lace and Gothic patterns. Especially observable in the same milieu is the rise of the subculture fashion that combines cuteness and darkness known as Gothic Lolita (see Figure 4). With the horror boom, led by films such as Kurosawa Kiyoshi's *Cure* (1997) and Shimizu Takashi's *Ju-on* (*The Grudge*, 2000), cuteness further came to merge with elements of horror and violence. The recent commotion surrounding a cute heroine holding a hatchet in *When Cicadas Cry* (see Figure 5) suggests the tension in merging cuteness and horror in today's Japanese society. The popular slang, *kimokawaii* that links *kimoi* (slang for *kimochiwarui*, grotesque) and kawaii, also embodies a similar confusion of cuteness. The dancing baby that enthralled global Internet culture around 1997 and the cod roe Kewpie seen everywhere in Japan since 2004 (see Figure 6) are both excellent examples of grotesque "cute."

While simple cuteness still entices mainstream consumers, the combining of grotesque elements with cuteness leads some observers to search for connections to Japan's current socio-cultural conditions. Cute things are cute because they are deprived of power and independence. The way youth, women, and their beloved goods transitioned from the sweet kawaii in the 1980s to the dark kawaii in the 90s is evidence of how those who used to remain submissive and dependent are now exposing elements of anxiety and uneasiness inherent in their powerlessness.[14] Contrary to the 1980s kawaii as a mechanism of self-pity and escapism, the recent kawaii derivatives are more likely to confuse our perception of cuteness vis-à-vis violence, defiance, and ugliness. Some of the best textual examples are Ekuni Kaori's novels and short stories, in which many of the female protagonists quietly accept insanity in everyday life. *Twinkle, Twinkle* (*Kirakira hikaru*, 1992), her only work translated into English so far, disturbs the reader with the heroine, who floats between her twinkling shōjo-like life and various discordances in her marriage to a gay

Figure 3
The CD cover of the tango song about three "dango" (sweet dumplings) brothers from NHK. This children's song illustrates the funny, yet warm and intimate, relationship of the three brothers that may be rare in Japan today, where the average number of children per nuclear family household barely exceeds 1.0.

man. The best-selling girls' manga *Nana* (1999 to the present) also exemplifies the duality of contemporary girls' identity by presenting two protagonists named Nana, a punk rock musician and a sweet, carefree lover of shopping (see Figure 7). Such pervading duality of cuteness implies that more young people, especially girls, refusing to be simply passive and dependent, aspire to defy patriarchal society. Even though the paradox of cuteness and darkness indicates their still vacillating identity, what is clear is that the discrepancies between women's reality and patriarchal rules are surfacing at last.[15]

In Japan's stagnating economy, while women seem to be growing in confidence, many men are faced with skepticism about the vision of success and progress that drove Japan's postwar period. *Nikkei Woman*, a business magazine for women, reported in 2005 that Japanese men are "maidenizing" (*otome-ka*), increasingly becoming passive and sensitive about romance and marriage, which results in low marriage rates and, the government fears, low birth rates.[16] In contrast to the vigorous economic growth periods of postwar Japan, contemporary youth in an economic recession seem more skeptical about the concept of masculinity measured against work and marriage. Popular culture closely mirrors men's reluctance to "become a man" through the growing popularity of effeminate men in the mass media, ranging from Johnny's boys to "the prince of knit."[17] Some manga for girls feature *otomen* (otome-type men who love cute things, sweets, girls' manga, etc.) while also portraying more masculinized heroines (see Figures 8, 9).[18] Contrary to the stereotypical image of Japanese men in the seventies and eighties as corporate warriors, contemporary men seem to be rein-

Figure 4
Gothic-Lolita Hello Kitty cell phone strap charm designed by Takemoto Nobara, a leading figure in the Goth-Loli fashion community. The Gothic Lolita combines Lolita (a fashion similar to Rococo-style children's clothing, represented by pink and white colors, puffed sleeves, laces, and ribbons) and Gothic (characterized by black or dark colors, Gothic symbols and patterns, and some influences from punk rock).
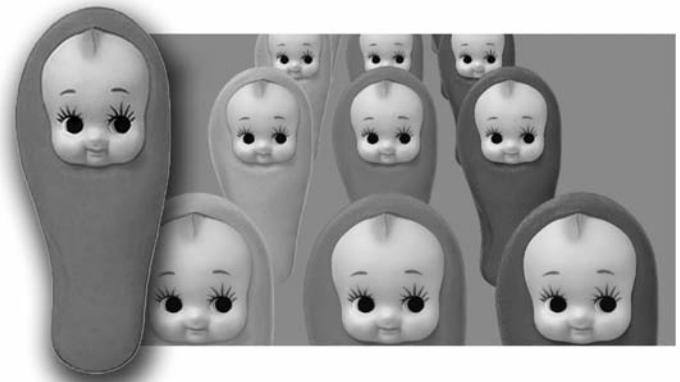

Figure 6
Tarako (cod roe) Kewpie, a commercial mascot character for cod roe spaghetti sauce produced by Kewpie Corporation (aka Q.P. Corporation). The TV commercial of this product shows a number of Tarako Kewpies marching on the street, which is more disturbing than cute. Image source: http://www.kewpie.co.jp/tarako/index.html.

Figure 7
An illustration of the two NANAs from Yazawa Ai's manga *NANA*, Vol. 2, Shōjo Beat Manga Ed edition (February 7, 2006). Although they are best friends, their contrast is clearly shown. Nana (left) appears in punk rock fashion, smoking a cigarette. Nana (right) wears a feminine skirt and scarf, eating an ice cream cone.

Figure 5
When Cicadas Cry (Higurashi no nakukoroni) is a PC game series that also turned into anime, manga, CDs, novels, a Play Station game, and a live action film. Its media deployment continues from 2002 to the present, and sales are promoted through images of violent murders and complex mysteries. The mass media tend to associate murders by youth, especially girls, with this character, Rena, who wears a Lolita-style white dress and hides a hatchet in the back. The image is the front cover of a fan book that analyzes the plot and characters, published under the title *Character & Analyze Book* published by JIVE in 2006.

Figure 8
Otomen, a shōjo manga written by Kanno Aya and published in Hakusensha's *Hana to yume* since 2006. The image comes from the front cover of Volume 2.

Figure 9
Four handsome men who have lost interest in career pursuit, commercial success, or heterosexual romance, gather and run a fancy bakery in Yoshinaga Fumi's manga, *Antique Bakery* (*Seiyōkottō yōgashiten*). In this scene from Volume 2, two men get excited like "otome" about Buche de Noel for Christmas. The manga has been serialized in *Shinshokan's Wings* since 1999, adapted into TV drama and anime, and translated into English since 2005.

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venting the alternative culture that was once vigorously explored by the most "unproductive" population, i.e., women and children. Cuteness also has become a key for men who are exploring unconventional gender models that exist across paradigms of masculinity and femininity.

The relationship of Japanese culture and cuteness has developed on several different levels in the country's cultural environment. After defeat in World War II and postwar recovery, Japan's cultural proclivity toward dependence and indulgence seemed to lead the nation to conclude that its political and economic dependence on the United States was the key to success.[19] This subservient relationship has perhaps nurtured Japan's "childish" popular culture.[20] The "cute" emperor at the end of the Shōwa reign could symbolize the nation's conversion from military despotism to pacifism. Cuteness also mirrors the changing conditions of culture from the viewpoint of the disempowered, especially women and children, who are forced to play the roles of incapable and subservient dependents on men. The current trend, seen in the symbiosis of cuteness and aggressiveness, further complicates kawaii as an icon of defiance and resistance of the oppressed groups to traditional gender norms and procreative roles. Cuteness today is a means for expressing identity from the margin of society where powerlessness can lead into subversion. Trifling as the culture of cuteness may seem, it is actually an excellent starting point for students to look at their personal interests and expand their horizons to a deeper understanding of Japan. Teachers in various disciplines will find "cute" to be a useful critical tool for introducing scholarly approaches to popular culture and visual media. ∎

NOTES

1. Eiji Ōtsuka, *Shōjotachi no kawaii tennō: sabukaruchā tennō ron* (*The Cute Emperor for Girls: Theory of the Emperor as a Subculture*) (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 2003).
2. Ken Belson and Brian Bremner, *Hello Kitty: The Remarkable Story of Sanrio and the Billion Dollar Feline Phenomenon* (Singapore: Wiley, 2004), 107.
3. Brian Bremner, "In Japan, Cute Conquers all," *Business Week Online* (June 25, 2002) at http://www.businessweek.com/bwdaily/dnflash/jun2002/nf20020625_7574.htm (accessed February 27, 2009).
4. Natalie Angier, "The Cute Factor," *New York Times* (January 3, 2006): 1 at http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/03/science/03cute.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=%22The%20Cute%20Factor%22&st=cse (accessed February 27, 2009).
5. Sei Shōnagon (circa. 967–1025) is one of the most acclaimed poets and writers of Heian Era. The collection of her essays is translated by Ivan I. Morris under the title, *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967).
6. Sharon Kinsella, "Cuties in Japan," In *Women, Media and Consumption in Japan*, ed-

ited by Lisa Skov and Brian Moeran (Honolulu: University of Hawai`i, 1995). Available online at http://www.kinsellaresearch.com/Cuties.html.
7. Kazuma Yamane, *Hentai shōjo moji no kenkyū* (*Studies of Girls' Variant Scripts*) (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1989). "Hentai" here signifies varied calligraphic forms, and not the "hentai," a term often used for sexual abnormality or perversion in both Japanese and English today.
8. Eiji Ōtsuka and Shinji Miyadai, *Ribon no furoku to otomechikku no jidai: tasogare-doki ni mitsuketa mono* (*Ribbon Magazine Supplements and the Age of Otome-Tic: What was Found at Dusk*) (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1995), 66–69.
9. A number of recorded videos of Seiko singing on TV are available on YouTube. To listen to her 1981 hit song, "Cherry Blossom," try the following links: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhpi7r5_sn4 and http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QDbeO5VngzI (accessed February 27, 2009).
10. Kinsella, "Cuties in Japan."
11. Jennifer Ellen Robertson, *Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 65.
12. John Whittier Treat, "Yoshimoto Banana Writes Home: Shōjo Culture and the Nostalgic Subject," in *Contemporary Japan and Popular Culture*, edited by John Whittier Treat, (19) 275–308 (Honolulu: University of Hawai`i Press, 1996), 281.
13. The novel *Kitchen* depicts the relationship of a "family" consisting of an orphaned college girl Mikage, her male friend, and his father who strives to substitute for his deceased wife. Their awkward communications in the process of creating a "family" range from finding comfort in Kentucky Fried Chicken to feeling nostalgia in the electric sound of the refrigerator. Some of the notable examples in shōjo manga include Okazaki Kyōko's *Pink* (1989), Haruno Nanae's *Papa Told Me* (1987–), and Hagio Moto's *Iguana's Daughter* (*Iguana no musume*, 1992).
14. Inuhiko Yomota, *"Kawaii" ron* Chikuma Shinsho (*Theory on Cuteness*) (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 2006), 86.
15. For the contexts of cuteness and defiance in today's American society, see Christine R. Yano, "Monstering the Japanese Cute: Pink Globalization and Its Critics Abroad" in William M. Tsutsui & Michiko Ito's *In Godzilla's Footsteps: Japanese Pop Culture Icons on the Global Stage* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
16. According to the national statistical agency (Tōkei-kyoku), 72.6 percent of men aged twenty-five to twenty-nine, 47.7 percent of ages thirty to thirty-four, 30.9 percent of ages thirty-five to thirty-nine were unmarried in 2005. Data were taken from http://www.stat.go.jp/data/kokusei/2005/sokuhou/01.htm (accessed February 27, 2009). In fact, 2005 was when Japan's birth rate dropped to 1.08 percent and the population began to decrease (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare).
17. Johnny's (Janīzu jimusho) is a talent agency that debuted cute boy singers whose development closely corresponds to girls' culture and cute merchandise. "The prince of knit" is a media star and professional knitwear designer Hirose Mitsuharu, who is immensely popular among women.
18. In Japan, women are supposed to like sweets, especially Western cakes and chocolates, whereas men are considered to prefer salty food and meat.
19. An academic work that best represents this understanding of the Japanese psyche based on interdependence among members of a community is psychologist Doi Takeo's *The Anatomy of Dependence*, trans. John Bester (Tokyo, New York: Kodansha International, 1973).
20. To learn more about the arguments on "childishness" of postwar Japan's popular culture in association with Japan's defeat in World War II, see Hiroki Azuma, *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals, trans. Jonathan E. Abel and Shion Kono* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), and Takashi Murakami, *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005). This critical trend emerged as a counterargument to the common idea that popular styles of contemporary Japanese culture stemmed from pre-modern aesthetic traditions, as exemplified by Murakami's own idea of "superflat." Instead, the identity of Japanese popular culture is seen as evolving in reaction to the US and the West overall.

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