

Ka-Why?-ii.

A foreigner's perspective on Japanese cuteness.

Cuteness, or 'Kawaii', is absolutely ubiquitous in Japanese culture. If you live or have traveled here you know that cuteness is manifest literally everywhere. On road signs, posters, PET bottles, and even bank-cards you will find cutesy characters and mascots that could make the uninformed foreigner think they were trapped in a child's playroom. Foreigners generally view this strange phenomenon as either simply intriguing or outright childish.

As a cultural phenomenon, 'Cuteness' started gaining acceptability in Japan in the late 1970's. During this time teenage girls adopted a cute method of handwriting whereby they wrote big, round characters laterally (rather than vertically as is traditional) and included cartoon doodles within the writing such as stars, hearts, smiley faces, etc... Initially used by schoolgirls passing notes in class, this distinctive writing style made its way into a slew of magazines and even product packaging by the mid 1980's. The 80's also saw the rise of cute idols like Seiko Matsuda and the first ever mega mascot: Hello Kitty. From there cute mascots were adopted by everyone ranging from toothbrush companies to police stations and the effect snowballed cuteness in Japan to where it is now.

Cuteness has become so cherished in Japan that the country's largest and most prominent corporations will go as far as to adopt a cutesy mascot whose image is totally unrelated to the company's business. Take for example NHK television. Japan's national public broadcasting station is represented by a tall, brown, anthropomorphic creature named Domo-kun. Described by his creators as a "strange creature that hatched from an egg", Domo-kun lives in an underground cave with an old tea drinking rabbit and an alcoholic bat.

Suffice it to say, this cultural nuance completely shocked me when I arrived in Japan. These were my presumptions of what the inhabitants of a first world country with the second highest global GDP (gross domestic profit): reserved business people with an air of professionalism in the white-collar world and an air of respect and duty in the blue-collar one. While my expectations insofar as the inhabitants of this great land

were more correct than not, I could have in no way predicted that those same professional businesspeople would embrace cutesy cartoon characters as public representations of the corporations they work for.

That Japanese corporations use cute mascots to sell their products is especially surprising to westerners because in North America and Europe, cuteness is almost exclusively associated with the interests of children. You would never find a cartoon dog on a bank of America debit card, nor too does Microsoft use an electric rat like Pikachu to sell software. ABC does not have a “strange creature that hatched from an egg” as a mascot, they don’t even have a mascot. The average westerner would assert “Why should they? They’re a broadcasting company who runs a myriad of different television programming.”

In modern times cuteness is truly ingrained in Japan’s culture and national identity. Some Japanese believe it to be deeply rooted in the country’s postwar peace and harmony loving nature. Others see it as foreigners do: infantile and frivolous. Whatever the true nature of Kawaii or its implications on Japan as a nation, one thing is for sure: for better or for worse, cuteness is here to stay.

Isaac Quinn

「カ・why・イ？」 外国人が見る日本の「カワイイ」
- Picture is worth a thousand words -

「箸が転んでもおかしい年頃」は、かつての十代後半の大和なでしこを指した諺ですが、平成の大和なでしこは「箸がころんでも「カワイイ」年頃」のようです。

19世紀、フランスの印象派やアール・デコに多大な影響を与えたといわれる「Japonism」も、今日の日本サブカルチャー・ムーブメントは、第二のジャポニスム到来とも言われています。多くの外国人観光客が訪れる秋葉原カルチャー、最先端に行くアニメーションやマンガ、そして日本の映画が注目されていることは周知の事実ですが、日本語の「カワイイ」という表現も海外の日本ファンの心をぎゅっと掴んでいます。

「国内総生産世界第二位の先進工業国」をイメージして日本に降り立ったアイザック先生の目に飛び込んでくるのは、日本人が普段あまり意識しない日常生活に溢れる「カワイイ」。頭に浮かんでは消える「???」「!!!」。

事実、国営放送（NHK）や銀行のキャッシュカードにまで「カワイイ」マスコットキャラクターが定着しているのは日本ならではの現象かもしれません。日本近代文化の「wonder」がここに隠れていました！

まさに「百聞は一見にしかず（Picture is worth a thousand words）」。

結果、世界に名高い「カワイイ」の日本代表マスコットである「キティちゃん」から、元祖「カワイイ」の代表である「松田聖子」まで辿り着きました。「？」なくして「！」は生まれません。