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CUTIES IN JAPAN

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mina totemo kawaii kedo
everyone's very cute
dakara totemo kawaisō nanda keredo!
and therefore everyone is pitiful!

(La Pissch)[1]

Kawaii style dominated Japanese popular culture in the 1980s. Kawaii or 'cute' essentially means childlike; it celebrates sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak, and inexperienced[2] social behaviour and physical appearances. It has been well described as a style which is 'infantile and delicate at the same time as being pretty' (Yamane 1990) (Figure 6.1). Cute style saturated the multi-media and consumer goods and services whilst they were expanding rapidly between 1970 and 1990 and reached a peak of saccharine intensity in the early 1980s.

Cute people and cute accessories were extremely popular. So much so that original cute fashion became a basic style or aesthetic into which many other more specific and transient fashions such as preppy, punk, skater, folk, black and French were mixed. Cute fashion gradually evolved from the serious, infantile, pink, romanticism of the early 1980s to a more humorous, kitsch, androgynous style which lingered on into the early 1990s. The results of a survey I conducted as late as 1992 showed that 71 per cent of young people between eighteen and 30 years of age either liked or loved kawaii-looking people, and 55.8 per cent either liked or loved kawaii attitudes and behaviour.[3] Although many respondents encountered difficulties deciding what social class they were in and what politics they supported, few had any problems explaining their relative fondness for the cute.

The word kawaii itself was by 1992 estimated to be 'the most widely

Figure 6.1 Cute and free in fantasy land. Illustration
courtesy of Tsuzuki Katō at Kadokawa Shoten

used, widely loved, habitual word in modern living Japanese' (*CREA*, November 1992: p.58). Iwashita, president of the *Kikan Fanshii* (Fancy Goods Periodical) trade journal, recalls that, 'Rather than being another postwar value, the present meaning of kawaii has not been in existence for any longer than fifteen years' (Shimamura 1990:225). The term kawaii appears in dictionaries printed in the Taishō to 1945 period as *kawayushi*. In dictionaries printed after the war until around 1970 kawayushi changed into *kawayui*, but the meaning of the word remained the same. Kawaii is a derivation of a term whose principle meaning was

'shy' or 'embarrassed' and secondary meanings were 'pathetic', 'vulnerable', 'darling', 'loveable' and 'small'. In fact, the modern sense of the word kawaii still has some nuances of pitiful, while the term *kawaisō*, derived directly from kawaii, means pathetic, poor, and pitiable in a generally negative, if not pleasing, sense.

Cute Handwriting and Slang

The emergence of the modern term kawaii in the early 1970s coincides with the beginning of the cute handwriting craze and childish fashion. In 1974, large numbers of teenagers, especially women, began to write using a new style of childish characters. By 1978 the phenomenon had become nation-wide, and in 1985 it was estimated that upwards of five million young people were using the new script.

Previously, Japanese script had been written vertically, using strokes that varied in thickness along their length. The new style was written laterally, preferably using a mechanical pencil to produce very fine even lines (Figure 6.2).[4] Using extremely stylised, rounded characters with English, *katakana*,[5] and little cartoon pictures such as hearts, stars and faces inserted randomly into the text, the new style of handwriting was distinct and the characters difficult to read. In middle and high schools across the country, the craze for writing in the new style caused discipline problems. In some schools, the writing was banned entirely, or tests which were completed in the new cute style would not be marked. The new style of handwriting was described by a variety of names such as *marui ji* (round writing), *koneko ji* (kitten writing), *manga ji* (comic writing) and *burikko ji* (fake-child writing). Through the 1980s magazines, comics, advertising, packaging, and wordprocessor software design (Macintosh) adapted the new style. Yamane Kazuma carried out two years of research into cute handwriting (between 1984 and 1986) which he officially labelled, 'Anomalous Female Teenage Handwriting'.[6] Arguing against the common view that cute handwriting was something young people had mimicked from the lettering in comics, Yamane furnishes evidence that in fact the craze for rounded lettering pre-dates its use in comics, which relied on the later invention of photo composition methods in order to be able to use the round characters. Instead, he concludes that teenagers 'spontaneously' invented the new style. Results of Yamane's survey carried out in 1984–85 amongst middle and high school students showed that the older students were, the more likely it was that they would use the childish hand writing. 22.5 per cent of eleven to twelve-year-old female pupils, 55.3 per cent of twelve

①線の交差の仕方がおかしい。

②典型がつかって、右線が横になり交差している。

③線の先のはねや点の延びや方向がおかしい。

④むすびが強調され、大きな円を作っている。

⑤基本形を完全に逸脱した文字も多く生まれている。

⑥濁点の位置がおかしい。

⑦平仮名はどではないが、片仮名にも変形などが見られる。

⑧漢字にも丸みを帯びた変形などが見られる。

⑨数字にも不可解な変形が生まれている。

⑩句点や読点、記号の図形化が広く進んでいる。

Figure 6.2 A sample of cute handwriting from 1985, courtesy of Yamane Kazuma

to fifteen-year-old female middle school pupils, and 55.7 per cent of fifteen to eighteen-year-old female high school pupils used the cute writing style. Amongst young men, ten per cent of twelve to fifteen-year-old middle school, and 17.5 per cent of fifteen to eighteen-year-old high school pupils used the cute style. Its increasing incidence amongst older students illustrates that cute handwriting was a style acquired with maturity and exposure to youth culture rather than the result of any adolescent writing disability. Yamane asked some of these young people why they used the round hand writing style and was unequivocally informed:

> 'It's got a kind of cute feel.'
> 'I think it's cute and it's my style.'
> 'I think these letters are the cutest.'
> 'Cute! They are hard to read but they are so cute I use them.'
>
> (Yamane 1986:132)

It is interesting that cute style did not start in the multi-media which are frequently criticised for originating all the trends of youth culture, if not exercising a virtual mind control over young people. Rather, it began as an underground literary trend amongst young people who developed the habit of writing stylised childish letters to one another and to themselves.

Cute handwriting was arrived at partly through the romanization of Japanese text. The horizontal left to right format of cute handwriting and the liberal use of exclamation marks, as well as English words such as 'love' and 'friend', suggest that these young people were rebelling against traditional Japanese culture and identifying with European culture which they obviously imagined to be more fun. By writing in the new cute style, it was almost as though young people had invented a new language in which they were suddenly able to speak freely on their own terms for the first time. They were thus able to have an intimate relation with the text and express their feelings to their friends more easily. Through cute handwriting, young people made the written Japanese language – considered to be the lynch pin of Japanese culture – their own.

The spread of cute-style handwriting was one element of a broader shift in Japanese culture that took place between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s in which vital popular culture, sponsored and processed by the new fashion, retail, mass-media and advertising industries, began to push traditional arts and crafts and strictly regulated literary and artistic culture to the margins of society.

At the same time as Japanese youth began to debase written Japanese, infantile slang words began to spread across the nation – typically coming into high-school vogue for only a few months before becoming obsolete again. In 1970 the *Mainichi Shinbun* carried an article describing how the common word *kakkoii*, meaning cool or good, had sprouted a deformed infantile version of itself. The term kakkoii was deliberately mispronounced as *katchoii*, thus mimicking the speech of a toddler incapable of adult pronunciation. There are even a few examples of deliberately contrived childish speech such as *norippigo* officially invented by pop-idol Sakai Noriko, alias Nori P, in 1985. *Norippigo*, now obsolete, consisted of changing the last syllable of common adjectives into a *pi* sound. Therefore *kanashii* (sad) could be changed into *kanappi*, and *ureshii* (happy) could be changed into *ureppi*. Meanwhile, Nori P invented a few words of her own, such as *mamosureppi* (very happy). However, infantile slang was not limited to the contrived overuse of puritanical kindergarten adjectives. 'Sex' became popularly referred to by the morbid term *nyan nyan suru* (to meow meow).

Cute handwriting is strongly associated with the fashion for using baby-talk, acting childish and wearing virginal childish clothes. Young people dressing themselves up as innocent babes in the woods in cute styles were known as *burikko* (fake-children), a term coined by teen starlet Yamada Kuniko in 1980. The noun spawned a verb, *burikko suru* (to fake-child-it), or more simply *buri buri suru* (to fake-it). Another 80s term invented to describe cute pop-idols and their fans is *kawaiikochan* which can be roughly translated as 'cutie-pie-kid'.

The Fancy Goods Industry

Cute culture started as youth culture amongst teenagers, especially young women. Cute culture was not founded by business. But in the disillusioned calm known as the *shirake* after the last of the student riots in 1971, the consumer boom was just beginning, and it did not take companies and market research agencies very long to discover and capitalise on cute style, which had manifested itself in manga and young people's handwriting.

In 1971 Sanrio, the Japanese equivalent of Hallmark Cards, experimented by printing cute designs on previously plain writing paper and stationary. Sanrio began to produce cute-decorated stationary and fancy diaries for the dreamy school students hooked on the cute handwriting craze. The success of this early prototype of *fanshi guzzu* (fancy goods), inspired by cute style in manga animation and young people's handwriting,

encouraged Sanrio to expand production, and its range of fancy goods proliferated. The company established a firm monopoly in the fancy goods market and during 1990 sold ¥200 billion worth of goods (Shimamura 1990:60–62), whilst the fancy goods business as a whole reached an estimated turnover of ¥10 trillion in 1990 (*Japan Times* January 5, 1991). Typical fancy goods sold in cute little shops were stationary, cuddly toys and gimmicks, toiletries, lunch boxes and cutlery, bags, towels and other personal paraphernalia.

The crucial ingredients of a fancy good are that it is small, pastel, round, soft, loveable, *not* traditional Japanese style but a foreign – in particular European or American – style, dreamy, frilly and fluffy. Most fancy goods are also decorated with cartoon characters. The essential anatomy of a cute cartoon character consists in its being small, soft, infantile, mammalian, round, without bodily appendages (e.g. arms), without bodily orifices (e.g. mouths), non-sexual, mute, insecure, help-less or bewildered. Sanrio invented a large cast of cute proprietary characters to endorse and give life to its fancy goods: *Button Nose, Tiny Poem, Duckydoo, Little Twin Stars, Cheery Chums, Vanilla Bean* and, most famous of all, *Hello Kitty* and *Tuxedo Sam*. Not only do these cute characters inhabit cute-shops; they have also worked hard selling under license the goods and services of over 90 Japanese companies. A large number of these are financial institutions such as 23 banks, including Mitsui, Sumitomo, Sanwa, and Mitsubishi; fourteen stock companies, including Yamaichi, Daiwa and Nomura; and seven insurance companies, including Nihon Seimei, Sumitomo Seimei and Yasuda Kasai (Figure 6.3).

Cute design was not limited to banking cards and stationary, how-ever. For the privileged, whose passion for cute was stronger than their sense of traditional good taste, there was the option of purchasing a 'short cake' house resembling a little cottage or fairyland abode in Hiroo or Seijō, or a cute rounded apartment in Roppongi or Akasaka-Mitsuke. The 1980s was the decade which left behind police boxes designed as gingerbread houses (*okashi-no-ie*).

Meanwhile Sanrio organised Sanrio festivals and athletics meetings, *Hello Kitty* Santa tours, a *Strawberry Mate* travelling caravan, Halloween and Valentine extravaganzas, and printed *Ichigo Shinbun* (The Strawberry News). Sanrio built cute shopping arcades such as the Sanrio Ginza Gallery, and Sanrio Fantagen – a cluster of eighteen cute goods shops in Funabashi – Ichigo Hall in Den'en Chōfu, Sanrio Theatre in Matsudo, Harmony Land in Kyūshū, and Puroland in Tama City, Tōkyō.

Cartoon characters printed onto goods literally add character to their

Figure 6.3 Mitsubishi Bank credit
card advertisement

lifelessness and slogans etched onto the actual good or printed on the packaging put across more forcibly the same notion of light fun. Cute slogans were more often written in fractured English or pseudo-French than in Japanese. A toilet bowl called *petit etoile*; a pink toaster in the shape of a cottage called *My Sweet Bread Toaster*; a can opener which says: *This can-opener is not just a kitchen tool. Treat it kindly and it will be our loyal friend*; school note paper inscribed with the message: *OK! You're in my team. Let's have fun together!*; and a set of plates saying: *Life is sweet like a poem when you are with kind friends.*

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The industrial, impure or masculine nature of some of the objects decorated in fancy style can produce incongruous images, such as the almost transvestite-like character of baby pink road diggers or adult gambling machines called *My Poochy* and *Fairies*. But there is no mischievous conspiracy of camp designers behind these articles. Despite appearances to the contrary, there is no sense of camp in Japanese culture. In some cases this mismatch between the good's function and its design has simply gone unnoticed; at other times an attempt has been made to camouflage and mask the dirty image of the good or service in question. The typical household toilet, maybe unconnected to a sewage system and sometimes foul smelling, was often made to resemble a tiny grotto, festooned with puffy gingham curtains, quilted toilet brush covers and toilet roll dispensers, fluffy toilet seat covers, fancy cartoon slippers. Love hotels, which sell room space for sex, are named after good, sweet girls like *Anne of Green Gables* and Laura of the *Little House on the Prairie*. Yakuza-run *pachinko* gambling parlours are recognisable as the light buildings full of pink and blue neon with baskets of plastic flowers arranged on the pavement outside.

Cute style gives goods a warm, cheer-me-up atmosphere. What capitalist production processes de-personalise, the good cute design re-personalises. 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. The good could appear to have a character of its own because of its winsome UFO or mammalian shape, such as little round, weeping digitalized vacuum cleaners and rice cookers, or the 1980s' *mini kāsu* (little cars) designed to feel playful and cuddly.[7] Modern consumers might not be able to meet and develop relationships enough with people, but the implication of cute goods design was that they could always attempt to develop them through cute objects.

Cute Clothes

Adverts and articles printed in *an-an* and *non-no*,[8] two of the leading women's fashion magazines, suggest that the desire for a more than just youthful, but distinctly child-like, cutie-pie look began in the mid-1970s. In May 1975, *an-an* ran a special article introducing its readers to the novel new concept of cuteness:

'PLAY! Cuteness! Go for the young theme! On dates we only want feeling, but our clothes are like old ladies! It is the time you have to express who you really are. Whatever you say, co-ordinating a very young theme is cute. Wear something like a French slip . . . for accessories try a cute little bracelet. BUT! It will look much cuter if you don't use high quality exclusive materials. Cute-looking plastic and veneer look younger. For your feet try wearing colourful socks with summer sandals, it will exude a sporty cuteness! Hair is cutest styled straight with children's plastic hair pins fixed in the sides.'

Cute clothes were – and are – deliberately designed to make the wearer appear childlike and demure. Original cute clothes were simple white, pink and pastel shades for women and more sort of bright and rainbow-coloured for men (Figure 6.4). The clothes were often fluffy and frilly with puffed sleeves and lots of ribbons – a style known as 'fancy' – or alternatively were cut slightly small or tight and came decorated with cartoon characters and slogans. In the first half of the 1980s the most fashionable design house in Tōkyō was 'Pink House Ltd.' which produced adorable outfits for budding cuties. Pink House was so sought after that the Hakuhodo Institute of Life and Living (HILL) began to refer to young people aspiring to the Pink House image as the 'Pink House movement' (HILL 1984: 227). Women's underwear was also cute, the dominant taste being for puritanical white pants and vests, in addition to the infamous white tights, frilly ankle socks or knee length 'school-girl' socks. Then there was the understanding habit of manufacturers in placing great lengths of elastic in underwear so that women's pants often looked like a little girl's when not worn, but fortunately stretched to three or four times the size when in service.

By the late 80s, cute fashion had matured into a cheeky, androgynous, tomboy sweetness. Apart from the perennially popular tight, white, baby vest-like T-shirts, nursery colours, cartoon characters and baby doll frills mellowed out into woolly Noddy hats, dungarees and tight little sweaters. This change is well illustrated by the fashion magazine *Cutie For Independent Girls*,[9] first published in spring 1986 and attracting a readership of 100,000 by October 1989. Obviously, *Cutie* takes cuteness as its starting point, but on top of the basic ingredient of childlikeness, *Cutie* style is also chic, eccentric, androgynous and humorous (Figure 6.5). *Cutie* is published monthly by the odd-ball media corporation Takarajimasha, which was founded by a group of ex-revolutionary Waseda University students, and is better known for publishing the

Figure 6.4 Pop-idol Kawai Sonoko in a little doggy outfit

sub-culture oriented magazine *Takarajima* through the 1980s; in *Cutie* the rebellious, individualistic, freedom-seeking attitude embodied in acting childlike and pursuing cute fashion is very clear. The magazine prints pages of photographs of readers, whom it calls 'kids', posing in clubs and streets trying to look bad and cute at the same time.

Figure 6.5 Funky-sweet – the front cover of a 1993 issue
of *Cutie For Independent Girls*

Cute Food

Young people took to purging themselves on cakes and sweets. Eating
confectionery is not only a habit with child-like connotations, but also
symbolically stresses personal sweetness which in Japanese (*amai*), as
in the English, refers interchangeably to both edibles and charming
people. The association between sugary foods, especially cake, and
children's culture is strong in Japan, as Edwards elaborates:

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Alcohol in general is considered one of the spicy foods which as a class are the province of adults, and which children are taught to avoid in favour of sweet ones. Cakes, as sweet foods, have a close association with children in Japan. Special cakes were made in pre-war times at the naming ceremony of a new born child.

(Edwards 1987:66)

The most popular and fashionable foods of the 1980s were soft, sweet and milky, including icecream, cakes, milk drinks and soft deserts. The yearly growth rate of the icecream market in the 1980s was five per cent and, by 1989, the sale of high-class icecream in Japan accounted for US$100 million per annum. Most of this icecream was sold in the fancy icecream parlours which arrived on the streets of Tōkyō and Ōsaka in the early 80s at the beginning of the 'icecream boom' caused by the sudden increase in adult consumers:

Until now icecream was always considered as 'something for the kids', however it has recently become fashionable and achieved a certain adult respectability . . .

(Focus Japan August 1986:4)

Icecream, puddings and cakes purchased at 'fancy patisseries' and cafés, and cleverly invented baby food like *cheezu mushi pan* (squashy, cheese-flavoured cake) were popular throughout the 1980s, whilst other sweet foods such as creme caramel, tiramisu, nata de coco, tapioca pudding and panacotta attained briefer fad followings (Figure 6.6).

The ideal 'cute' food carried with it a marketing image, frequently something petite, frilly and Victorianesque; rustic and olde worlde; or derived from fairy-tale images scavenged from the nursery. A good example is Rolly Doll, founded in 1985, which operates and franchises over sixty fresh-baked cookie shops across Japan and owes most of its ¥5 billion annual sales to nostalgia. Its founder explains:

Drifting through sweet memories of childhood I recalled the special aroma of fresh baked cookies, emanating from Aunt Stella's farm kitchen in Pennsylvania's rustic Amish country. The concept was complete in a flash: the image, the taste, the aroma, the wholesome goodness of an earlier America where 'kinder and gentler' were the norm.
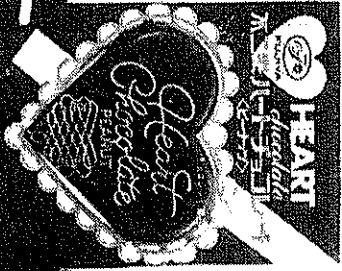
(Focus Japan 1990:8)

Figure 6.6 Very fancy. Fujiya chocolates

Figure 6.7 Typical Matsuda Seiko, waking up in her nightie, and cuddling dolls and foreign children

Cute Idols

Matsuda Seiko was to cute what Sid Vicious was to punk. Between April 1980 and 1988 she became the reigning queen and prototype for a whole new industry of 'idol singers' that flourished in the 1980s.[10] Matsuda was flat-chested and bow-legged and on TV she wore children's clothes, took faltering steps and blushed, cried, and giggled for the camera (Figure 6.7). Every one of her 23 singles, released between 1980 and 1988, became number one smash hits (Imidas 1991:746). Matsuda gained her popularity by being childish. She published several books for her fans, filled with large wobbly handwriting, small words and 'heart-warming' poems like the one below:

> Seiko always . . . . .
> Wants to see a dream.
> What I'm thinking,
> I want to try and put in a poem.
> So my little heart,
> Can reach out to you a little.

<div align="right">(Matsuda 1982: 147)</div>

Following in Matsuda's footsteps, most of the 1980s idols were released in time to become famous between the ages of fourteen and sixteen. The debut age of packaged pop-stars has in fact been getting progressively younger since 1974. This includes male sweety bands like Tanokin Trio aged fourteen to nineteen (debut 1980), SMAP aged fourteen to fifteen (debut 1988), and Hikaru Genji aged fourteen to sixteen (debut 1988), as well as female idols such as Kyon Kyon aged fourteen (debut 1982), Nakayama Miho aged fifteen (debut 1984), and WINK aged fourteen (debut 1988).

Cute stars dominated television and magazines as well as pop-music. Known by the collective term 'talents', their appearance as hosts, contributors or ornamentation in a great many television programmes was an innovation that partly originated with Fuji Television's *Yūyake Nyan Nyan* (Sunset Kittens) programme in 1985. Katō Kōichi describes the original reasons for the programme's popularity:

> They responded to the host's questions, and played silly games, like a competition to see who could stay in an extremely hot bath the longest. Childish and frivolous as the show was, it nevertheless attracted far more viewers than programmes featuring the performances of professionals and celebrities.

<div align="right">(Katō 1987:89)</div>

<div align="center">235</div>

Sunset Kittens, on air daily at five o'clock, became such a popular programme that it has since achieved the status of a TV classic. The programme was hosted entirely by school girls and consisted of games, songs, sketches ridiculing adults, and an ongoing competition amongst school girls who wanted to join the team of amateur hosts, otherwise known as the *Onyanko Club* (Kitten Club). Eventually the number of kittens expanded to 52, and over the following years some of the most popular girls, such as Kawai Sonoko and Kokusho Sayuri, began to branch out into separate careers, releasing hit singles and diffusing into other television programmes. However, the practice of using cute childish stars with no specific talent, such as singing or acting, to increase the interest value of programmes began to fade out by the 1990s.

Instead, in 1991 there was a national craze for the 100 year old twin sisters, Kin and Gin, who made frequent appearances in talk shows on television, had their faces printed on all kinds of fancy merchandise – such as Kin-san and Gin-san hard boiled orange sweets – and even recorded a song on CD together. They were described by young and older people alike as both kawaii (cute) and kawaisō (pitiful). Kin and Gin were sweet, frail old ladies with girlish old-fashioned ways of expressing themselves and, like many very old people, they were slightly out of touch. The case of Kin-san and Gin-san illustrates that, although cute was principally about childishness, a sense of weakness and disability – which is a part of childishness – was a very important constituent of the cute aesthetic. In fact cute and pitiful were often the same thing (Figure 6.8).

Toddlers, baby animals, and frail old ladies are the natural models for cute, and cute characters produced by the fancy goods industry were deliberately designed to be physically frail, emulating weak members of society. Cute characters like *Hello Kitty* and *Totoro* have stubbly arms, no fingers, no mouths, huge heads, massive eyes – which can hide no private thoughts from the viewer – nothing between their legs, pot bellies, swollen legs or pigeon feet – if they have feet at all. Cute things can't walk, can't talk, can't in fact do anything at all for themselves because they are physically handicapped. Discussing cuteness in America, Harris makes this point very clearly:

> Although the gaze we turn on the cute thing seems maternal and solicitous, it is in actuality a transformative gaze that will stop at nothing to appease its hunger for expressing pity and big heartedness, even at the expense of mutilating the object of its affections.
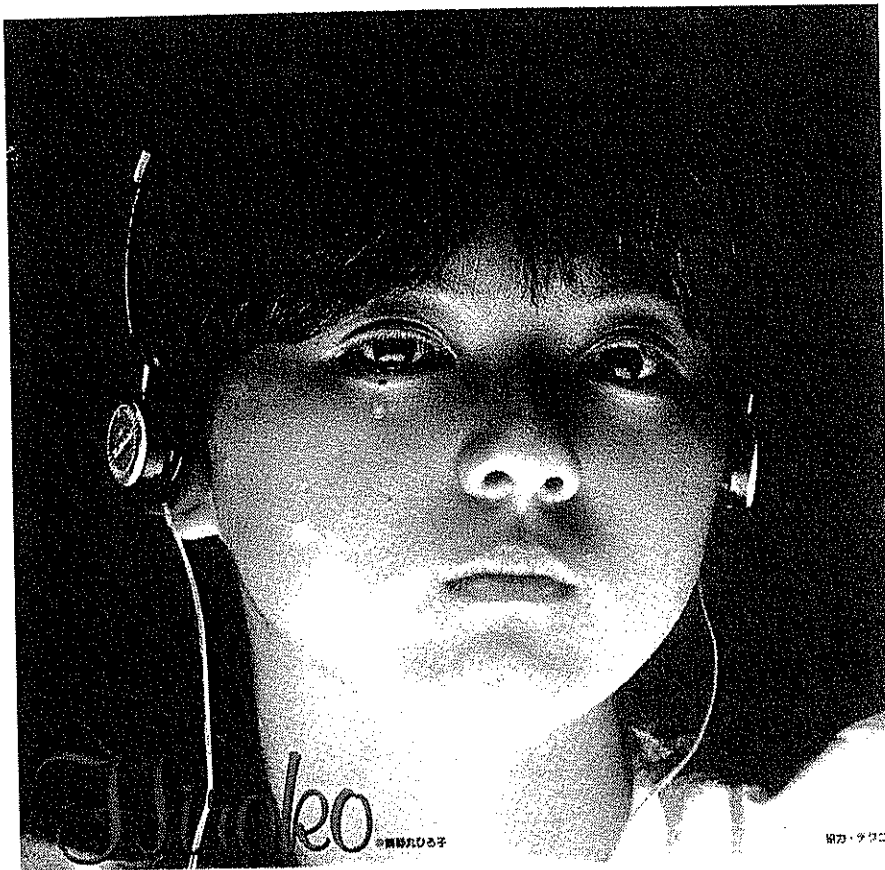>
> (Harris 1993:134)

Figure 6.8 Pop-idol Hiroko spills her adorable tears for
the fans

However, cute fashion in Japan was more than merely cuddling cute things; it was all about 'becoming' the cute object itself by acting infantile. Young Japanese, especially women, purchased cute accessories and filled their rooms, cars, desks at work, and handbags with sweet paraphernalia as a way of surrounding themselves by cuteness, to the point where they felt transformed and could enter this cute-only world themselves. Being cute meant behaving childlike – which involved an act of self-mutilation, posing with pigeon toes, pulling wide-eyed innocent expressions, dieting, acting stupid, and essentially denying the existence of the wealth of insights, feelings, and humour that maturity brings with it. In cute culture, young people became popular according to their apparent weakness, dependence and inability, rather than because of their strengths and capabilities.

Cute Ideas

During a survey amongst 18 to 30-year-old men and women carried out in Tōkyō in 1992, I asked respondents to write down freely what cute

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meant to them. The question asked was: 'In what kinds of situations might you use the word kawaii?', and the replies were dominated by themes related to childhood. Respondents said they used kawaii when they felt people were *childlike*:

> 'Children and adults are innocently frolicking about.'
> 'When you have treated your companions a little contemptuously as though you thought they were little fools.'
> 'I use it as a complimentary word when people are childlike.'
> 'When people's faces are perpetually childlike.'
> 'People who experience things in a childish way.'
> 'When my friends seem precocious and their clothes and gestures childish.'
> 'People that in places are as pure as children.'

These childlike people were often childlike because of their apparent *innocence*:

> 'Loveable idiots.'
> 'Cute is people so lacking in experience that they can't communicate.'
> 'When I see a clear girlish innocence in someone.'
> 'Tiny innocent things.'
> 'Babies, children and people younger than me with an expression of innocent obedience.'

Beyond mere innocence, some respondents felt that kawaii referred to people in a state of *naive* unity with their world:

> 'When children and friends are happy and quite indifferent to their lack of common sense.'
> 'People who fit into their surroundings and lose sight of themselves.'

Cuteness was also a very *unconscious* thing, as is reflected both in the degree of unawareness respondents displayed in their answers and in a few outright admissions that kawaii was about not thinking at all:

> 'The word just pops out unconsciously.'
> 'When people are acting without thinking at all.'

Kawaii was also considered to be a *natural* thing:

> 'When I feel natural.'
> 'When a friend is genuinely and naturally lovely.'

Secondly, respondents used kawaii when they felt that warm *emotional contact* between individuals had been expressed:

'The effort people expend for other people is cute.'
'When I see something that is dear to me.'
'When people make contact with someone else.'
'When my feelings are softened and made culpable.'
'When I see an incredibly sympathetic face.'
'When without any connection to profit the mood of your heart is expressed.'

These sociable, sincere emotions tended to come from *inside individuals* where it was normally hidden:

'It is about the internal part of you seen when you make a chance gesture or move that is disarming.'
'The greatness inside someone oozes out.'
'When things warm the spirit.'
'When from the bottom of my heart I am able to think that something is sincerely cute.'
'When it is hard to say "I love you".'
'When people show their real selves without any affectation.'

The *fashionability* of cute was apparent in the answers of respondents who associated cute predominantly with fashion items and attractive people, or who mentioned the peer pressure they felt to use the word cute:

'Attractive faces.'
'Things to my taste. When I see and touch things.'
'When I see the kind of little things and clothes I like.'
'When I realise my friends want me to say "cute".'

Cute was also strongly associated with animals, or more precisely pets, which – needless to say – were very popular during the 1980s.

'When animals and children play for my attention (*amaeru*).'
'When I see the gestures of the animals I look after.'

Some respondents directly described as cute an individual's *weakness* and inability to deal with everyday life:

'When I look and I feel that someone is trying as hard as they can and grappling with something.'
'When someone's situation overwhelms them more than my situation overwhelms me.'
'When someone is happy and then suddenly their smile drops, or when someone is relieved.'

It is quite apparent from these statements that, for cute 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 it 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 not often visible to other people. For the fans, cute people and things seemed to be in a state of happy, naive, and natural unconscious unity with life and other people.

The idea underlying cute was that young people who 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. But the original childlike innocence of each individual, rather than disappearing forever, was still present in some naive individuals and could be glimpsed occasionally in the gestures, expressions and attitudes of almost any kind of person. Cute childlike behaviour was considered genuine and pure – implying that the experiences and social relations acquired after maturation were considered to form a false, shallow, external layer.[11] The logic of this assumption is quite coherent, although ironically cute is in fact extremely artificial and stylised. Cute is the particular style derived from adults (and children[12]) pretending to be childlike. Furthermore, the 'childlikeness' aspired to is not so much real childish behaviour – which must include subservience, temper tantrums, bed-wetting and frustration – as the idolised childlikeness described in the neo-romantic tradition.

Respondents tended to think of cuteness manifested in the minutiae of friends, gestures and behaviour as profoundly natural. At the same time as they imagined cute to be natural, they did not tend to view it as a historically defined style. Young people fond of cute things and acting like *burikko* (fake children) did not consider themselves to be engaging in a current fashion at all. This apparently unconscious involvement was very distinctive of cute fashion. I say 'apparently' because one of the ideals of the cute fashion, as we know, is precisely to be uncontrived and genuine, so that any real cutie was obliged to cover up the traces of her conscious effort to look sweet.

Childhood Romance, Adulthood and Individualism

We have established that cute style was all about acting childish in an effort to partake of some of childhood's legendary simplicity, happiness,

and emotional warmth. Underpinning cute style are the neo-romantic notions of childhood as an entirely separate, and hence unmaligned, pure sphere of human life. In fact, the general belief that childhood is 'another world', in some ways an ideal world, has been the dominant perception of childhood throughout the developed world for most of the twentieth century. Early European criticism of the spiritual poverty of modern society, which developed in response to industrialisation and urbanisation, led to a romantic re-evaluation of pre-industrial society. For the first time, past and more primitive lives in rural communities and in childhood were described as a period of innocence, simplicity and spiritual unity which had been ruptured and destroyed by the corrupting and alienating forces of modern social relations and cities.

Urban nostalgia for this wholesome country life did not result in a cute aesthetic until this sentiment was captured by Disney animation and delivered to a mass audience. Disney made his first animations in the interwar years, producing *Steam Boat Willy* in 1928 and *The Opry House* in 1929. As with Charlie Chaplin, Disney animations were adored in Japan, as much as, if not more than, in America, until they were banned for the period of the war. But from 1950, Disney comics and animation, this time full-length productions such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, flooded into the country again. Going to visit the cinema to see Disney films on specially designated days became a part of primary school education (see Ono 1983). Disney had a big influence both on Japanese animation and comics and on the introduction of the modern cute aesthetic into Japan.

However, whereas Disney cute was based more on a sentimental journey back into an idealised rural society populated with happy little animals and rural characters taken from folk stories, Japanese cute fashion became more concerned with a sentimental journey back into an idealised childhood. As Disney romanticised nature in relation to industrial society, so Japanese cuteness romanticised childhood in relation to adulthood. By idolising their childhoods and remnant childishness, young Japanese people implicitly damned their individual futures as adults in society. Condemning adulthood was an individualised and limited way of condemning society generally.

In the survey I conducted in 1992, I also asked respondents to describe the way they felt about adulthood and childhood. In relation to adulthood the question I asked was: 'When you think of adulthood what images come to mind?' Although some respondents gave positive appraisals of adulthood, describing it as a period of 'freedom' and

'potential', the great majority of respondents – who, we must remember, are not teenagers but young people already well embarked in their adult lives – described adulthood as a bleak period of life:

> 'The harshness of having to make do everyday and make a living, the harshness of supporting a family.'
> 'Controlled society, hard work to help society, responsibility and effort.'
> 'It is a hard society where you take responsibility for all your actions, working hours are long and free time is lacking, fun, gentleness and naturalness are hard to give and let out.'
> 'A dirty world of power.'
> 'The degree of freedom on the spiritual side is lower than that of a child, responsibility to big organisations becomes very large, dreams disappear as the necessity to conform comes nearer.'
> 'Strictness day in and day out, you can't stop working.'
> 'Life is lonely'

The negativity of the answers given is startling. Their assessments of Japanese society were very dark, and their impressions of an adult life in that society equally depressing. Adulthood was directly understood to mean society, and vice versa; it was not viewed as a source of freedom or independence, it was viewed as quite the opposite, as a period of restrictions and hard work. The most common impression of adulthood was that it involved responsibility (*sekinin*), typically a huge responsibility, which was not an abstract individual, but specific, responsibility to society, to one's family, and to large organisations, in which one had to work hard and conform to expectations. After social responsibility, respondents cited a general lack of free time and tight social regulations as the unhappy characteristics of adulthood. The mid-1970s to mid-1980s was a period notable for its lack of political and social imagination in Japan and, in relation to this widespread understanding that adulthood was a period of restriction and overwhelming obligations, childhood – one of the oldest and most immediate sites of imagined freedom – became extremely popular. Cute fashion idolises childhood because it is seen as a place of individual freedom unattainable in society.

There is in Japan no strong pattern of thought which links adulthood with individual emancipation. Maturity, which in the west has been linked to the authority and rights of the individual, still tends to be thought of according to the Confucian model in modern Japan. That is, maturity is commonly considered as the ability to cooperate well in a

group, to accept compromises, to fulfil obligations to parents, employers, and so on, and carry to out social responsibilities. This underlying ideology is another reason why rebellion against society in Japanese youth culture has developed into a rebellion against adulthood as well. For the same reason intellectuals, ascetics and artistic outsiders from Japanese society have long carried the stigma of infantilism, and some have possibly even played up to the image of being childlike eccentrics.

Cute fashion was, therefore, a kind of rebellion or refusal to co-operate with established social values and realities. It was a demure, indolent little rebellion rather than a conscious, aggressive and sexually provocative rebellion of the sort that has been typical of western youth cultures. Rather than acting sexually provocative to emphasise their maturity and independence, Japanese youth acted pre-sexual and vulnerable in order to emphasise their immaturity and inability to carry out social responsibilities. Either way the result was the same; teachers in the west were as infuriated by cocky pupils acting tough, as Japanese teachers were with uncooperative pupils writing cute and acting infantile.

Cute Ladies

Young women were the main generators of, and actors in, cute culture. From the consumption of cute goods and services and the wearing of cute clothes, to the faking of childish behaviour and innocent looks, young women were initially far more actively involved in cute culture than were men. This is not to say that cuteness was not popular amongst young men – on the contrary it was very popular – but young men were largely relegated to the passive, wistful audiences of the performance of cute culture put on by women. Towards the late 1980s, more and more young men did in fact join the ranks of cute young women themselves, and cute style became more androgynous and more asexually infantile. The gender-related nature of youth culture in itself is not new. Nearly all originally western youth cultures in the postwar period – such as mods, rockers, new romantics, techno, punk and hip hop – have been dominated by young men with young women playing a more passive, side-kick role. To date, the much greater original involvement of men than women in other youth cultures has attracted little specific notice – perhaps for the simple and valid reason that the greater active involvement of young men had seemed to be normal or natural, given the general structure of modern societies. Consequently, the creation of cute youth culture around young women has attracted a lot of notice. While old-fashioned

mums in England grumble that they can no longer distinguish between girls and lads because the girls all dress like boys these days, Japanese social commentators have bemoaned the domination of modern culture by young women and the increasingly cute, little-girlish appearances of young men.

The position of the young unmarried woman in contemporary Japanese society represents greater freedom than that of the young man. Young women – by virtue of the strength of their oppression and exclusion from most of the labour market and thus from active social roles – have come to represent in the media the freest, most un-hampered elements of society. Young women pushed outside mainstream Japanese society are associated with an exotic and longed-for world of individual fulfilment, decadence, consumption and play. Young men do not represent freedom in the same way. Nor, in their role as subservient company employees, do they embody any of the characteristics of the powerful, antagonistic, macho individualism of the male in western societies and their youth cultures. For many young men, cute fashion represents freedom and an escape from the pressure of social expectations and regulations. Typically these young men both wear cute fashions, emulate cute behaviour themselves, and fetishize young women – either real girl friends or syrupy sweet little girl heroines depicted in lolita complex comic books for adolescent boys. Adolescent women (*shōjo*) provide the elusive model for cute culture. As John Treat discusses in some detail in a later chapter of this book (see also Treat 1993), *shōjo*, the leaders of cute, have been transformed into an abstract concept and a sign for consumption in the Japanese mass-media and modern intellectual discourse.

For their part, young women – even more than young men – desire to remain free, unmarried and young. Whilst a woman was still a *shōjo* outside the labour market, outside of the family she could enjoy the vacuous freedom of an outsider in society with no distinct obligations or role to play. But when she grew up and got married, the social role of a young woman was possibly more oppressive than that of a young company man. In her role as an unmarried woman, she was pushed to the margins of society, but was still able to work as an OL on a temporary contract in company offices, spend her money on herself and her friends, and socialise in urban centres. Maturity and marriage threatened to separate her from these privileges, and very likely to shunt her off to a small apartment in a remote and unattractive suburb, with only her devotion to her children and their school books to occupy her. While the 'moratorium mentality' and lack of desire to grow up and take on

adult social roles and responsibilities was a feeling spread right through Japanese society in the 1980s, for women the urge to prolong youth and its appearances took on the form of a profound struggle. These young women thus savoured their brief years of freedom as unattached urban socialites through decadent consumption, and also expressed their fear of losing that freedom and youth through the cute aesthetic. Shimamura (1990) notes that, as young women get older and particularly in the period immediately prior to marriage, their fascination with and immersion in cute culture becomes still more acute.

Cute Consumption

Young people entered cute culture through consumption of cute goods with cute appearances and emotional qualities. The increasingly large disposable incomes of youth and young women in particular throughout the 1980s, and the inventiveness of Japanese businesses in providing goods to make them part with their money, had the greatest determining influence on the highly commercial nature of cute culture. Cute did, however, seem to be accessible *exclusively* through consumption. This was both because it encouraged hedonism and sensual pleasure necessitating consumption, and because, even during their youth and bachelor days, it was very difficult for Japanese to be cute full-time. Cute culture along with other youth cultures could only be enjoyed during brief moments of private time, such as at home between working and sleeping, or in the car, and in tiny private places such as inside handbags, presents and pencil cases. There was not only no space for cute to ever become part of a 'lifestyle'; the fantastical nature of cute culture itself contained so few references to real life and society that there was in any case little way of understanding it in terms of everyday life. Cute culture had to be entered and left in a matter of minutes or moments, which lent it to construction by ephemeral products and places of consumption of goods and leisure services.

And childlikeness was an expensive youth culture. There is no upper limit to the cost of childish clothes and accessories because perfect childlikeness is a particularly unattainable ideal that becomes less and less attainable with time. The demanding ideal of cute fashion generated a built-in orientation towards the consumption of goods which could transform a young person to look and feel something like a child.

Unlike even those ironically well-marketed western origin youth cultures such as punk and grunge, cute culture did not condemn materialism or the display of wealth. Many contemporary western youth

cultures have been distinctly opposed to, amongst other things, modern consumer culture, encouraging a tendency among hip youth to condemn materialism, to appear to or actually buy little, to dress down, and to find cheap, second-hand goods with which to adorn themselves. In contrast, personal consumption is portrayed as something rather anti-social and immoral in mainstream Japanese society, and cute youth culture went against the grain of older social values by sanctioning consumption.

Anti-cute Ideas

There were anti-cute elements. Anti-cute people can be divided into two social categories: young people who considered cute to be too weak and stupid; and conservative intellectuals in academia and the civil service who were appalled by the spread of a new female-led youth culture which did not accord to traditional canons of good taste, let alone good morals.

Punks, rockers and young people attracted to the 'indies' scene felt that their own fashion was more politically progressive, intelligent and sophisticated. These types of independent young people would have been likely to read magazines like *Takarajima*, Japan's main sub-culture magazine which frequently criticised the commercial pop-idol industry whilst promoting *YMO*, Japanese indie bands, 'New Age Fashion', encouraging the import of UK punk music and fashion, and challenging pop-stars like *David Bowie, The Jam,* and *Siouxie and the Banshees*. Many of these young people, who in the 1990s are in their late twenties and early thirties, entered *katakana* and multi-media professions as producers, editors, freelance writers, and designers, and brought their disdain for cute and other common cultures with them.

Amongst intellectuals, criticism of cute style blended with the general moral attack on youth – and especially young women's behaviour and social values – which was sustained through the 1970s and 1980s. Ironically, this is also the period in postwar history when Japanese youth were most politically passive and untroublesome for the establishment. But in fact it is this extremely passive behaviour at which intellectuals began to take offence. Rather than reflecting on 1968 and being grateful for the enormous inactivity of Japanese youth, moral academics complained that this passivity was part of an attempt on the part of youth to shrink away from their active duties and obligations in society, at work, in the public space, in the home. Intellectuals demanded that youth show their commitment to the social order by an eager, positively motivated, moral engagement with their traditional

social roles as company man and housewife, rather than merely refrain from active criticism of society. Cute fashion was perceived correctly as one more example of social disaffection and malaise amongst youth. Rather than attempting to grow up and take on social obligations that adulthood brings with it, youth were quite obviously attempting to avoid all these oppressive demands made on them by aspiring not to grow up at all and immersing themselves in cute culture.

Cute 'boys' and 'girls' were portrayed as spending horrendous amounts of money on music, clothes and cute 'things' in Harajuku and Aoyama, or meeting their friends at trendy restaurants and bars, and going on frequent holidays skiing or abroad. And this they surely did where possible – but it wasn't cute youth in particular that consumed, but the goods consumed that were particularly cute. Retailers, advertisers and manufacturers scrambled over one another to invent new goods, services and gimmicks to sell on the expanding domestic consumer market, as they sought to appropriate the cute style.

Conservative critics felt that allowing this consumption to continue out of control could only encourage the idea that life was about the pleasure of the individual and not about gaining moral satisfaction through fulfilling social obligations and responsibilities. Individualistic consumption and the cute values of sensual abandon and play, which provided an apology for consumption, were accused of undermining Japanese tradition:

> Play can only be truly satisfying when a sense of balance reveals the substance of tradition. True play by drastically diminishing one's own stature in relation to tradition, expands one's world. Puerile play by exaggerating one's position in relation to tradition, constricts one's world. I bear no ill will towards commercial civilisation. Like it or not, I am very much its beneficiary. This does not mean, however, that I feel the least inclination to glorify it in any way. The maturity of culture requires a certain degree of serenity and moderation, but commercial civilisation spreads noise and excess in the name of vigorous differentiation. As little as I know about foreign lands I am well aware that the 'Japan problem' brought on by our commercial civilisation has grown to serious proportions. As Ishikawa Yoshimi has pointed out, the basic Japan problem is not the trade surplus but implicit and explicit disdain for the Japanese way of life itself.
>
> (Nishibe 1986:41–42)

Nishibe directly equates play with consumption and makes it quite clear

that the concept of play (*asobi*) in the contemporary Japanese context was no more than a cute way of saying 'do what you want'.

But the play motif ran right through the core of advertising, retailing, and the multi-media in the 1980s. For these industries, which had to appeal to the private, often solo, consumer to purchase their goods, the idea of play became a useful aphorism for individual fulfilment through consumption. Incidentally, the patronising implication of the equation of individual free time and consumption with play, made both amongst the Japanese intelligentsia and in the mass media, was that Japanese youth were insignificant people even to themselves whose private activities amounted to little more than child's play.

Cuties were also denigrated for being infantile. For a style which labels its self as infantile it is hardly a critique to say that it is infantile. However Fujioka, PR director for Dentsū, certainly came up with an original reason for why cute might be literally 'stupid' when he described cuteness as the epitome of thought without reason:

> Cuteness can not be developed by reason and cannot be evaluated without being seen. Thus it is really not in the least surprising that for grasshoppers *[modern youth, spendthrifts]*, making what one would want oneself means responding not to any practical demand but to the subjective, intuitive demand for cuteness.
>
> (Fujioka 1986:35–6)

Fujioka was using post-modernist theory to make his point, but most critics were not so generous. The general opinion of cute was that it was 'juvenile, effeminate and tasteless' (Shimamura 1991). In this equation the feminine, the tasteless, the infantile, and the popular were used as virtually interchangeable concepts, giving a good idea of the kind of narrow prejudices of the critics. Yamane, in particular, took it for granted that infantile meant feminine:

> What can we conclude about this complete infantilisation of Japan? The answer is straightforward. The girl has jumped up. The girl is boisterous.
>
> (Yamane 1990:11)

Nakano Osamu, a leading intellectual and expert on youth echoes Yamane's sentiments:

> With the action of one selfish nod of their head in response to a question, a response originally typical of children, young people display their infantilism. At times female university students babble

to themselves and from their attitude and demeanour to their facial expression they act just exactly as though they were children.

(Nakano 1985:62)

One gets the strong impression that Nakano feels that the problem of ingratiating 'selfish' cute fashion could be solved if only women were banned from universities altogether. Women were blamed for feminizing society. But the so-called feminine behaviour described by critics is not actually traditional feminine behaviour at all, but a new kind of petulant refusal to be traditional subservient females which can be observed in modern young women following cute fashion. Cute behaviour was perceived as 'selfish' not just because of its seeming refusal to co-operate with social expectations – in this case respectful and polite behaviour in the presence of superiors like Mr Nakano – but because it was strongly correlated with indulgence and individualistic consumption.

Young women, in particular, have born the brunt of the criticism of consumer culture throughout the 1980s and 90s. Cuties have been scapegoated. Their recent and highly conspicuous participation in decadent consumption activities, together with the older association of personal consumption involving interest in fashion and emotional abandon with femininity, has helped critics of modern culture to point the finger at women. Overworked salary men have been encouraged to see the source of their misery as the new generation of stroppy decadent young women, who selfishly do whatever they wish and make unreasonable demands on men. There is a general consensus that, today, men are hard done by and humiliated by manipulative, choosy, cute young women. In fact, in the first half of the 1980s, young women worked more than at any time previously in the postwar period. However, the greater involvement of young unmarried women in the labour force has also been interpreted as another act of willful selfishness on the part of women, who were accused of deliberately vying with men for good jobs and simultaneously denying them marriage partners.

There is an interesting, though incidental, similarity both between the particular forms of black culture and the ways in which black Americans have been discussed in academic and media discourses in the USA, and the particular form of feminine cute culture and the ways in which women have been discussed in academic and media discourse in Japan. In the 1980s, a strand of black American culture responded to the mainstream stereotyping of blacks as vain, emotionally unstable, immature, violent, criminal, and so on, by adopting the stereotype of the 'nigger' and raising it into a positive stereotype. They proudly described

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themselves as 'niggers' (for example *Ice T* and *NWA*), and flaunted their potential for criminality, violence, and sexual prowess in their fashion, in hip hop, and in rap music. In Japan, a barrage of sexist stereotyping and insults – frequently propagated under the guise of media or academic social analysis about the new position of women in Japanese society – began flowing in the mid-1970s and continued throughout the 1980s, producing, by now, a mountain of books on 'women'. Aspects of cute culture engaged in by young women appear to respond to this criticism by defensively strengthening a 'girls only' culture and identity.

Women debased as infantile and irresponsible began to fetishize and flaunt their *shōjō* personality still more, almost as a means of taunting and ridiculing male condemnation and making clear their stubborn refusal to stop playing, go home, and accept less from life. Popular examples, true or false, of young women's triumphal manipulation of men using their cute appearances as a bait, abounded in late 80s Japan. Apparently the cutest and most innocent-looking of young women were keeping several dates on the boil at once in order to service their materialistic needs. Each date would have a separate function and name – *ashi-kun* (Mr Legs) being awarded to the man who could provide a free late-night taxi service, and *meshi-kun* (Mr Food) to the man who provided free meals out on the town.

Cute Against Society

Cute fashion, as we have seen, idolises childhood. The aims of playfulness, individual emotional expression, and naiveté incorporated in childlikeness are not consistent with traditional social values. The people who persist in play and 'refuse to grow up' are what Okonogi Keigo would call moratorium people:

> Present day society embraces an increasing number of people who have no sense of belonging to any party or organisation but instead are oriented towards non-affiliation, escape from controlled society, and youth culture. I have called them the moratorium people.
>
> (Okonogi 1978:17)

The concept of 'moratorium people' invented by Okonogi in 1978 became very widespread and influential, to the point that students and individuals on the periphery of Japanese society happily identified themselves as *moratoriamu*. But, in fact, the contemporary association of social disaffection or social rebellion with childishness began during the students' movement at the end of the 1960s. One of the reasons for

this was the adoption of children's culture as an alternative to mainstream 'adult' culture by *students* who refused to accept any longer the values taught by the universities. Rather than reading the classics and doing as they were told, students started to read instead children's and adolescent comics, more or less adopting the comic medium as their own. The common motto of the day was 'never trust anyone over thirty', and students showed their loathing by spending hours with their noses in comics which came to be considered somewhat risqué and underground. 'Adult' came to have the additional meaning of conservative, while 'childlike' and play came to have the additional meanings of progressive and open-minded. This explains the logic behind Doi Takeo's thinking when, in 1973, he neatly described internationalism and social equality as infantilism:

> In practise, the present tendency to shelve all distinctions – of adult and child, male and female, cultured and uncultured, east and west – in favour of a universal form of childish *amae* can only be called a regression for mankind.
>
> (Doi 1973:65)

Okonogi Keigo's vision of moratorium people who evaded responsibilities, social duties and adulthood is an extension of Doi Takeo's theory of childishness. Nakano goes on to recall bitterly that cute behaviour is a direct expression of the moratorium mentality:

> They deliberately affect a pitiful cuteness. Growth, maturity and becoming an adult are not positive values: they want to remain children forever. This subjective childishness is related to the prolongation of the *moratorium period*, which is made evident by the striking infantilism of young people after they have entered university.
>
> (Nakano 1985:63)

Cute style is anti-social; it idolises the pre-social. By immersion in the pre-social world, otherwise known as childhood, cute fashion blithely ignores or outrightly contradicts values central to the organisation of Japanese society and the maintenance of the work ethic. By acting childish, Japanese youth try to avoid the conservatives' moral demand that they exercise self-discipline (*enryō*) and responsibility (*sekinin*) and tolerate (*gaman*) severe conditions (*kurō, kudō*) whilst working hard (*doryoku*) in order to repay their obligation (*giri, on*) to society. Rather than working hard, cuties seem to just want to play and ignore the rest of society completely.

Cute is one element of the vast popular culture which has flourished in Japan during the last quarter of a century, overwhelming and threatening traditional culture. This popular culture is almost entirely devoted to an escape from reality, and its dominant themes have been cuteness, nostalgia, foreignness, romance, fantasy and science fiction. Cute culture has provided an escape exit into childhood memories; nostalgia has been a door to people's collective past; foreign travel and fixation with foreign culture have provided another escape hatch; whilst syrupy monogamous romance has beckoned people into their narrow, inner lives. Fantasy and science fiction – most visible in comics, animation and computer games – have opened an escape route into alternative universes. The rule for Japanese popular culture has been any space or any time, but here and now in Japan.

In any modern society, culture is the sphere to which people turn to fulfil spiritual, emotional, intellectual and sexual needs and desires which are not met within the fabric of their lives at work, at school, at home. The overwhelming desires of young Japanese people in the 1980s, reflected in cute culture, were to escape from real life as completely as possible. For Japanese youth, as for Sid Vicious, there was NO FUTURE; in fact, there was not even a present.

NOTES

This chapter is based on the following materials:

> Magazines: *Takarajima, an-an, JJ, non-no, Cutie for Independent Girls, Popeye, Heibon, CREA, SPA!*
> Journals: *Japan Echo, Look Japan, Focus Japan, Takarajima 30*
> Interviews with: Shimamura Mari, Yamane Kazuma, Okonogi Keigo, chief editors of *Cutie For Independent Girls* and of *Takarajima*.
> Survey: Analysis of the free answers in the self-completion written questionnaire I distrubuted to 110 men and women between the ages of 18 and 30 in the summer of 1992.

1 *La Pissch* are a main stream ska/rock band from Tōkyō. These lyrics are taken from the song *Sanbon Tsuji ni Shōjo Murete*, on the album *MAKE* released in 1988. The two words *kawaii* and *kawaisō* in the first and second lines work together as a play on words. Kawaii means cute and kawaisō, which is a slight variation of the word kawaii, usually using the same Chinese characters, means pitiable, pathetic or vulnerable.

2 In Japanese, *amai, airashii, mujaki, junsui, kantan, shōjiki, yasashii, kizutsukeyasui, kawaisō,* and *mijuku.*

3 The questions asked were: 'To what extent do you like or dislike cute-looking people?' and 'To what extent do you like or dislike cute behaviour

and attitudes?'. Respondents were asked to answer these questions along a boxed scale of: (1) love/like a lot; (2) like; (3) neither like nor dislike; (4) dislike; (5) dislike strongly/hate. The survey was given to a random selection of 110 people, by whom 89 answers were returned.

4 In the same years that the new handwriting cult spread, the mechanical pencil industry made record profits producing strong, thin leads and a plethora of cute mechanical pencils for young writers to choose from. Between 1969 and 1979 sales of mechanical pencils doubled, and between 1979 and 1981 trebled again.

5 There are two syllabaries in the Japanese language. *Hiragana* is the alphabet used most frequently for all normal purposes, and *katakana* is a special alphabet used originally for Buddhist texts and then for military purposes and foreign words, but now also used to give emphasis to particular words, and in advertising.

6 Yamane's research involved examining visitors' books in tourist temples and love hotels where young people left signatures and personal messages, and a questionnaire survey in which 3021 school students nation-wide participated (see Yamane 1986).

7 Nissan is a big producer of the so called mini car with models such as the snail-shaped *S-Cargo, Figaro, PAO* and the extremely popular, indefinitely sold out, bubble-shaped *BE-1*, launched in 1987, complete with extra horns and whistles. The most successful mini car of all, the *Mazda Eunos*, is also one of the most lucrative designs of car ever created. Shigenori Fukuda, chief designer of the *Eunos*, consciously set out to create a 'small, softly curved, comfortable car that would be a kind of friend like a puppy' (quoted by Ōtsuka Sachiko in Mazda's public relations magazine, *Joyful Life*, 1989).

8 *an-an* and *non-no* have been two of the most consistently popular and widely read young women's fashion magazines since 1970 and 1971 respectively when they were launched. *non-no* circulates 1,500,000 copies a week, targeted at young women between 17 and 23 years of age. *an-an* circulates 650,000 copies every fifteen days and is targeted at slightly more sophisticated 18 to 25 year old women.

9 One editor of *Cutie For Independent Girls* told me that the original plan had been to call the magazine plain *Cutie*. However, since there were five other magazines in publication at that time whose titles and copyrights were a variation on the word 'cute', the words *For Independent Girls* were added in small print. The title is not therefore intended to carry any meaning.

10 By 1988 Matsuda was married with a child and had adjusted to a more adult, sexy image, and at this point the media began to witch-hunt her, describing her as a 'bad' wife and 'cruel' mother. One or all of these events caused a decline in her popularity and all but the end of her career.

11 Sayuri Koshino, a PR representative for Sanrio, describes exactly this mentality: 'I believe we are all born with actual physical organs of cute, tiny and valentine shape, pulsing away in our cerebella. But I also believe that many of us, having developed harsh and realistic life attitudes, have repressed our cute impulses.' (Quoted in Logan 1983:12)

12 In a brilliantly perceptive book written by a photographer on the abuse and misrepresentation of children in modern society, Patricia Holland describes

how children are often forced to behave 'childlike' according to adult expectations: 'Children – especially girl children – must learn to present themselves *as* an image. They must learn a special sort of exhibitionism and reproduce in themselves the charming qualities adults long to see. They may recognise the pleasure that childhood provides for adults but they must not reveal that knowledge, observing adult behaviour only secretly. Open refusal to cooperate invites punishment and a forced return to childishness in tears and humiliation' (Holland 1992: 16).