Wink on Pink: Interpreting Japanese Cute as It Grabs the Global Headlines

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Consider the following news items by which Asia is making the headlines:

In a 2007 “mockumentary” book entitled *Japanese Schoolgirl Inferno: Tokyo Teen Fashion Subculture Handbook*, journalists Patrick Macias and Izumi Evers chronicle girl culture street fashion in urban Japan from the late 1960s to 2007, ending with what they call “cute overload.” There, as an example of this overload, stand two young women in various shades of pink from head to toe: shocking pink hair adorned with multiple pink barrettes, fuzzy pink kitten earmuffs, pink baby doll dresses, mismatched pink knee-high socks, and pink laced shoes. Around one woman’s neck hangs that icon of cute: Sanrio Company’s flagship character since 1974, Hello Kitty. Among the barrettes in the other woman’s hair is, again, Kitty. Standing at the entrance to Harajuku—the commercial mecca of street youth culture in Japan—they pose, leaning into each other, hands clenched, kitten-paw-style, at their cheeks. In the insouciant style of these Tokyo women, the look is not passively sweet, but assertively in-your-face *kawaii* (cute). This is cute with a wink, gesturing to the cameras that await them. The women pose for multiple gazes, knowing that what they donned that morning might be seen thousands of miles away, captured by foreign and Japanese photographers and posted on Web sites or eventually published in magazines and glossy coffee table books. The interaction between viewer and viewed defines and reifies the spectacle of *kawaii*, or what I call “Japanese cute.” Nestled within the interaction, tucked among the frills of this Tokyo “cute overload” rests that mouthless icon of Japanese girl culture, Hello Kitty.

Another gaze upon Japanese cute and, specifically, Hello Kitty comes from multiple news wire sources in August 2007. The headline declares, “To Punish Thai Police, a Hello Kitty Armband.” Reported widely from the Associated Press to CNN International to Al Jazeera, the story revolves around a new strategy devised by Bangkok police to discipline not the general public, but their own male patrol force. Any delinquent officer would be shamed into compliance by being forced to wear a bright pink Hello Kitty armband. Hello Kitty—that ultimate symbol of cute femininity in Asia and elsewhere—presumably provided a sufficient threat to the police officers’ masculinity. As of the news item’s

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reporting, none of the armbands had actually been used. The threat of being publicly Hello Kitty-ed, apparently, was enough. The global press had a field day.

Yet more headlines. From the Pacific to the Atlantic, high fashion in the United States has been speaking the Hello Kitty language. In October 2008, Sanrio unveiled its newest vision of cute-as-chic: Sanrio Luxe in New York’s Times Square. The first concept store of its kind, Sanrio Luxe abandoned the pencils, erasers, and lunch boxes that were the original staples of the Hello Kitty line and replaced them with designer fashions, diamond-encrusted watches, and finely crafted luggage—with prices to match—all bearing the characteristic Hello Kitty logo. Managers say that many items have been selling out quickly to Japanese, American, and European buyers, in spite of the global recession. Many of the latest iterations of Hello Kitty in the Luxe store and elsewhere depict a variant of the feline visage: Not only is she mouthless, but also she is winking.

Meanwhile, the cosmetic line M.A.C. made a major Kitty plunge in 2009, featuring not only a new line of Hello Kitty cosmetics, but also decorating their stores with Hello Kitty in blackface. The Honolulu M.A.C. store featured a striking promotional figure: a bare-chested, bronze-skinned man in tight black leather pants, nails painted black (presumably using nail polish from the new M.A.C. Hello Kitty line), sporting an oversized Hello Kitty head in black, edged with pink. Looking at this image with its sadomasochistic undertones, one cannot help but be astonished by the distance that Japanese cute has traveled. In conjunction with M.A.C.’s new line, New York City’s Fashion Week in February 2009—considered a global hotspot of style and trends—featured a parade of Hello Kitty-inspired designs by thirty cutting-edge designers such as Emanuel Ungaro and Esteban Cortazar. The fashions were subsequently auctioned on eBay at high prices matching their status. In these American scenes, Japanese cute had transcended both its Tokyo home, as well as its link to childhood innocence. Sanrio plays with Hello Kitty as simultaneously “cute,” as well as chic, hip, and kinky-sexy.

How to explain this multifaceted phenomenon of Japanese cute—and Hello Kitty within it—showered with such global popularity? What sense do we make of the ubiquity of the phenomenon—not only in terms of actual products such as Hello Kitty, but also the influence of the very aesthetic and sensibility that seems to dwell in the playful, the girlish, the infantilized, and the inevitably sexualized, for young and old alike? How can a logo (akin to a cartoon character) reside in so many places globally, high and low? From the trinket-laden sidewalks of Harajuku to the traffic-clogged streets of Bangkok to the catwalks of New York, Japanese cute, as exemplified by Hello Kitty, inhabits a prime space of visibility. The eyes of many parts of the industrial world, it seems, have turned to Japan as a source of cute. But what, exactly, have they seen? More importantly, perhaps, what do they want to see? Sanrio’s recent thirty-fifth anniversary celebration provides a rich opportunity to reflect on what I call “pink globalization”—the
widespread distribution and consumption of Japanese cute goods and aesthetics to other parts of the industrial world. Notably, Hello Kitty was always intended as a global product: According to Sanrio’s founder, Tsuji Shintarou, this was supposed to be the Japanese cat that would overtake the American mouse. It is this kind of vision, especially as it has been realized in the twenty-first century, that focuses our discussion. In particular, it is Hello Kitty (and other cute products) as a global wink—cultural, national, transnational, gendered, and, ultimately, corporate—that draws our attention.

Journalist Douglas McGray helped frame the phenomenon with his catchphrase “Japan’s gross national cool” in 2002, referring to the popularity of manga (comics), anime (cartoons), and other elements of youth culture from Japan that have gained significant cachet elsewhere. The phrase has been overplayed ever since. In fact, it is the overplaying as saturation that holds our interest here. Joseph Nye’s “soft power”—that is, the ability to indirectly influence behavior or interests through cultural or ideological means—has been the backbone of much talk about Japan’s “cool.” The heated gaze upon cool by Japanese government, media, and industry rests in the purported expansiveness of its soft-power capital.
Cute/cool provides global currency in a market trade of youth culture that spans continents and oceans. At a time when Japan’s political regime faces fierce global and domestic critics, when its economic ascendancy faces challenges from that other East Asian giant—China—as well as the overall global downturn, and when its self-defense force questions its possible role in international disputes, retreat into the easy comforts of soft power cute/cool sounds like a welcome respite.

Nevertheless, the soft-power position of Japanese cute comes with its own set of challenges. Even cute can suffer the excess of its cool riches. Thus, Japanese cute often prompts virulent internal and external debate. Asking “Is Japan too cute?” some critics in Japan and abroad have expressed concern over the country’s image, as it relies on the exportation of frilly youth culture. There is concern that the new cultural capital in youth-oriented, feminized cuteness trivializes Japan as infantile and superficial. A 2004 editorial in the Japan Times, for example, called out, “Time for Goodbye Kitty?” and lamented Sanrio’s cat’s “potential to embarrass Japan abroad,” proclaiming, “[a]s a cultural ambassador, Kitty presents Japan as the ultimate kingdom of kitsch.”

The Japanese government has paid little heed. Instead, it has chosen to capitalize on cuteness as a new, youth-oriented way to brand Japan—relinquishing images of samurai warriors and dark-suited bureaucrats for a newer, frankly commercial, overtly playful aesthetic. If the Japan of old was epitomized by sober, warrior-infused masculinity accompanied by gracious kimono-clad women in an atmosphere of high aestheticism, then this newly promoted Japan may be epitomized by pink-clad girls, animated fantasies, and winking Kitty logos. In the process, the masculinized image of Japan at work (including wartime sacrifices, high-yield productivity, and nose-to-the-grindstone education) has given way to that of feminized Japan at play. In fact, it is not only Japan at play, but Japan as play, that loads the message. Play—especially that linked with feminine youth culture—serves as a benign framework by which Japan performs its own cool, fashionable stance as a winking logo. Further, performing Japan as corporate, feminized wink highlights the means by which that stance can be interpreted as both benign and powerful.

This is Japan at and as play for which the government has given more than a passing nod, as it reaps what it perceives to be the benefits gained by newly found millennial cool in Asia and Euro-America. Although placing popular culture icons on national objects is not unique to Japan, it is worthwhile to note that the Japanese postal service issued Hello Kitty stamps in 2004 and again in summer 2008. Sold in commemorative sheets of fifty- and eighty-yen stamps (domestic postcard and letter rates), the 2008 release depicted Hello Kitty and her male companion Dear Daniel dressed in flowing robes from the Tale of Genji, demonstrating a remarkable sartorial dexterity in trading eras and icons. This kind of official sanctioning of Japanese cute trades on both domestic and global cool. However, is any cool as good as the next?

Although Hello Kitty may not be the sole target of this cool, other forays of cute officialdom provide a general—and some would say uneasy—context in
which to consider Sanrio’s global consumption. What kind of international message is being broadcast to the rest of the world for a country to have a “cartoon culture ambassador”—as Japan has had since March 2008, when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced its selection of Doraemon, a robotic cat character with special powers, to that position. What further message might be wrought with the announcement in May 2008 by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism of Hello Kitty as Japan’s official ambassador of tourism to China and Hong Kong, in conjunction with its “Visit Japan” campaign? The work of pink continues with the Japanese government’s designation of three kawaii taishi—“ambassadors of cute”—in March 2009. Thus, models Misako Aoki, Yu Kimura, and Shizuka Fujioka appear in official capacity at Japanese global events representing, respectively, “Lolita” (Japanese youth fashion emphasizing frilly Victorian-era, doll-inspired clothing; in name, also referencing the sexual fetishization of young prepubescent girls by older men known as rorikon, “Lolita complex”), Harajuku (youth center in Tokyo), and schoolgirls-in-uniform fashions. Their debut performances included the Japan Fest in Bangkok in March 2009 and the Japan Expo in Paris in July 2009. Clearly, the Japanese government is participating in the “wink on pink” (a phrase originally coined by trends analyst Faith Popcorn), wherein Japan as a whole may be represented by such “cute overload,” of which Hello Kitty is a part. In this regard, Japanese cute—including its tease of youth and femininity—has become part of official policy in creating a new face that beckons the overseas customer.

One prominent figure who has commented and acted extensively on “pink globalization” is international mega-star artist Takashi Murakami (b. 1966). Beginning with his 2000 exhibit at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, Murakami has been at the forefront of the global production and marketing of Japanese cute through what he calls “superflat” art. Superflat describes an aesthetic that is highly influenced by digital technologies and Japanese animation, characterized by the interplay of mobile, flat surfaces. In April 2005, Murakami curated a major exhibit of cute/cool entitled Little Boy: The Arts of Japan’s Exploding Subculture at the Japan Society in New York. The exhibit included works by Murakami’s coterie of artists and designers dubbed “neo-pop,” alongside items of Japanese popular culture such as Hello Kitty, Godzilla, the robot Gundam, and the robotic cat Doraemon. The juxtaposition of “high” and “pop” art was deliberate and provocative, especially framed within the title of his exhibit. Murakami selected the title Little Boy to reference the code name for the atomic bomb that the United States dropped on Hiroshima in 1945. Murakami’s choice highlights what he believes Japan has become in relation to the United States—that is, a forever-emasculated “little boy” by virtue of Article 9 of Japan’s postwar constitution, which denied Japan the right to a military force.

Calling Japan a “castrated nation-state,” Murakami both situates Japanese popular culture as a site of the nation’s own infantilization, and argues for the soft power of Japanese popular culture to resurrect the nation to new global
According to Murakami, Japan’s cute/cool achievement, then, marks no less than the revenge of the “little boy” nation of Japan, as it crawls out from under the hegemony of the West and asserts its own “exploding subculture” soft power. That subculture includes “sado-cute” (cute mixed with sadomasochism) and overt hypersexualization, as depicted in some of Murakami’s works. Here is cute/cool as the “bomb” of global pop culture, as a wink with a large-scale neo-nationalistic, sexualized punch. The irony lies in the fact that Japan is “remasculinizing,” specifically by way of the feminized visual language of cute, in particular through the popularity of items such as Hello Kitty. Murakami’s interpretation of cute/cool pushes the envelope of Japanese cute and Hello Kitty into alarming political and sexual undercurrents. He aggressively deconstructs the wink (or his version of it) for a global audience. In Murakami’s interpretation, Japanese cute—whether approached straight on or ironically—becomes a benign agent of neo-nationalistic fervor entering the global marketplace. Hello Kitty’s seeming innocence opens that very door.

Not everyone would agree with Murakami’s pronouncements, especially coming from an artist known for a certain amount of Andy Warhol–style self-promotion. Nevertheless, they do point up some of the potential for Japanese cute—including Hello Kitty—as a benign, if winking, mask for larger issues. Here, it is useful to discuss the issues behind the wink.

The first of these is gender and sexuality. If nothing else, Japanese cute is linked to a feminized position that is born in passivity, then extended outward to various subject positions, from innocent schoolgirl to Lolita sexuality and beyond. Japanese cute references these various positions simultaneously, thereby gaining layers of intertextual power. Thus, the wink on pink includes lunchbox-toting schoolchildren, giggling Harajuku faux “kittens,” high-fashion tongue-in-cheek New York designers, and even mute, muscled men in black, by virtue of a shared frame—here, the playful iconicity of Hello Kitty. The wink is both the come-on of gender and sexuality, and the tease of its withdrawal in the name of play.

The second of these is insider and outsider knowledge. The wink creates a bond between the object (including its corporate maker) and viewers. Because of the wink, Sanrio may place Hello Kitty in frames and places that one may not expect, yet shield it from criticism as an insider joke. The further afield Hello Kitty may be found, the greater the license to jest—and profit—by Sanrio. In this decade, these extensions include Hello Kitty as a black-garbed punk rocker, a blood-splattered “Gloomy Bear” (a hyperviolent bear character designed by graphic artist Mori Chack), and even a World War II kamikaze pilot. Artistic nihilism, hyperviolence, and wartime sacrifice make for a complex target through winking cute. The fact that anything, it seems, can be “Kitty-ed” (that is, made cute) in Japan and elsewhere has uneasy ramifications, especially when extended to realms of history and politics.
The third of these issues is corporatization. From beginning to end, Hello Kitty is pure product. Although a backstory does exist, according to the Sanrio Web site, knowledge of that backstory is not a prerequisite for becoming a fan. In fact, many consumers of Hello Kitty know or care little about this story. Rather, she exists as a logo. Through licensing agreements in the 2000s, Sanrio has teamed up with numerous other corporations and thus extended its reach manifold, from Fender guitars to airplanes (Taiwan’s EVA Air) to contact lenses to wedding rings. As a logo, Hello Kitty has become ultimately mobile, bearing and sharing a world of branded goods. Part of being “Kitty-ed” implies not only being made cute/cool, but also being made corporate. Consumers themselves share in this capitalist-infused world, customizing items or their own bodies with the Kitty logo. These include guns, cars, computers, food, clothing, and tattoos. Indeed, the cute/cool as corporate logo can readily infuse an entire material world.

Finally, the wink straddles and connects the national (Japan), regional (East Asia), and global (youth culture, girl culture). This is not to say that consumers in these different settings imbue Japanese cute (or Hello Kitty) with the same set of meanings. Rather, what they share is consumption itself in a cohort of cute/cool. Hello Kitty’s wink becomes a pact between these consumers, tied specifically through her purchase. That pact plays on hypermeanings—that is, Hello Kitty as the über-cute, the über-feminine, and, for some, the über-Japan. She exists in her very excess, playing it multiply and exoterically. The power of Hello Kitty lies in her ubiquity—thus, commodity not as a fad, but normalized as an excessive, lifestyle brand.

Sanrio’s cleverness in exploiting Japanese cute and its mute vulnerability may make many of us shake our heads in bewilderment. Yet a quick inspection of playgrounds, kitchens, and runways from Tokyo to New York demonstrates the ways in which many consumers hold the icon dear. Indeed, some Hello Kitty fans negotiate the shifting terrain of twenty-first-century life through both her constancy and her changeability. Sanrio has worked hard so that Hello Kitty as a brand is always the same and always different. The work of cute/cool permeates the global consumerscape multiply, playfully, edgily, and sometimes ironically. It is the denseness of the wink that makes these many iterations not only possible, but also desirable, and ultimately profitable.

Undeniably, the global cool spotlight constantly shifts to new targets. Sanrio has been concerned with this for years, willing to capitalize on the “cool Japan” moment, but working even harder for steady sales that have sustained the product from the 1970s to the 2000s. Thus, Hello Kitty is not a fad on the order of Pokemon or Tamagotchi. While “cool” may not be as “hot” as a sweeping mega-fad, it is still linked to the particularities of the pulse of the time. Indeed, artificial Japanese government support may be interpreted as the death knell of cool. Nevertheless, it remains useful for Asia analysts to observe these ebbs and flows as they intersect with political frameworks, economic trends, and cultural
values. Pitting Japan’s “pink globalization” against other forms of transnational flows from Euro-America demonstrates the ways in which global hierarchies shape not only the meanings given to products (often, but not necessarily, tied to their country of origin), but also their critique. Sanrio’s cleverness rests in manipulating the wink on pink, leaving ambiguous the extent of its corporate knowing. Understanding Asia beyond the headlines—here Japanese cute in its many global manifestations and interpretations—means grappling with both the subject’s pinkness, as well as the subversive playfulness of its wink.

Suggested Readings


