CAPITALIZING ON "CUTENESS":
THE AESTHETICS OF SOCIAL RELATIONS IN A NEW
POSTWAR JAPANESE ORDER

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In the fall of 1988, Yoshida Kenji, the president of the San'yo Sōgo Bank in Okayama, made headline news in the economics section of leading Japanese newspapers. Unlike most bank presidents appearing in the news at that time, Yoshida was not defending himself or his bank from accusations of wrongdoings. He had made the national news because of the new name he had chosen for his bank: Tomato Bank. The occasion for the new name was the bank's planned change in status from a savings and loan association to a commercial bank following a recent reform in Japanese banking law. The hoopla that arose around the name "Tomato," along with the bank's bright red logo, was related to the associations that it conjured up in many Japanese minds, associations that somehow seemed incongruent with the image that banking institutions have traditionally held in Japan.

Although there was some initial opposition among bank employees, who felt that the name Tomato sounded more appropriate for an agricultural cooperative than for a bank, the public response seemed only positive. Although the conversion was not to take place for six months, Sanyo Sōgo was inundated with inquiries from people all over the country wishing to open accounts at the new Tomato Bank. In interviews about the unexpected popularity of the previously little-known prefectural bank, Yoshida explained that he thought it important to send the message that he was "breaking the status quo." A crucial element in the delivery of this message was the use of a name that would be perceived by the public as *kawaii* (cute, as translated in the *Japan Times*, 21 October 1988: 11).

Although newsmaking in the context of its application to a banking institute, the *kawaii* aesthetic itself was, at the time, neither new nor very newsworthy. The commodification process of *kawaii* goods can be traced back to the early 1970s with the establishment of a joint stationary and gift card business by Gakken publishers and Sanrio gift shops – now the largest purveyors in the cute gift industry, which garners some 10 billion yen annually (about $ 90 million) (SHIMAMURA 1991: 60). In 1965 Sanrio began manufacturing gift cards with the United States manufacturer American Greetings. Under this arrangement, the designs and messages – done in English – were created by the American half while the printing was done

in Japan. In 1972 American Greetings came out with their Holly Hobby series. The character became an instant hit and was adopted for use on a wide variety of apparel and household wares. From 1975 all sorts of animated characters of foreign and domestic origin began being used as designs on goods, and became a secret to success in the competitive marketing world (SHIMAMURA 1991: 58–61). The *kawaii* aesthetic gradually spread to medium-priced electrical appliances, e.g., pink, round (or in some cases, even heart-shaped), small, and soft telephones, vacuum cleaners, personal computers, and televisions. By 1985, the most expensive consumer durables such as cars and houses were being manufactured in a style referred to as "*kawaii.*"

In 1991 the Public Employment Security Office (*Shokugyō Anteisho*), operated by the Labor Ministry, decided to advertise its new "friendlier image" by adopting the name "Hello Work," suggestive of the popular animated cat character Hello Kitty. Shukutoku Junior College, a Buddhist school, redesigned their campus to resemble Disneyland's Main Street in an attempt to maintain their enrollment. The result was a tripling in the number of applicants. And in 1993 the Communist Party in the city of Nagoya, chose a cartoon giraffe with markedly large round eyes to emphasize its *kawaisa* (cuteness) as their logo for the national election. Coinciding with the growing commercial popularity of things *kawaii*, was the develpment and spread of a new script of cute handwriting characterized by the use of round characters rather than the usual sharp vertical strokes. In short, the aesthetic was not restricted to a narrow range of consumer goods, nor was its appeal restricted to a small sector of the population – young girls, mothers, and even men seemed to find the *kawaii* images desirable. This broad-based popularity has led some Japanese writers on the topic to assert that the *kawaii* aesthetic can be labeled a "cult" or "culture," and that, as such, it is a key to understanding the 1980s (MIYADAI 1991a: 78–79; ŌTSUKA, ISHIHARA and MIYADAI 1992: 79). Guided by the theoretical perspective that consumer goods have social meaning and that consumption is a kind of communication (DE CERTEAU 1984; BOURDIEU 1984; BAUDRILLARD 1988), I will attempt in this paper to place the prevalence of the *kawaii* aesthetic within a wider social debate in Japan about how interpersonal relations and society should be conducted and organized.

Although "cuteness" can be argued to be found in other parts of the world, most notably the United States and Europe, the purpose of this paper is not to relate a Japanese perception of *kawaisa* to these other phenomena of "cuteness," but rather to attempt to describe a certain social and political atmosphere that relates to the development of the *kawaii* aesthetic in Japan. Although I do not wish to create the impression that cuteness is unique to Japan, I also do not want to casually lump together all forms of

"cuteness," which is why, for the most part, I use the word *kawaii* through-out this work rather than the often used English equivalent "cute." I will leave it to others to describe the development of cuteness in the United States and Europe and its relationship to mass market capitalism in general, as well as to decide to what degree there might be an affinity between those and the Japanese social and political atmosphere. I can say, however, as a brief remark, that many of my Japanese informants saw the United States as quintessentially *kawaii* and placed their own attraction to *kawaisa* as an attraction to a way of being they imagine to exist in the United States. Associations/misrecognitions of the United States with the popularity of *kawaisa* in such institutions as Disneyland have been noted in the follow-ing way:

> Disneyland is the place where adults can break away from daily life and play optimistically like Americans ... Disneyland is the final form or appearance of the imagined, not real, America that post-war Japa-nese are drawn to (*Asahi Shinbun* 10 January 1995: 9).

My own approach differs from a recent work written on the popularity of *kawaisa* by MCVEIGH (1996), "Commodifying Affection, Authority and Gender in Everyday Objects of Japan," although I do not disagree with his contribution to our understanding of the phenomenon. In particular, I feel that McVeigh's remarks regarding the use of *kawaisa* in denying power in social relations is crucial to understanding the popularity of the aesthetic. I can not deny that the presentation of young women as *kawaii* can rein-force an image of women as subservient although in my paper I also wish to stress that the aesthetic has a nonconforming or escapist aspect to it. In this respect, my understanding of the phenomenon is closer to KINSELLA's (1995) contributions in "Cuties in Japan". In this paper, I also try to show how and why the aesthetic has become so popular among a wide sector of the population, not just young women.

1. SOME ETYMOLOGICAL AND CATEGORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Although the boom in *kawaii* images in advertising and marketing is a rel-atively recent phenomenon, the word *kawaii* is not new, possessing roots traceable to writings of the Heian period (793–1185). The word *kawaii* can appear in Chinese characters, in either of the two Japanese syllabaries or in the Roman alphabet. In the case of Chinese characters, there are two ide-ographic renditions of the *ai* character. In the first case, *kawaii* can be thus understood as a quality that makes something "natural to love" or "lova-ble". In the comprehensive *Shogakkan* dictionary, the following entry ap-

pears: "(in the case of women, children, etc.) of lovely appearance, the situation of feeling something is lovely, or the situation of thinking dearly of the other that is also wanting to be loved." In the second case, which is often recognized as older rendition of the term, *kawaii* conveys a sense of pathos or, more specifically, sorrow, pity, or longing. In both cases, the terms relate to feelings or emotions.

Some of the associations made with the term as a behavioral attribute, as found in dictionaries and upon inquiry, include *sunaoni* (obedient or docile), *enryogachi* (reserved), *kodomoppoi* (childish), *mujaki* (innocent or without evil intent), and *musekinin* (irresponsible). Antonyms include *kibishii* (strict), *kitsui* (stern or sharp), and *nikui* (detestable). *Sunaoni* and *enryogachi* have been traditionally seen as the ideal qualities for women in general, and, even more so for young women. In some cases, though, even disobedience and a lack of reserve can be *kawaii*. For example, a book for young women titled *Kawaii onna wa chotto namaiki* (Lovable Girls Are Somewhat Cheeky) was released (MISATO 1987). The main gist of the book, which was written by a woman who had studied in the United States, was that times are changing (or perhaps, better yet, should be changing) so that *sunaoni* (obedience) and *hikaeme* (reserve) are no longer the only desirable qualities for a young woman. Rather, being able to express oneself more freely could also be "lovable," thus the character of Dennis the Menace in the movie of that name was billed as *chōkawaii* (exceedingly cute). In general, a valuation of any behavior as *kawaii* is context dependent, especially in regards to the gender of the doer (MISATO 1987).

In short, *kawaisa* carries more than one connotation. On the one hand, the term can be one of approval because *kawaii* behavior is generally considered to be innocent and thus natural or honest rather than socially contrived. On the other hand, insofar as there is a connotation of a lacking – lack of reserve, responsibility, adulthood, etc. – the term can be received ambivalently, especially when a young female calls an older male in a position of authority "*kawaii*." The potential for (re)defining behaviors in terms of "lovability," which is itself a somewhat ambiguous term, rather than power or status, is also an important part of the proliferation of the term in the 1980s.

SHIMAMURA (1991) presents an exhaustive list of goods and services that can be included in the category of *kawaii*, and cites some of their common attributes. The archetypal *kawaii* good is small, round, soft, and pastel, but anything that can be made and/or marketed can rightfully be termed *kawaii*, including cars, computers, and power shovels. Certain architectural styles, such as Early American for private homes, European for resorts and inns, and Disneyland styles for love hotels and college campuses, are also included in this category – which again suggests that *kawaii* as a somewhat

vague word of approval, has the potential to include variety of styles in one aesthetic. The first two styles are said to have a connotation of romantic love, while the Disneyland style has an association with childhood. In terms of goods, traditional Japan is not, in general, the source of what is deemed *kawaii*. This is an important point when considering the significance of the proliferation of goods and services considered to be *kawaii*.

At first appearance it might seem that one can account for the *kawaii* phenomenon as a fortuitous taking up of an aesthetic at a time when Japan was for the first time experiencing a high level of prosperity. Reasons for buying *kawaii* goods or presenting oneself (or one's institution) as *kawaii* can in part be seen in terms of the general faddish quality of consumption in Japan. However, a closer look at who buys *kawaii* goods and how they are used suggests that the aesthetic is being used to create a new understanding of interpersonal relationships and the organization of society. As SHIMAMURA writes: "What emerges is that cute is not just an aesthetic in Japan. It is a [new] philosophy of life"(*Japan Times Weekly*, 5 January 1991: 1, 4).

2. *KAWAISA* AND ITS RELATION TO A FEMININE IDEAL

In order to understand how the proliferation of *kawaii* goods and services bespeaks a new understanding of social relationships, it is necessary to trace the various kinds of changes – economic, social, and cultural – that have occured in postwar Japan. In addition, as *kawaii* behavior, goods, and services seem at the outset to belong in the domain of women, it is necessary to focus particularly on women as they assume new roles and statuses in modern Japanese society.

What this new modern role is and how young women may perceive it is addressed by ŌTSUKA, ISHIHARA and MIYADAI. They begin by discussing the theory that the proliferation of *kawaii* goods has come about through the conjunction of three social phenomena: 1) the creation of the girls *(shō-jo)* category in modernizing society, which has young women cocooned away from general society in training for their future role as good wives and wise mothers *(ryōsai kenbo)*, 2) the marking of the girl category with symbols of *kawaisa* – ribbons and bows, and 3) the linking of the girl with the activity of consumption. They assert that there could be a danger in assuming that young girls and women buy *kawaii* goods simply because they see themselves as conforming to a certain idea of femininity with its various associations regarding separation from general society and one's sexuality. And, to see what the relationship is between the ideal of girl and *kawaii* markers, they look at how *kawaii* images are used in pre- and post-

war comic books and magazines for young girls. Ultimately, they contend that the *kawaii*-fication of the 1980s is not related either to an ideal of female behavior or strictly to the power of women as consumers. Their contentions rest on a disjunction between an ideal of femininity, the historical realities of young women's work between the Meiji Era and World War II, and various portrayals of women's imaginations of their feminine role as found in comic books. Neither the realities nor the imaginations suggest that young women overwhelmingly saw themselves as necessarily conforming to some girl ideal. Thus rather than look at some supposedly classic "traditional" role for women one is forced to look more closely at the 1970s and 1980s in particular (ŌTSUKA, ISHIHARA and MIYADAI 1992: 81; 83–86).

Certainly it was only in the late 1960s that Japan reached a level of prosperity that allowed large numbers of married women to spend more time at home even as more jobs became available outside the home. It was at this time that white-collar positions started to account for an increasing proportion of the available jobs. The recent development of the "professional housewife" role was comparable and largely synchronic with the development of the white-collar position. In addition to the general increase in economic prosperity, the nuclearization of the family freed many women from the demands of extended family living situations. Through the advent of technological advances, like convenience foods and time-saving appliances, women's domestic work load was cut considerably, giving them more free time than ever. In the postwar period, education opportunities also increased for women. For all these reasons, many Japanese women at this time became freed from the necessity of working full time or throughout their adult life cycle and were able to invest more time in their roles as homemakers and mothers. One sign of this was the appearance at this time of the phenomenon of the education-mother (*kyōiku-mama*).

What has occurred in this postwar period has been a contradictory situation in which many women are increasingly free in some spheres but increasingly restricted in others. For all the freedoms women may have gained, as a group they find themselves excluded from the full employment opportunities that men have, and they find themselves in a society where an ever more distinct gender division of labor occurs in many sectors of the population through longer periods in the life cycle. The increasing tendency in the postwar years to define women in terms of their roles as wives and mothers has led Japanese feminists to note that "in the past the role of women was much more 'masculine' than it is now" (SMITH and WISWELL 1982: 279). It is in the context of this increasing division of society by gender and a change in what are perceived as socially valid roles that I would suggest that *kawaii* aesthetics appeals to men as well as to women.

Evidence for the association of *kawaii* images with a desire to escape confining roles and develop a new understanding of social relationships is presented in research of girl's comics (ŌTSUKA, ISHIHARA and MIYADAI 1992: 82–88). Scholars note that it is not until the late 1960s that the adjective *"kawaii"* is applied to persons as well as clothes, and other small goods being advertised in young girls' comic books. Up until then the most common terms used were *utsukushii* (beautiful), *suteki* (stylish), *jojō* (lyrical) and *hin no yoi* (elegant). The kinds of characters involved in the stories and the world in which they exist suggest that the girls were experiencing and envisioning a new kind of society with a different kind of organization, centered not around general adult society and family life as was common previous to this period, but around female friendships and romantic love encounters. Written communication between friends began to take place using the newly developed, cute, round handwriting rather than conventional lettering, and an analysis of written content suggests that the new style was correlated with new ways to express new feelings to friends (KINSELLA 1995: 222–225). The way the term *kawaii* was used also suggests that rather than conforming to ideal notions of femininity – obedience and sexual innocence in particular – a challenge was being made.

> The aim of being *kawaii* was far from the notion of being isolated from one's sexuality, but rather was being used by one subculture of young people to declare their sexuality as children and their conscious refusal of the distinction posited by the main culture between mature adults and immature children (ŌTSUKA, ISHIHARA and MIYADAI 1992: 85).

For instance, a popular story from 1969 through 1971, that first appeared in comics and then on television, featured a female high school student having a secret liaison with her teacher. In response to her father who is chastising her for her rashness, she answers something to the effect that precisely because she is a child, she and her behavior are *kawaii* and therefore all right or "loveable" (ŌTSUKA, ISHIHARA and MIYADAI 1992: 95). The idea that childhood rather than adulthood is a time freedom was commented on by Benedict in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* in her now famous observation regarding the "arc of life". As she writes:

> The arc of life in Japan is plotted in opposite fashion to that in United States. It is a great shallow U-curve with maximum freedom and indulgence to babies and the old. Restrictions are slowly increased … This low line (of having one's own way) continues many years during the prime of life, but the arc gradually ascends again until after the age of sixty men and women are almost as unhampered by shame as little children are (BENEDICT 1946: 253–54).

3. KAWAISA AND THE DESIRE TO ESCAPE

The fact that it was sexuality that was incorporated into story lines and goods perceived as romantic – most often from the United States and Europe – that began to be labeled *kawaii* in the comics suggests that by the mid 1970s young girls desired to escape from their lot in Japanese society – the wife and daughter-in-law. Asserting that she and her behavior are *kawaii*, the girl in the comic book attempts to engage in romantic encounters of her own making. The use of "loveability" as a reason for the acceptability of her behavior also suggests that the girl is trying to circumvent power relations that would put her in an inferior position. She circumvents these power relations, not by directly challenging authority, but by saying her behavior, whether it is acceptable or not, and the response to her behavior, are issues of emotion rather than power.

In short, when the character in the comics and the movies refuses to be obedient and presents herself and her actions as *kawaii*, she is finding a space to exercise a freedom of sorts. It is an emotional demand for the right or allowance to be selfish – or to escape one's *giri* and *on* (obligations of reciprocity), in this case, to one's family.

The notion that escapism from rather than confirmation of a feminine ideal is of primary importance in understanding *kawaii karucha* (cute culture) is also suggested by ŌTSUKA Eiji (1989: 190–204). By the 1980s many young girls had reached a new level of escapism, desiring freedom not only from traditional marriages but marriage and gendered (re)production in general. ŌTSUKA Eiji, in commenting on how young girls in the 1980s gather *kawaii* goods around themselves and turn their bedrooms into *kawaii* "fortresses," points out that girls, having been assigned more confining roles in modern Japanese society, have responded by trying to cut themselves off from society completely. He writes:

> Included in the image of the girl's room is the undeniable fact that the girl is trying to make a place for herself separated from normal life and (re)production (ŌTSUKA 1989: 87).

Likewise, the desire to escape the normal social life and one's responsibilities for (re)production seems to be suggested by young girls' sudden interest in and attraction to old *kawaii* women who are also seen as not gendered and, as suggested by the above quotes regarding the life cycle, are seen as free and without responsibility.

Finally, another example of escapism is found in sexually explicit comics marketed for young *kawaii* girls. Comic story lines often depict what appear to be homosexual liaisons or hermaphroditic encounters. Characters who are really androids or extraterrestrial creatures sprout and lose

organs as they change back and forth across genders. Rather than interpreting these behaviors as reflecting a desire to be male or engage in lesbian affairs, both ŌTSUKA Eiji (1989: 202) and Ian BURUMA (1984: 118) say that it reflects a desire to be sexless. In turn, this desire to be sexless among girls is not due to a fear or distaste for the physical condition of being female but reflects an ambivalence about having to grow up and, as a woman, assume a very distinct and confining role. This sexual ambivalence is related to the portrayal of themselves as children insofar as both reflect a desire not to assume one's gendered role. After all, early childhood is a time when one is not expected to be able to play a role and when distinctions based on gender do not exist to the extent they do for adults. As BURUMA writes:

> The emphasis in so many Japanese stories … is on the ending of youth, on the destruction of it, rather than its flowering. *The alternative is to remain an eternal youth or virgin or neither man nor woman, which is the same as not growing up at all* (emphasis added; BURUMA 1984: 124).

Thus in Japanese thinking, although perhaps not always reflected in reality, we see that the child is free from roles and social responsibilities (*giri* and *on*) and is generally pampered in a way that no adult is. Not surprisingly, most Japanese are quite nostalgic for childhood; as BURUMA writes, the Japanese "… retain a lifelong nostalgia … for that childhood paradise. The yearning for that particular Arcadia is a very important aspect of Japanese culture, for it can be collective as well as personal" (BURUMA 1984: 21). For an adult, freedom from *giri* and *on* can normally only be acquired by defying authority and bought at the price of loosing respect. If an adult were to try to assert his or her personal desires it could be seen as selfish, defiant, and/or morally weak. The proliferation of *kawaii* images signals a movement away from traditional types of group-orientated behavior or an increasing inclination for what is seen as escapism. As SHIMAMURA suggests, the proliferation of *kawaii* goods corresponds, not only to infantilization, but also to escapism (*datsuningen*). She writes: This *kawai*-fied society can be said to be both phenomena of infantilization and of escapism (SHIMAMURA 1991: 234). *Datsuningen* has the general connotation of escape, but it also suggests a leaving of one's desire for human – that is full adult – sociability.

This change, however, should not be understood as reflecting a growing value placed on individualism in Japanese society. Individualism entails an increase in the individual's consciousness of his own responsibilities – which is not apparent in the situation in which *kawai*-fication is taking place. In addition, it does not appear that young Japanese are any less concerned about how their behavior is perceived by the group to which they

belong, it is only that now young people are redefining which groups are important. So, for example, instead of the *ie* or *kaisha*, it is peer groups that one is concerned with. From a traditional point of view, *kawai*-fication represents selfish tendencies and a desire to escape conventional responsibilities. It is interesting to note that in the 1980s one of the most popular bridal services marketed its weddings as the *wagamama* (selfish) wedding.

Insofar as the appeal of infantile images lies in their suggestion of freedom from *giri* and *on*, the images can also be seen as a recent manifestation of the old concept of *ninjō* (human feelings). As Takie Sugiyama LEBRA notes, *ninjō* is often valued in opposition to the emphasis on *giri*. *Ninjō* is "indulgence of Ego's natural inclination or desire in disregard of *giri*" (LEBRA 1976: 46). MIYADAI Shinji (1991a: 79) writes that what is behind *kawaii karucha*, along with other phenomena that appear in the 1980s, is a "floating feeling" (*fuyū kankaku*). It is in the "floating world" or "free-floating life" that the avoidance of *giri* is sought. Insofar as *kawaii* images can be correlated with *ninjō*, the desire to escape *giri* and *on* should not be seen as anything new to Japanese culture. Furthermore, freedom from *giri* and *on* is as appealing to men as it is for women – which explains why *kawaii* images have spread to the degree they have. For example, one of the most obvious locations for male consumption of *kawaii* images has occurred in the sex industry.

Studies of male pornography note a distinct switch in female type preferences between the pre- and postwar years. Commonly accepted perceptions of female attractiveness in the prewar years were largely maternal in character with the woman playing a motherly role and the man that of the child. In contrast, the postwar years are marked by a distinct preference among men for childish women in what has come to be referred to as *Rorikon* (Lolita Complex). BURUMA explains this change of preference in terms of fear of impotency, which he links to the loss of World War II and the Allied Occupation (BURUMA 1984: 57–63).

Concurrent with changes in female type preferences, there is also a postwar change in the image of the mother/wife, with prewar mothers/wives being seen as quiet and submissive and postwar mothers/wives being seen as more aggressive (LEBRA 1976: 58). In part this aggressiveness might be related to the increasing economic power women have attained as the "holders of the purse springs" in modern Japanese society, thus making the appearance of the *Rorikon* concurrent with the new challenges to male power by women's new domestic role. Alternatively, this change in the image of the mother/wife could be reflective of males' sense of impotence rather than, or at least in addition to, any real changes in mothers'/wives' behavior. And this sense of impotence in men could arise from the larger political situation, as BURUMA suggests.

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However, in contrast to BURUMA'S impotence explanation, LEBRA suggests that the change implies not so much fear as a simple desire to escape (which does not necessarily have to be based on fear). She believes that it is the man who has had enough of being dependent on the maternal-figure woman that turns to the childish girl. In this scenario, a culturally valued relationship of dependency is still valued, but reversed. It is reversed in such a way that the individual is allowed to escape the role that he usually plays.

> Escape from such domesticity is sometimes sought in a Lolita syndrome, as when a fifty-year-old man falls in love with a seventeen-year-old bar girl who has no inclination toward the caretaker's role (LEBRA 1976: 63).

4. *KAWAISA* AS A RHETORIC OF DISCONTENT

In so far as in Japanese thinking the performance of one's *giri* and *on* are necessary for the maintenance of society and are the requisites for assuming adulthood, it is necessary to consider how *kawaii* imaging and name-calling – as a repudiation of *giri* and *on* – can be considered a rhetoric of discontent. BURUMA notes that the attraction of the fantasy world of far-off places in girls' comics – worlds that are themselves called *kawaii* – comes from feelings of *akogare* (yearning, longing) for something that is unattainable. In the appeal "there is a streak of deep pessimism running through ... or at least a tragic sense of *mono no aware*, the pathos of things" (BURUMA 1984: 121). It is the Chinese character for *aware* that appears in the earlier rendition of *kawaii*, which, as I mentioned previously, has this nuance of pathos. Thus it seems that young girls, in labeling some things *kawaii*, convey the meaning not only of desirability but also regrettable unavailability.

The observation that the rhetoric of lovability contains within it a rhetoric of displeasure – insofar as what is lovable is not otherwise acceptable or attainable – is of course evident in the previous example of young girls wanting to arrange their own marriages based on romantic love. Scholars note that plots based on love and romance replace an earlier type of stories in comics that depicted acts of outward rebellion and violence. They also point out that these story-line changes and the rejection of mainstream ideas regarding the distinction between adults and children, which leads to infantilization, escapism and devaluation of *giri* and *on*, all occur when there is a rising consciousness among young people of their own subculture. They argue that this first generation of young people define them-

selves, as a group, in opposition to the the main culture in terms of love, sexuality, friendship, and happiness. The subculture arises out of a shared experience of school in a postwar educational system that espouses democratic ideals of equality and the individual, and becomes defined as it confronts an adult culture which thinks in terms of hierarchy, authority, and place and which emphasizes familial and national duties. The turbulent but unsuccessful years of student activism in the 1960's can be seen as the apex of this subculture's united confrontation against the "adult system" (ŌTSUKA, ISHIHARA and MIYADAI 1992: 85).

The failure of the riots to stop the renewal of the Security Treaty with the United States in 1960 is a memory emblazoned in the minds of many Japanese. The renewal of the Peace Treaty, orchestrated by one sector of the government, sent the message to not only the students but to many Japanese citizens that they were children insofar as they still needed to be protected by the United States Government. The historian HAROOTUNIAN interprets the 1960 protest as a "struggle over the choice between democratic politics and economic growth;" the failure of the protests and a renewal of the Peace Treaty was a victory for those who saw Japan's future in terms of economic growth and production. (MIYOSHI and HAROOTUNIAN 1993: 212–13). For those who were involved in the student riots, not only directly but also vicariously as contemporaries and associates, there was a strong sense of disillusionment about the future role one was to play in society. A friend of mine, who is a bit younger than those who were most directly involved, recalled the kind of media messages delivered to her age group in the ensuing years. As she put it, they were told that it was just foolish or not cool to take anything too seriously. The young were encouraged to lead carefree – or at least nonpolitical – lives, which highlights the problem of making political activity effective and also helps explain the downplaying of power and the emphasizing of emotion in the *kawaii* aesthetic. In mainstream thinking, outward rebellion or implicit criticism of the status quo are taken as signs that the perpetrator/complainer is unable to *gaman* (endure) and withstand *kurō* (hardship), and thus is not taken seriously (KONDO 1990: 104–115). This generation is called the generation of the three nihilisms (*sanmushugi no moshiko*) – lacking vitality, responsibility, and concern (*mukiryoku, musekinin*, and *mukanshin*).

In the years following the strikes and riots, citizens turned their attention (and had their attention turned) from political affairs to prosperity, with an emphasis on personal consumption. The slogan for Prime Minister Ikeda Hayato's government in the 1960s was the Income-Doubling Plan and, by this time, the life-time employment system was becoming taken for granted as part of company life. The attitude of the times is summed up in the slogan of "cheerful life" (*akarui seikatsu*). The value

placed on *kawaii* images fits into this new atmosphere of lightness, freedom and interest in consumption and play rather than seriousness, responsibility, production, and work. The *kawaii* image is often associated with places and objects that are considered to be part of leisure time activities. So for example, it is not unusual to see signs in resort areas -- whether they be geared towards children's activities or not – that have cartoon characters. Normally suited salary men wear logos with cartoon characters on weekends and vacations. And bank books with *kawaii* characters have become popular, especially among young women. In recalling her choice of a bank book an informant said that the *kawaii* character seemed fitting for the amount and purpose of her money – for "play," not for serious saving.

5. PERCEPTIONS OF EGALITARIANISM

Because *kawaii* images repudiate concerns with *giri* and *on*, and thus lead to a disregard for status, the image has also come to represent ideals of democratization and egalitarianism. SHIMAMURA, quoting Iwashita, president of a trade journal called *Cultural Goods Industry*, writes: "Whether its good or bad, Japan is a classless society. 'Fancy' symbolizes that idea." Continuing in her own words she says that "[Fancy's] astounding popularity demonstrates … our cherished illusion of equality" (*Japan Times Weekly* 5 January 1991: 4). This association of the *kawaii* image with egalitarianism helps explain why, although it is said to represent an "erosion of traditional male aesthetics", it has also been assumed by public institutions, government departments, and city halls as part of their advertising and promotional campaigns. In response to the new name, Hello Work, which was chosen from some 4,200 suggested by the public, a director of the Public Employment Security Office replied; "The idea was to dispel the agency's negative image … 'Hello Work' is the kind of name we bureaucrats could never think of … it is such a friendly and attractive name" (*Japan Times*, 14 January 1990: 2). The traditional male aesthetic is that which pertains to a hierarchically structured, power-based, stern world which is now seen as belonging to the outmoded past. In contrast, the newer *kawaii* female aesthetic has come to represent a horizontally structured, emotion-based, friendlier world of the future (IWAO 1993: 7–8, 245–46).

   In asking various informants, both male and female, about the prevalence of *kawaii* images in messages of apology and caution, I was frequently told that apologies, such as road signs apologizing for construction, were not truly apologetic if they only had lettering. Informants from con-

sumer groups[1] also mentioned that cautions, another frequent location for *kawaii* images, were perceived as having no connection or being too distant if there was only lettering. One female informant in her thirties said that she would be apt to ignore cautionary messages without *kawaii* characters. In both cases, *kawaii* characters appealed to my informants because they were seen as honest and close whereas, without *kawaii* characters, the messages appeared neither true nor relevant, suggesting that both sign users and receivers are trying to deny the issue of authority.

The goverment's use of a *kawaii* front also seems to suggests that it was trying to make itself more relevant by giving up its past authoritarian ways – or rather, concealing them. The repudiation of authoritarianism by the adoption of a *kawaii* front is suggested in Yoshida's explanation of the Tomato logo for Sanyo Sōgo's new image and the Japanese Communist Party's banner with the *kawaii* giraffe logo. The honest and anti-authoritarian connotations are made clear in the Communist Party's Banner mentioned earlier that appeared in Nagoya in 1993. Accompanying the big, round-eyed giraffe logo was the following: "We will do it! We will get to the bottom of the Liberal Democratic Party politics, clean up the money politics and head for real reform. Stop contributions from businesses and groups and revise the number of Diet members!" The desirability of the *kawaii* image at that time is further explained by the various banking and government scandals which smacked of authoritarian, and therefore corrupt, ways of conducting business and politics.

6. *KAWAISA* AND ANXIETY

The circumstances of changing social structure (from vertical to horizontal) and the concomitant transformation in ways of relating (from hierarchical to egalitarian) is pertinent to ŌTSUKA, ISHIHARA, and MIYADAI's final reading on the reason behind the general *kawai*-fication of society. In the closing pages of their article, they assert that it is because *kawaii* goods and images enable one to hide one's "true self" in communicating with others that there has occurred a society-wide *kawai*-fication. They write:

> Even though *kawaii* images attract others, they also stop others from inquiring into one's real self by communicating that *everybody is the same*. And it is in this way that cute things really function as interpersonal tools … In particular *kawaii* images are useful for communication in situations of women only or men and women together; when

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[1] Asked between 1995 and 1997 in Nagoya.

1) one is not protected by some official role, 2) one wishes to make am-
biguous in which way one is acting – either in the capacity of a desig-
nated role or as one's true self, or 3) one wishes to simulate a personal
interaction. In all these cases, *one can evade revealing one's true self.* And
it is as an effective way of managing interpersonal relations that *ka-
waii* images have spread to the degree they have at present (emphasis
added; ŌTSUKA, ISHIHARA and MIYADAI 1992: 90–91).

The quote, in addition to confirming the links between *kawaii* images and
egalitarianism and between egalitarianism and the world of women, sug-
gests that there is a degree of anxiety associated with revealing oneself.
And, according to ŌTSUKA, ISHIHARA, and MIYADAI, buying *kawaii* goods
and talking about things in terms of *kawaisa* is a safe way to maintain both
group harmony and individual peace of mind. The quote also points out
how contrived *kawaisa* is even though it is often understood as being a
mark of sincerity. They do not, however, address why *kawaii* images
should serve this function or why Japanese would necessarily feel such
anxiety about revealing themselves at this particular moment in history.

In my opinion, *kawaii* images are perfect for a situation in which one
fears acting incorrectly in an ambiguous situation. The notion that it is fear
of confusion that is behind *kawai*-fication is supported by an observation
on the presence of *kawaii* goods in the office environment. *Kawaii* goods are
found for the most part in small offices rather than in large corporations
(ŌTSUKA, ISHIHARA and MIYADAI 1992: 91). Large corporations are, for the
most part, devoid of personal interactions, so no confusion occurs and
therefore, supposedly, no need for *kawaii* goods exists. In contrast, in small
offices there is a tendency to have a more personal atmosphere which
causes confusion between personal versus position-based behavior. Fear
of confusion and confrontation is overcome by being ambiguous. As SHI-
MAMURA writes: "Young people in Japan have mastered the art of avoiding
confrontation that might result from personal judgment. Decisiveness –
the offspring of a clear set of values – is disturbing. The antidote is cute-
ness" (*Japan Times Weekly*, 5 January 1991: 4). In short, utterances of *kawaii*
are by and large meaninglessness, but it is this very meaninglessness that
permits conversation – empty as it may be – to occur. Just as one of the ar-
chetypal characteristics of *kawaii* goods is roundness, conversations that
contain utterances of *kawaii* also involve metaphors of "roundness" – they
have no corners and therefore do not arouse anger but instead keep the
peace.

One might well ask why in the 1980s would this predilection reach a de-
gree to which the society in general seems to be suffering from an anxiety
that makes the *kawai*-fication of goods necessary, as ŌTSUKA, ISHIHARA, and

MIYADAI, assert. And why in particular are young people so averse to being decisive? One explanation for the former has already been suggested, and involves the restructuring of Japanese society as more "egalitarian" or at least more horizontal. As LEBRA (1976: 72, 222–23) points out, there has been a tendency for Japanese, especially men but also women, to think of social relations hierarchically and to feel ill-equipped to interact in situations where hierarchical status or its relevance to proper behavior is not clear. For example, the Japanese "phobia of interpersonal relations"(*taijin kyōfu shō*), is manifested more often in situations of same rather than unequal status interactions or when the ritual code is not clearly defined. One can view the spread of *kawaii* communication – both in the sense of displaying and exchanging *kawaii* goods and the inclusion of *"kawaii"* as an attributive term in conversation – as an attempt, however empty, to interact in a way that is perceived as nonhierarchical/horizontal.

Another possible source of general uncertainty involves the frequently uttered trope of Japan as an "advanced information society." Shinji MIYA-DAI describes a situation in which a plethora of disparate images are entering Japanese society in such a way that people are beginning to inhabit mutually incomprehensible media-made worlds where, like the *kawaii* world, no real communication seems to be able to exist. As MIYADAI writes: The advanced information society actually promotes the extinction of communication (1991: 981). This incomprehensibility in turn leads to a situation in which the individual can neither judge the expectations of others nor gauge their reactions to his actions. For the young especially, this leads to feelings of anomie which cause one to turn in or to suffer from what the Japanese call "narcissism". Although MIYADAI does not draw a parallel between his above depiction and someone suffering from a "phobia of interpersonal relations," the anxiety seems similar in kind if not degree. In the case of a "phobia of interpersonal relations" release from the feelings of anxiety can only be found within the home, among one's family and friends – where emotion, rather than authority, ideally thrives and is thus a place where one will not be criticized for lapses in behavior (LEBRA 1976: 218–223). *Kawaii* images, associated as they are with the child (and thus the mother), innocence, irresponsibility, etc., are, I suggest, one way of creating a home-like, intimate, emotional, and therefore non-threatening atmosphere.

This notion of "harmlessness" is pertinent to the attraction of *kawaii* goods as gifts – and currently 90% of the profits from Sanrio, the father of the *kawaii* industry, come from gifts. Although traditional gift-giving between households, companies, benefactors and patrons has not fallen into the *kawaii* domain, that between individuals has. *Kawaii* gifts are popular because they are seen as without difficulty (*munan*), harmless (*mugai*), and

safe (*bunan*) in the sense that they reveal little about the giver or the receiver, unlike traditional Japanese gifts, which meticulously mark status differences. So, unlike the case of the traditional gift, the giver does not have to be careful about matching the gift with the status of the receiver. And, unlike traditional gifts, *kawaii* gifts are not conceived of as favor repayers (or builders) which rely on the concept of *giri*, although they arguably do call for reciprocity on the basis of affection. Rather, the *kawaii* gift is seen as sincere and without obligation. The devaluation of *giri* is evident in the humorous coinage of "*giri choko*" for the chocolates given on Valentine's Day (usually by girls and young women to boys and men of equal or higher status). In short, from the 1970s in an era of *giri* and *on* devaluation and the associated egalitarianism, *kawaii* images are suitable for gift transactions precisely because they are seen as suitable for everyone in their meaninglessness, honest in their motivation, and innocent in their intention.

7. CONCLUSION

Kawaii karucha involves a discourse about individuals finding and defining themselves through confinement and escape, conflicting roles and confused desires. It is also a discourse about how and for what purposes a society should be organized – hierarchically, with an emphasis on *giri* and *on*, production (work), power and a morality of endurance; or nonhierachically, with an emphasis on rights, freedom, consumption (play), attachments based on emotion, and a morality of acceptable selfishness.

Insofar as there is a positive association of *kawaii* images with honesty and innocence, the negative reaction against the connotations of the desire to escape responsibility has developed rather slowly. In fact, looking at the overwhelming popularity of the *kawaii* aesthetic among all sectors of the population, one might think, that there has been no reaction at all against these escapist connotations or the outright false and shallow way the image has been used by public corporations or the government. I have found, however, three groups in which a reaction against the use of the *kawaii* aesthetic has appeared: women, environmentalists, and academics. As an example of the first, I recall a critical response by a female Japanese reporter to the self-presentation of a famous sumo wrestler's fiancee. Dressed from head to toe in all the markers that would make her quintessentially *kawaii*, the fiancee was in no uncertain terms told that as the future wife of a future manager of a "stable" (*heya*) of sumo wrestlers, her image was not appropriate. Although most of the article was about the gift that the sumo wrestler had chosen for his fiancee (which was, one would imagine, status appropriate), the single critical remark excerpted in large type at the

beginning of the article, "Wakanohana likes you precisely because you are strong-minded and self-controlled, therefore next time we would like you to show us your fully adult female appeal" (*Josei Jishin* 8 March 1994: 28).

In 1994, we can also find antinuclear activists protesting the use of a "peppy, rosy-cheeked 'Mr. Pluto'" *kawaii* animation in a video sponsored by the government's Power Reactor and Nuclear Fuel Development Corporation.The activists' protest against the use of "Mr. Pluto", with his assurances of the safety of plutonium, resulted in the video being pulled (*The Nikkei Weekly*, 12 September 1994: 8).

Academic responses against the refusal to grow up and accept "traditional" notions regarding adult responsibility and work have been made since the 1970s in such works as *Majime no hōkai* (The Dissolution of Seriousness) (SENGOKU 1991) and *Moratorium ningen no jidai* (The Age of the Moratorium People) (OKONOGI 1981). In these works, *kawaisa* not only disavows traditional social ethics regarding work, responsibility, endurance, and obligation but also indicates a lack of any political conviction to address the necessity of change. It is neither a conservative nor a liberal call for reform.

The lack of political conviction and even knowledge is presented vividly by ŌTSUKA who tells of the rather odd scene of groups of school uniform clad girls appearing to register their wishes for the ailing emperor Hirohito's recovery in 1988. The girls' statements that " ... the emperor is rather *kawaii*" (*tennō tesa nanka kawaiin dayo*) clash with the reverently bowed figures of the emporer's age mates and right-wingers who had come to register their prayers. As ŌTSUKA notes, these girls should not be taken as supporting or even knowing of the emperor and the imperial system, but rather in gathering around "in support" of the ailing emperor, these girls were equating and acknowledging their own "isolated"/ "lonely" (*kodoku*) but "pure" (*muku*) existence with that of the emperor's (ŌTSUKA 1988: 245).

Seemingly satisfied with purity in isolation, rather than the possibility for a purer, cleaner social existence, *kawaii* culture like other popular aesthetics of postwar Japan, such as nostalgia, science fiction fanstasy, and romance, seems to offer escape as the only solution, often through consumption. Also, as the *kawaii* aesthetic interprets the basis of behavior through a logic of emotional attachment – that is "loveability" – rather than power, it can not really challenge the power structure but, rather, often appears to conform to it.

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