"AMATEUR" MASCOTS ON THE LOOSE: THE PRAGMATICS OF *KAWAII* (CUTE)

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A NOTE ON NAMES, IMAGES, AND TRANSLATIONS

To protect my informants, I refer to all with pseudonyms. I include the actual names of all places, mascots, and managing organizations, however. Japanese names are written with the family name first, then given name (e.g. Birkett Mary).

Except images of mascots, all photos have been taken by me. Mascot images are from the 2011 Yuru Kyara Grand Prix website unless otherwise noted.

Except where I note, all translations from Japanese to English are my own.

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PROLOGUE

It was 10:30 PM on Monday night, and I was starting to get annoyed. I was supposed to interview Yanana's manager, Itô Eiji, half an hour ago, but technical difficulties had intervened. What's more, the person Skyping me looked like some middle-school kid. *What? This guy isn't the manager*, I thought. Like my other interviews, I had prepared about an hour beforehand by visiting Yanana's website, skimming through her blog, and watching a few YouTube videos of her if I hadn't already seen any. I tailored some of my questions to fit what I saw on the web, planning how to best direct the flow of our conversation. During this background research, I came across a picture of Yanana's "ogre manager (*oni manêja*)" on her profile page. He looked like a man in his 40s caught in the middle of a smile, a pair of soft black bunny ears sprouting from his head.

Moto, who answered Skype, was not this man. *Maybe I should've used video in the other interviews too*, I thought. I hadn't turned on the video during any of them, assuming the other person would prefer to remain as anonymous as possible. I also didn't want them to see how nervous I was, or to get distracted by the notes I scribbled during our conversations. I had a hunch Yanana's manager might want to use video, though, and had washed my greasy bangs in the sink in the last 5 minutes before our interview. Just in case.

Moto finally got Skype to work. I discovered that somehow 7 staff members had managed to gather around their PC while we were navigating Skype. "I'm kind of nervous now that I have an audience," I joked. They laughed, and I kept grinning at my blank screen while I waited for their video to load. It eventually got up to speed, revealing a gang of young Japanese people smiling in my direction. I still couldn't see

the manager, but didn't mind much anymore. It was good to see the people who actually formed the group managing Yanana. The Person to Person 's Group (*Hito-Hito no Kai*) seemed like a fun place to work. The staff were all dressed casually, wearing yellow lanyards over their T-shirts, and a few of the women were laughing. As usual, they asked if I was half-Japanese and I gave them a short explanation of myself and my research topic. Finally, the ogre manager appeared.

He was wearing what looked like a leopard-print jacket with the collar slightly popped. Under that, a plaid collared shirt. His hair was gelled into a short mohawk. Maybe it was the rush I got from being able to talk so casually with people halfway across the world, but I liked him. Still on a roll from the camaraderie I enjoyed with his staff members, I chided him for forgetting his bunny ears. "What?," he laughed.

The rest of our interview was more sobering. Together, we unfolded a story about a wasting marketplace that represented not only the nostalgic conclusion to Japan's Shôwa era (1926-89), but the contempt for, and emptiness of, its vicissitudes. When Itô was a young man in the 1990s, Gifu was a healthy town (*genki na machi*), a fun place where young people would gather. And Yanagase marketplace (*shôtengai*) was its prospering center. But as Japan's demographic and economic problems began to make themselves felt, the city's waxing prosperity was peeled away, one sliver at a time. For 40 years, the population struggled to increase from 370,000 to its current 410,000 residents. Now that rise is dropping off. A shopping mall was built 30 minutes away. The vibrant marketplace, once filled with 200,000 people every weekend, is now the rusting pecking ground for some 10,000 or 30,000 visitors. "The cities (*tokai*) are all right but in the peripheries (*chihô*), the number of people is decreasing ... If the town's

center isn't healthy – if there aren't people there – then that town will lose its strength," said Itô.

Figure 1 Gifu City, Yanagase marketplace's unofficial character, Yanana.

As a young event planner who had survived a rough childhood, Itô felt indebted to the community that had looked out for him, and he wanted to do something to help them, to repopulate the city center. That was his definition of town-making (*machi-zukuri*). Instead of developing properties into tourist spots, he decided to create fans of the city by using an amateur character (*yuru kyara*), Yanana. She is a spunky 8-year-old mermaid who was pining after a human boy in Yanagase until the Witch of the West turned her into a yuru kyara ("Yanana's Profile" NA). Performed by a woman wearing a cardboard box on her head, she appears at yuru kyara events to draw people to Yanagase. Her head is shaped like a mailbox, and has yellow hair and a cute face painted on. The woman wears a floor- length skirt and a T-shirt with the archetypal shell-bra design to complete the mermaid look (See Figure 1).

"We couldn't just do events," explained Itô. "We had to convey that we have people with magnetism (*miryoku*). To exaggerate, if these people were to become stars, fans would come to see them. From anywhere. And because they're not in Tokyo, or Nagoya, but in Gifu, [they] will want to come to Gifu's Yanagase marketplace."

This was not just about gaining back customers and a tax base, which is what Itô seemed to mean when he was talking about Gifu's waning strength. It was also to transform how residents felt about their city.

"People just end up comparing it with the past, so it seems like a rusted town … It's not something they can be proud of; they're embarrassed of it. But if a celebrity like Yanana or an idol comes from this place, suddenly, some people will feel proud of their town (*hokorashigeru yô ni omou*). They will feel like, 'my town is awesome (*uchi no machi, sugoi*)' … I hope that young people will start to think that Gifu is not something to throw away, that it's pretty fun."

I hung up wondering what to think. Could such a plan work? In the face of an aging national population, ongoing emigration to metropolises since the 1960s, and a prolonged economic recession, Itô's efforts seemed hopeless. And yet Yanana was the 8th most popular mascot in Japan ("*Yuru Kyara Grand Prix* 2011 Ranking" 2011). She had fans that traveled to Yanagase marketplace to meet her, as Itô had anticipated. But I couldn't imagine that it would reverse the tide of long-standing national trends 50 years in the making. Every time I listen to this interview, I melt into Itô's nostalgia, wanting to believe that Yanana and her *kawaii* mascot friends can pull it off. What makes Itô believe in her? What makes these mascots' existence possible?

ABSTRACT

This thesis is about a class of characters that has been mobilized to facilitate place-making efforts in Japan. They are most commonly known as *yuru kyara*, which I have translated as "amateur mascot." *Yuru kyara* tend to be categorized as a kind of "soothing" *kawaii*, or cute, character, which has comforted adults and children since at least the 1990s. Informants described *kawaii* characters as instantly recognizable, approachable, and able to speak (with or without words) to humans in a way no person could. My interest in them has developed out of a more generalized desire to know why *kawaisa* (cuteness) has the saliency and widespread visibility it does in Japan.

Though scholars of *kawaisa* have focused on its relationship to postwar consumerism, gender, and aesthetics, I would like to analyze how *kawaisa* is deployed in government practices. Through this example, I take you through Japanese children's propaganda; to maid cafés in Akihabara; to the suburbs in the United States; and finally to the crumbling towns hidden in Japan's peripheries. In this, I argue for a return to considering the cultural context – the social, historical, and spatial location of the thing – in order to understand the pragmatics of the aesthetics, ideologies, and practices encompassed by the word, *kawaii*. Through this, I also demonstrate that the childlike, anthropomorphized, infantilized mascots I studied have been used in ways unnervingly similar to the way in which images of children were made to "work" during the Asia-Pacific War. Then, heavily censored children's magazines and other media emphasized that children were depending on adults to join the war effort, turning these children into signifiers that inspired affection, pity, and perhaps even that loaded wartime term: "comfort." Simultaneously, colonies were depicted as children as well, transforming them into friendly beings deserving of Japan's care and extending the domestic,

nurturing space of the nation to battlefields and violent scenes of colonization. By inspiring feelings of pity and endearment, children helped to create a national – indeed, imperial – community that was believed to bring a "bright, cheerful future" to East Asia.

Now, *yuru kyara* re-incorporate youth cast as self-absorbed and isolated into a locally rooted community, while simultaneously "soothing" members of this community with their earnest efforts to connect with them. This is accomplished through the playful techne of the mascot costume, which separates "playful" and "real" sociability, allowing people to enter a space where they can create a close, friendly relationship with a being that signifies the distinctive spirit of their place.

I begin by introducing the mascots and the people involved in their production, while also discussing the methodologies I used to research them. I then briefly illustrate the complex diffusion of the term, *kawaii*, and describe some of the aesthetics, ideologies, and spaces with which it is associated. In my sections on the pragmatics of *kawaisa*, I evaluate scholars' arguments of what *kawaisa* is believed to accomplish in Japan, and then illustrate a few historical continuities between these uses and uses of cute imagery in wartime Japan. Finally, I situate one specific use of *kawaisa*, the *yuru kyara*, in the context of place-making and regional revitalization, and analyze how they are using a *kawaii* aesthetic through the techne of "mascot" to aid place-making efforts. To aid you in this narrative, I have included an appendix describing the mascots to which I refer, a glossary of Japanese terms, and many photographs, since after all, this is about an aesthetic not only experienced through text.

PART I: *KAWAISA*

RESEARCHING *KAWAISA*

I began my research somewhere that was not at all *kawaii*: the Yasukuni shrine. Its history is closely tied to that of Japanese imperialism and war. Constructed in 1869, just after the Meiji Restoration,[1] it was intended as a centralized place to honor war heroes (Earhart 2008, 11; Nelson 2003, 447). At the time, the central government was intent on recreating itself as an equal to European states. Perceiving that all the Western states functioned in accordance with Christian ideology, they decided to create their own nationalized religion: Shinto. Though they presented Shinto as a uniquely Japanese religion as uniformly structured as Christianity seemed to be in the Western hemisphere, it was, in fact, primarily a religion assembled from various traditions of spirit (*kami*) worship dispersed throughout Japan (ibid). Thus, Shinto became the new "state religion" and Yasukuni was the first "Shinto" shrine in this new sense.

Moreover, the shrine's purpose was directly linked to war. Since Yasukuni's establishment, men who died in the service were enshrined there as warrior-gods (*gunshin*) and nation-protecting deities (*gokokushin*) (Earhart 2008, 11). This transformed Yasukuni into a space of sanctified death, through which the "Japanese nation" itself was remade into an aesthetic object (Selden 2008). This intimate connection with both war and statehood has also made Yasukuni a political battleground. Convicted war criminals have been enshrined there, and state visits to the shrine have fueled heated debate about Japan's wartime responsibility (Seraphim 2008).

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[1] The Meiji Restoration of 1868 restored imperial rule in Japan and occasioned enduring political and social reforms (Robertson 1991, 174). In Japan, state chronology uses the emperor system, rather than the Greogorian calendar. Each period is named after the emperor, beginning and ending with the start and end dates of that emperor's reign. I refer to two eras in this thesis: Meiji (1868 - 1912) and Shôwa (1925 – 1989) (Traphagan 2000, 73-4).

Since its inception, patrons of the Yasukuni shrine also insisted that it should occupy a space separate from quotidian life. This was most obviously demonstrated by its location. The shrine rests on Kudan Hill, just north of the Imperial palace. Shinto priests at Yasukuni also emphasized this distance. The following statement written by a priest in 1941 emphasizes the way in which Yasukuni was constructed as an imposing representation of the nation.

> "Bereaved families are wrong to feel intimacy to the shrine and behave in casual and inappropriate ways. To equate the human spirits (*jinrei*) with the divine spirits (*shinrei*) shows a wrong orientation: these spirits now belong to the nation (*kokka*)" (Suzuki Takao 1941, quoted in Nelson 2003, 451-2).

To be at the shrine was to be in the presence of this imposing nation to which all other relationships should be subsumed. This distance is also reflected in conceptions of the national government during the Asia-Pacific War. As Japanese Studies professor Tessa Carroll describes, the military Shinto state constructed itself as an entity to which the Japanese populace should subordinate itself. Until 1947, government organizations communicated with citizens in Imperial Classical Japanese, which was based on language from the Heian period (794-1185) and consequently often unintelligible. The emperor himself spoke in an even further removed register (Cheok 2010, 225; Carroll 1991, 302-3).

Today, Yasukuni shrine stands on the same spot on Kudan Hill, just a twenty-minute walk from the Imperial Palace. It's located in Tôkyô's Chiyoda ward, which is where most national government buildings and cultural sites are found. The Shôwa Hall, a museum celebrating the perseverance of the "common people" during the Shôwa

Period (1926-89), is on the sloped avenue leading to Yasukuni's entrance (*Kôjien* 2008). The National Diet building is a thirty-minute walk south.

Figure 2 The long walk to Yasukuni. This *torii* you see is the second gate. The main gate is directly behind, and the building you can barely make out framed in the main gate is the main shrine hall.

I must have made a great first impression on my new guesthouse friends by asking them whether a site so associated with violence, politics, and death should have a *kawaii* mascot. Of course, I did not really expect them to say yes, but was curious to see how they would explain why it was inappropriate. In their struggle to find a polite way to explain the obvious, almost all of them talked about its sanctity. Ken, a guy in his mid-20s who was always pulling all-nighters to finish his work, told me in one living room conversation, "It would definitely be weird … Yasukuni is sacred (*shinsei*). It's a spiritual place (*supiricharu na basho*)." Many of my other housemates, and later, friends I made through them, echoed this idea, often saying that even one of Japan's many neighborhood shrines or temples should not have mascots. My roommate Remi, who was a frank kind of person, responded to my suggestion by saying that it would be *kanekusai* (literally, that it would stink of money).[2] In a later conversation, Ken also said it was because it had to do with

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[2] This seemed ironic, since Japanese religious spaces have been linked to consumption for centuries. In fact, some have recently created mascots to represent themselves. I spent part of my fieldwork talking with the chief priest at a temple in the Hachiôji ward of Tôkyô. Though its proper name was Ryôhôji, it had become known as "*moe* temple" for the *moe*-style character

Japan's culture (*bunka ni kankei arukara*) – in other words, it was a sacred, culturally significant site. Yôko, a friend of my mother's in her 40s that I visited, elaborated more on this. She emphasized that the Yasukuni shrine simply did not need a mascot character because it did not need to become friendly. It didn't need to promote itself or become popular. It was a "serious" institution, a sacred home for the souls of the war dead (interview 6/30/2011). [3]

Despite these conversations, I did find many *kawaii* things in my visits to the Yasukuni shrine. They were concentrated in the gift shop of Yasukuni's museum. Among other things, it sold keychains of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) mascots, stationery featuring Norakuro, an endearing cartoon character from the wartime period, and fluffy stuffed animals of dogs and pigeons, which were used by the Japanese military during the Asia-Pacific War (Frühstück 2007, 171-4). These were distributed in a section with food and pastel stationery featuring cherry blossoms. The gift shop was marked off by its rounded ceiling, which implied a bubble-like

Figure 3 Cookies with JSDF Mascots. From the upper right, text reads, "Let's go Japan! / Thank you self-defense forces / We will protect beautiful Japan!

they had made to represent the goddess at the temple, Benten. The temple later transformed the initially two-dimensional mascot into a full Buddhist statue, and the priest told me they were considering eventually initiating it as a living goddess, as they had done with the temple's sacred statues (conversation 6/5/2012). In the past few years, temples and shrines have also created their own yuru kyara mascots. For example, the Higashi Honganji recently made three mascots, Ranon-kun, Akahon, and Ren-chan ("Yuru Kyara" 2010).

[3] She gave a court as another example of an institution that should not have *yuru kyara*, though in fact, some courts do have them. Back in the United States, I met a judge from Yokohama who told me that his friend had worn his court's mascot's costume before. "It has a mascot?!," I exclaimed. The one he told me about is called "Court Parrot (Saiban Inko), which is a play on the word for "juror," *saiban-in*. It was made in May 2011 to popularize a new jury system (Conversation 2/18/2012).

boundary between the shop and the rest of the museum. Its light brown wood and bright yellow lighting contrasted with the dark floors and spare presentation in the museum.

When I asked the woman at the register about the key chains and stuffed animals, she said they were geared towards families with children, but were not very popular since they could be bought elsewhere. They wouldn't provide material proof that the buyer had thought of their friend or family member at Yasukuni. Thus, though *kawaii* items are sold at the Yasukuni shrine, they are not intended to be iconic representations of it. Perhaps this was why, when I went to another gift shop on the shrine grounds looking for *kawaii* things, the owner suggested, "Go to Akihabara." In his mind, the shrine could not possibly contain anything *kawaii*.

Similarly, Yasukuni became in some ways associated with *kawaisa* during its annual Mitama Matsuri, or Spirit Festival, when people gather to celebrate the dead enshrined there. The shrine seemed transformed from an austere, imposing symbol of nationalism into something akin to a crowded arts fair. Instead of the thin stream of elderly and middle-aged visitors who normally frequent the shrine, the main avenue leading up to the main shrine building was filled with teenagers in their cotton kimonos chugging cans of Asahi beer. It was difficult to believe that a few hours earlier, both leftist and right-wing groups had protested in this same space. Now, the wide avenue leading to the main shrine hall was lined with carts selling savory pancakes, shredded ice, chocolate-covered bananas, dumplings, pan-fried noodles ... Some had images of Pikachû, Hello Kitty, or the popular children's cartoon character Doraemon on their stalls, no doubt to hook small children with their parents or the occasional nostalgic customer (See Figure 4). There were festival games set up towards the right, where you could try to pop balloons in exchange for pictures of popular idols like top AKB48

members and *anime* characters. **Figure 4** A food stand on the main avenue leading to Yasukuni's main shrine hall. The sign reads, "Baby Castela," and features Doraemon on the right and the Pokémon Pikachû on the left.

An announcer for a haunted house entreated passersby to test their bravery inside. Teenagers in their cotton *kimono* crowded around a road intersecting the main avenue, right in front of the second *torii*. This was the boundary

between the tumultuous festival and the inner sanctum of the shrine complex: no food could go past the gate. Students hung out in groups just outside, talking animatedly and drinking beer or eating chocolate bananas. Giant trashcans and recycle bins overflowed with used napkins and aluminum cans.

These two examples seemed, at first glance, to demonstrate that anything can be made *kawaii*: even Yasukuni Shrine, which looked like the antithesis of *kawaisa*, sold *kawaii* merchandise and occasionally assumed the garb of consumerist desires. Upon closer consideration, though, I realized that a more qualified analysis was necessary. It is not that the sacred space of Yasukuni excludes *kawaisa* or that anything can be made *kawaii*, but that objects with this aesthetic circulate through a number of different places. In this case, gifts, cell phone straps, stationery, and stuffed animals for children are made *kawaii*, even while the shrine itself cannot be represented by a *kawaii* mascot. This demonstrates something important about its pragmatics. Though I cannot argue that *anything* may be made *kawaii* or that all *kawaii* things are used for the same purposes, I can observe that this aesthetic has become so widely commodified that it turns up in even the most austere places, if you know where to look.

Etymology

Though scholars have described *kawaisa* as both a word and an aesthetic originating in Japan's postwar period, it may not be so removed from the histories of war so closely tied to Yasukuni. In this section, I will narrate the literature on both the word, *kawaii*, and the cute, childlike aesthetic that my thesis is about. Often, the two are difficult to separate because much of the literature on *kawaisa* contextualizes one specific aesthetic, "fancy goods" that became popular in 1970s Japan, as the epitome of *kawaisa* to which all other significances of the word should be subsumed. In fact, as I will argue, the meaning of *kawaii* changes with the context in which it is used, making it unproductive to generalize about the pragmatics of the word from one specific aesthetic that is described by it. In this section, I will discuss the word's etymology, explain how scholars have generalized about *kawaisa* from descriptions of "fancy goods," and finally attempt to give you a sense of the breadth of things that can be described as *kawaii*.

Before describing the etymology of *kawaisa*, I would like to reflect on why I do this. I raise this concern because I think some scholars have used its etymology to validate the fundamental significance of the term's current meaning by tracing its origins to a distant past. Consider, for example, how two scholars researching uses of *kawaii* in nursery schools summarize Japanese art historian Yomota Inuhiko's argument: "*Kawaii* is rooted in a sociohistorical aesthetic for things that are small, delicate, and immature, as evidenced in early Japanese art forms and literary writings" (Burdelski and Mitsuhashi 2010, 66). Such a statement implies that Japanese have a cultural preference for "small, delicate, and immature" things because they appeared in medieval Japanese history. However, this use of etymology hides the actual varied meanings that related words have had at various places and times. Besides, what is the

purpose of describing an aesthetic without also clarifying its context and usages? Things that can be described as "small, delicate, and immature" have, I am sure, existed in many places for a very long time – as have violent, ethereal, grotesque, or many other kinds of things. The point here, I think, is to trace historical continuities not through the word or the aesthetic *per se*, but through *related practices* rooted in these aesthetics and contextualized by these words. To unravel the meanings of a word as convoluted and diffuse as what "*kawaii*" currently describes, it will be necessary to approach the topic from this pragmatic and culturally situated angle – culturally situated in the sense that it recognizes the social, historical, and spatial location of the thing – rather than one that essentializes. Accordingly, though I will describe the many uses of the word *kawaii* in this section, I will focus on only one of its uses (to describe *yuru kyara*) in the remainder of my thesis.

The word "*kawaii*" derives from "*kawayushi*," which according to Yomota, appeared in as early as 12th century Japan. At this time, she says, it meant something like 'embarrassing' or 'pitiful' (Okayama and Ricatti 2008, 11). Japanese folklorist Shiokawa Kanako claims the word has slightly deeper roots, citing the Bible of Japanese dictionaries, the *Kôjien*, when she states that it comes from the word, "*kawai*," which appeared in the *Tale of Genji* (ca. 1000s) (Shiokawa 1999, 95). Like Yomota, she says that during the 11th and 12th centuries, it referred to sentiments of "pity and empathy," as well as persons or things that inspired such sentiments (ibid). *Kawaii* also shares its stem with the word for "pitiful," *kawaisô* (Kinsella 1995, 221). Thus, the words from which *kawaii* derives carried connotations of pitifulness. By the 16th century, however, *kawayushi* also meant 'lovable,' and was mainly used to refer to children and small creatures (Okayama and Ricatti 2008, 11). Art historian Sharon Kinsella claims that the

Figure 5 *Kawaii* birds from a 1933 edition of *Shôjo Club*.

term appeared in dictionaries as "*kawayushi*" until 1945, when the Asia-Pacific War (1931- 1945) ended, and that it only transformed into kawayui, and from that to *kawaii*, in the postwar period (ibid).

However, I found instances of *kawaii* as early as 1933, in a children's wartime periodical (*Shôjo Club* 1933). It was written using Chinese characters, 可愛い, with the Japanese phonetic reading above (*kawaii* かはいい), and was used in three separate articles to describe songbirds (Figure 5), the smooth "breath" of a ticking clock, and to Molly, a 14-year-old shepherd girl in a play called *Golden Shoes* (*Kin no Kutsu*) (Figure 6) (ibid, 32). The narrator introduces her:

> "The shepherd girl Molly
>
> always always works
>
> in the sunny green pasture
>
> always always working
>
> *kawaii kawaii* Molly" (ibid)

The phrase, "*kawaii kawaii* Molly" is repeated throughout the play, which narrates how the sweet girl finds a pair of golden shoes while tending to her sheep. She brings the slippers home, wondering who their owner might be, when an old woman comes asking for

Figure 6 "*Kawaii kawaii* Molly," a shepherd girl in a play recorded in a 1933 edition of *Shôjo Club*.

them. Molly's greedy mother refuses to give them to the old woman who presumably owns them. The crone then appeals to "*kawaii kawaii* Molly" to help her. When Molly

argues with her mother to return the shoes, the old woman reveals that she is an angel, and makes Molly a princess for being an honest (*shôjiki*), empathetic (*omoiyari ga aru*), and good child (*ii ko*) (ibid).

I also found instances of both *kawaii* written in Japanese phonetic script (known as *hiragana*) and the Chinese writing, 可愛い, which could have been read as either *kawayui* or *kawaii*, in later periodicals from the 1930s (*Shôjo Club* 1933, 43, 72; *Fujin Club* 1933; *Shôjo Club* 1939, 40, 61). Thus, though Kinsella has dated the term to Japan's postwar period and others have claimed that it was first applied to inanimate objects in the 1960s, it is in fact something that may have come into use during the Asia-Pacific War (Kinsella 1995; Shiokawa 1999). Moreover, the examples from these 1930s periodicals indicate that it did refer to objects in as early as the 1930s, and was part of moralizing discourses since at least a few years into the Asia-Pacific War, a point which on which I will further elaborate in my section on the pragmatics of *kawaisa*.[4]

Some scholars have further cast *kawaisa* as a purely postwar aesthetic by taking fancy goods from the 1970s, which were associated with girls, or *shôjo*, as the archetype of all *kawaii* forms (Madge 1997; Rea 2000; Yano 2004; Cheok 2010; Kinsella 1995).[5] The term "fancy goods" comes from "fanciful characters," which referred to Disney cartoon characters such as Mickey Mouse that flooded into postwar Japan under the Occupation government (Tsukamoto 2007, 7). Sharon Kinsella, the most widely cited Anglophone scholar on *kawaisa*, describes fancy goods as "small, pastel, round, soft, lovable, *not* traditional Japanese style but a foreign – in particular European or

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[4] I should note that because I did not read periodicals published before 1933, I am unsure of whether the term appeared before then.

[5] Though sociologist Anne Allison does not discuss fancy goods *per se*, she, too, claims, "The cute business started in the 1970s in Japan" (2003, 386).

American – style, dreamy, frilly and fluffy" (1995, 226). She argues that the stationery company Sanrio started the fancy goods trend when it started to sell "fancy"-style stationery and other small goods (toys, toiletries, lunch boxes, cutlery, towels, etc) in the early 1970s (ibid). John Treat, an East Asian literature professor, has claimed that "fancy businesses" became widespread a few years earlier, in the mid-1960s (Treat 1993, 362). Regardless, both Japanese and Anglophone scholars have described characters made by the now-famous Sanrio,[6] and Hello Kitty in particular, as archetypes of fancy goods, and therefore, of *kawaisa* (Aihara 2007, 51; Yano 2004, 56; Kinsella 1995, 226). Anthropologist Christine Yano, for example, introduces a piece on Hello Kitty as an examination of

> "the phenomenon of Japanese *kawaii* primarily in its home base through
> the products distributed by one of its largest purveyors, the company
> Sanrio. Specifically, the focus is on the marketing and consumption of
> Sanrio's flagship character Hello Kitty, an infantilized, mouthless cat who
> epitomizes Japanese cute." (2004, 55-6)

Rather than being an archetype of something as problematic as "Japanese cute,"[7] however, these goods were attached to a specific group of people in 1970s Japan: *shôjo*,

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[6]Though Sanrio is now famous for its "fancy characters," which include Chococat, Little Twin Stars, My Melody, and others, its American partner, a gift card manufacturer called American Greetings, may have produced some of its earliest ones. Madge cites Shimamura Mari, who researched fancy goods, when she describes the immediate popularity that Holly Hobby enjoyed in Japan when American Greetings made her in 1972 (Madge 1997, 156; Cheok 2010, 228). Sanrio made Hello Kitty two years later (Yano 2009, 681).

[7] I say "problematic" because *kawaii* only refers to things indexical of "Japanese cute" in contexts where it indicates commodities exported precisely as this. In this latter sense, Yano's description of Hello Kitty is accurate. As she describes in a later article on the cat, with the start of the 21st century, Hello Kitty has been exported as an archetype of "Japanese cute" (2009). However, this is not an always-apparent connection, especially given that, as a "fancy character," Hello Kitty has been marketed as a non-Japanese character in Japan – her last name is "White" and she was born in London (McGray 2002, 49; Yano 2004, 68). Hello Kitty can also apparently

or young women. Like fancy goods, many scholars who have written on *kawaisa* (and, as I have indicated, often equated this with fancy goods) trace its origins to *shôjo* in the 1970s (Kinsella 1995; Shiokawa 1999; Yomota 2006; Masubuchi 1994; Treat 1993). Kinsella, for example, describes *kawaisa* as though it was almost entirely produced by teenage girls as a form of resistance against dominant gender expectations (Kinsella 1995). Ôtsuka Eiji, a *manga* artist whose amateur research on *shôjo* received a lot of media attention in Japan, even defined *shôjo* as "whomever is said to be cute (*kawaii*)" (Treat 1993, 358; Ôtsuka and Nakamori 1991, 70).

But to what degree were Japanese commentators like Ôtsuka describing actual *shôjo*? As anthropologist Jennifer Robertson argues in her book, *Takarazuka, Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan*, a few prominent (male) critics in postwar Japan, including Ôtsuka, used the term almost as a misogynist slur for what they considered to be excessive, self-absorbed consumerism (1998, 157-9). Anyone could be called "*shôjo*" if they participated in what critics considered to be irresponsible consumerism. Robertson relates this to the way in which the category of *shôjo* became a "barometer of decadent, un-Japanese social transformations" in the 1930s:

> "Whereas sixty years ago [in the 1930s], some pundits cast *shôjo* or zealous revue fans as the analogue of a nation infatuated and preoccupied with the West, several 'celebrity' critics today have extended the image of the now relentlessly cute *shôjo* to all Japanese in light of their 'compulsory and excessive consumerism' (Horikiri 1988, 114-115, see also Treat 1993)" (1998, 159).

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represent the United States: Cheok writes, "Since 1983, Hello Kitty acts as the Ambassador of the children of United States for UNICEF" (2010, 228).

Thus, she argues that the historical vicissitudes of the term *shôjo* made *kawaisa*, as something imagined to be solely consumed and produced by *shôjo*, vulnerable to conservative criticisms of unproductive, self-centered consumption (Allison 2003, 387).

Shôjo also played into the trivialization of *kawaii* goods. As Michal Daliot-Bul argues in her article on *asobi*, conservative critics tied the term to excessive consumption in the 1970s (2009a). They drew a sharp distinction between consumerism, symbolized by the *shôjo*, and "productive" pursuits epitomized by "the working man" (ibid). The consumption of *kawaii* fancy goods was thus cast as irresponsible and puerile because it was not "productive." Drawing from this dichotomy in which *kawaisa* and *shôjo* signified self-absorbed consumption, many scholars have discussed *kawaisa* as an attempt to escape the heavy obligations of work and family. After tracing *kawaii* aesthetics to *shôjo* in the 1970s, Allison writes, "Cuteness became not only a commodity but also equated with consumption itself—the pursuit of something that dislodges the heaviness and constraints of (productive) life" (2003, 387). McVeigh argues that women rebel against a masculine work ethic by consuming *kawaii* goods (2000b, 135-6). Thus, as a category of person as well as a metaphor deployed by conservatives, *shôjo* have played a role, both "real and imaginary" in the narrative of "archetypal" *kawaisa* (Allison 2003, 387).

If we look beyond "fancy goods" and *shôjo* from the 1970s and examine the history of aesthetics that would now be described as *kawaii*, we see that its uses extend to before the postwar period. This does not mean that *kawaii* has always existed in its current form, but that certain actors were using signifiers similar to what is currently described as *kawaii* in ways that seem relevant to current uses of *kawaii*. Of course, what these signifiers indexed, and even the signifiers from which *kawaisa* was

composed, could have been quite different from their current associations. In other words, I am not arguing, as Burldelski and Mitsuhashi did, that *kawaii* always existed in Japan, but that there is a longer history of using cute iconography for marketing in Japan than some scholars have argued.

Andreas Riessland, who writes on uses of cute imagery in Japanese marketing, notes that companies with cute logos have existed since the early 1900s: in 1905, the diary factory Morinaga created a cherub logo; in 1922, Q.P. Corporation adopted a popular baby doll, Kewpie, as its mascot (1997, 130). In 1933, the candy company Glico launched a cute ad campaign – the same year the magazine with "*kawaii kawaii* Molly" was published (ibid). Significantly, this last example was not combined with the same signifiers Kinsella identified in her research on fancy goods: *kawaii* children during the Asia-Pacific War were not frilly, pastel, or dreamy. When scholars write on "fancy goods" as archetypally *kawaii*, then, they preclude other uses and meanings of the term. Though "fancy goods" certainly *are* an example of what comes to many people's minds when discussing *kawaisa* now, it becomes problematic when they stand in for *all kawaii* things and all their varied uses.

Despite these examples, scholars have also demonstrated that an aesthetic combining anthropomorphized animals or objects, infantilized features, and often what Riessland calls "situationally cute" qualities (e.g. innocent clumsiness) became widely diffused in the 1980s and after (Riessland 1997, 131). As I will explain in my section on regional revitalization, local revitalization groups started to create *kawaii* mascots in the 1980s. Madge also writes that expensive goods like cars and houses were "being manufactured in a style referred to as '*kawaii*'" at this time (1997, 156). In late 1980s and early 1990s, national government organizations started to represent themselves

with *kawaii* mascots: the Tôkyô police force created its mascot, Pîpo-kun, in 1987; a National Census character was made in 1990; and the Labor Ministry changed its name to "Hello Work" in 1991 (McVeigh 1996, 310; "National Census Image Character" 1990; Madge 1997, 156). In the 1990s, cute children's cartoons and toys like Tamagotchi and Pokémon, which are anthropomorphized and animalized characters, became hugely popular both in Japan and in the United States (Allison 2003; McVeigh 2000b, 169-70). Thus, this aesthetic became widely commodified and attached to far more kinds of organizations than was previously possible (e.g. government organizations; banks; fashion magazines). It was suddenly able to accomplish something it could not in the 1930s.

In fact, anecdotal evidence from scholars like Brian McVeigh, Riessland, and my own research implies that this aesthetic has, to some degree, become so normalized that it is understood to be completely obvious to anyone, regardless of their gender, age, or nationality. Riessland describes it as a "marketing multitool": "it can take on many shapes, it can appear in very different contexts, serving very disparate means" (1997, 131). McVeigh writes exasperatedly, "Asking Japanese about cuteness was similar to inquiring about beauty or love. It's just something one knows about" (2000b, 138). In a similar vein, when I asked one mascot manager why her town had decided to create a mascot, she replied, "It's something that anyone instantly understands." In other words, it is something so embedded that its referent is immediately comprehensible (phone interview 3/14/2012).

These diffuse *kawaii* aesthetics, and certain techne, became associated with play in the 1980s. In an article on Hello Kitty, Christine Yano argues that through campaigns like "Cool Japan," which export *kawaii* as a Japanese product,

"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" (2009, 684).

Similarly, Anne Allison argues that *kawaisa* is part of the "play aesthetics" that became

popular in postwar Japan, which manifests as mobile, intimate, digitized toys and

characters like Pokémon and Tamagotchi (2006, 225). She argues that *kawaisa* often

refers to these techne, which create playful fantasies, perhaps even more so than to their

aesthetics. In other words, *kawaii* is equated with play, and (*kawaii*) animated

characters are especially able to frame themselves as things with which one plays.

Besides describing a widely commodified aesthetic associated with play, the word

kawaii refers to many things in different contexts. It is large component of dominant

gender ideology: women, and girls especially, should generally be *kawaii* in some way –

in terms of their personality, their movements, or their fashion – though to deploy these

things in situations where it might be construed as manipulative earns them the

derogatory label, "fake child (*burikko*)" (Miller 2004, 161).

Kawaii has also been taken up by women's fashion magazines, and to a lesser

extent, men's since the 1990s, as justification for idiosyncratic self-expression. They re-

categorized (and created) perceived imperfections as *kawaii* and therefore forgivable.

Though the specific messages tend to differ based on the perceived gender of their

readership, they are equally heteronormative towards both men and women. Towards

women, the message is often, "find your inner endearing qualities (*kawaisa*) so that you

will be well-liked by everyone." To men, at least in the mid-1990s when the idea of a

kawaii no-good boyfriend (*dame-otoko*) came into vogue, magazines tended to convey

that men did not have to be cool or perfect to appeal to women; in fact, any man could turn his faults into endearing qualities that would attract women's "maternal instincts," as one article put it ("Love Revolution Lesson" 1996). *Kawaii* can also stand in for "like" when shopping for clothes or accessories, or simply mean that something looks good.

Furthermore, there are a number of hyphenated forms of *kawaisa* that I found in popular media since at least the 1980s. Again, this speaks to its semiotic girth. In fashion magazines, unfashionable-*kawaii* (dasa-*kawaii*), adult-*kawaii* (*otona-kawaii*), ugly-*kawaii* (*busu-kawaii*), and sexy-*kawaii* (*ero-kawaii*) describe different fashion styles. Images labeled adult-*kawaii*, for example, tend to be of women with brown medium-length slightly permed hair. Anthropologist Laura Miller and Brian McVeigh have also noted these terms, though Miller explains them as a way that Japanese women react against, and sometimes parody, *kawaisa* (McVeigh 2000b, 146; Miller 2011). Her article focuses on how women are incorporated into the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affair's "Cool Japan" campaign. She discusses 'yucky yet cute' (*kimo-kawaii*), 'cute even though homely' (*busu-kawaii*), grotesque and *kawaii* (*guro-kawaii*), and intentionally excessive *kawaii* fashion styles as expressions of "resentments and anxieties circulating in [Japanese] girl's culture" (Miller 2011, 24-5).

I would like to add to her point by mentioning that these aesthetics are not just produced by or for women, and thus cannot be simply explained as "anti-cute" statements by women who dislike the *kawaii* hegemony that supposedly hangs over all women in Japan. Instead, I believe that grotesque-*kawaii* and disgusting-*kawaii* are parodies of more generalized *kawaisa* that is not always associated with women. The *Gnome Encyclopedia* (*Kobito Zukan*), a recently popular children's book published in 2006, is an example. An acquaintance showed it to me when she told me about

disgusting-*kawaii* at a friend's house. I finally read it when Hanako took me to a gag gift shop specializing in weird items. A young boy named Eaton finds and traps some weirdly humanoid creatures that look like crosses between 40-year-old men and nature-themed Teletubbies. His grandfather gives him a book (the *Gnome Encyclopedia*) that tells him, and consequently, the reader, the characteristics of each gnome and how to capture it. In the end, his grandfather catches him at his mischief and admonishes the boy with the age-old, "how would you feel if someone did that to you?" He then puts his bawling grandson in a glass insect cage and walks off with the gnomes (Nabata 2006). [8]

If the gnomes are so apparently grotesque, what makes them disgusting-*kawaii* instead of simply disgusting? The acquaintance who first showed me the gnomes, a laid-back woman in her 20s, suggested it had to do with their size and shape. "Look at how small he is compared to this ant," she said. "And this one,"

Figure 7 *Gnome Encyclopedia* merchandise. Harajuku, Tôkyô.

she elaborated, pointing to a peach-themed gnome, "The way he's rounded is *kawaii*." A visual assessment also reveals the containment of off-putting features within a body that is *kawaii*. The gnomes' bodies are small, brightly colored, and rounded. It's just their faces that are gross, and the combination seems to make them disgusting-*kawaii* (see Figure 7). Judging by the kinds of commodities being sold (cups, stationery, kitsch-y paper holders), this is not an example of women

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[8] Since 2006, a huge variety of related goods have gone up for sale, including *Gnome Encyclopedia* workbooks and coloring books, postcards, stationery, and the *Gnome Beat* (*Kobito Bîto*) DVD, which teaches viewers how to do a dance that will attract gnomes ("Gnome Works" NA). There are also two iphone apps, which allow users to take pictures of themselves as gnomes and decorate everyday photographs with gnome stamps.

parodying *kawaisa* in their fashion – though an analysis of how disgusting-*kawaii* merchandise is bought, worn, and otherwise displayed might shed more light on this.[9]

In still other contexts, *kawaii* is deployed as part of moralizing discourse. Parents will tell disobedient children that they are "not *kawaii*" (*kawaikunai*). Government organizations use *kawaii* characters in postings that encourage residents to follow traffic rules, watch out for potential criminals, refuse bribes from elected officials, and recently, to participate in post-3/11 disaster efforts to save electricity. Women who are called "fake children," too, are of course being subjected to a moralizing discourse about gender. As the "*kawaii kawaii* Molly" example from the 1930s demonstrates, this usage appears to have relevant roots predating the postwar period.

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[9] A newspaper article notes, for example, that some women have started to wear grotesque-*kawaii* accessories shaped like eyeballs after the singer Pamyu Pamyu did so ("'Gurokawa' (Grotesquely Cute) Fashion Styles" 2012).

KAWAII PRAGMATICS: VIOLENCE

To date, little has been written on the pragmatics of *kawaisa* (adjective, *kawaii*), and most of what has been written has primarily focused on its politics, especially in relation to gender, consumption, and soft power. In this section, I argue that a more contextualized analysis of its pragmatics is necessary. This means recognizing that the word *kawaii* refers to many things in different contexts, and that even the childlike aesthetic I discuss in this section has many uses. These cannot be explained by one paradigm generalized from one use of either the word, *kawaii*, or of a specific aesthetic described as *kawaii*. In this section, I will discuss the pragmatics of the playful, childlike aesthetic I described in the section previous.

First, I should explain what I mean by "pragmatics." This is quite simple: I am interested in what *kawaisa* moves people to do. In what contexts is it deployed, by whom, and to what end? To add on to the question that concluded my prologue, what makes it possible for *kawaii* mascots to change how people interact with one another? Of course, this does not mean that just because something is made *kawaii* that it will always have the same effect. In other words, I believe that people are not automatons that follow dominant categories of thought, but, paraphrasing a friend, that they decide what to believe by drawing on many logics that percolate around them (Shapero 2011).

In this section, I argue that *kawaisa* became associated with the techne of play in the 1980s and 1990s, which facilitated *kawaii* characters' abilities to create a sense of belonging. Simultaneously, anxieties about the next generation's inability to communicate manifested in discussions of Akihabara ward in Tôkyô. This district is in some ways the dumping ground for anxieties about future Japan. It is iconic of *otaku*,

who represent the gendered crisis of Japan's future, wrought by digitized lifestyles that supposedly pervert maternal care, and through it, the future (male) generation.

Akihabara Style

From Yasukuni, it's a simple 15-minute walk and 5-minute train ride to Akihabara. In some ways, this place is the antithesis of what Yasukuni represents: it has been popularized abroad as a component of the Japanese government's "Cool Japan" branding initiative since 2002;

Figure 8 Akihabara ward, Tôkyô.

the *otaku* associated with it have become symbols of the threatening perversions of a postmodern information society; it has been the site of a childlike but sexualized femininity subject to a male gaze; and it's exploding with playful technology in the form of *anime, manga*, and electronics (Miller 2011; Daliot-Bul 2009b; Sharp 2011; Kuresawa 2010, 3). A maid figure smiles down at you (the Anglophone foreigner) from a tall building when you walk outside Akihabara train station, her cat ears poking out of her hair (Figure 8). If you came out of the Yodôbashi exit, the *anime* museum lies straight ahead.

The first time I went to Akihabara, I was looking for a laptop charger. I wandered from electronics store to electronics store, sometimes sidling through cramped aisles full of oddly shaped light bulbs, nuts, and computer parts, and other times walking into suave brightly-lit chain stores or corner stores filled with *otaku* figurines. The streets

were crammed with people, mainly men. Eventually, I stopped to rest on the railing of the main avenue.

Maids from competing maid cafés lined the main street, distributing brightly-colored fliers to passersby. I had collected a few as I plodded on, feeling grimier with each step. *Well, if I'm here anyways I might as well go to one*, I thought. I furtively took out one of the leaflets I had stuffed in my bag, feeling a little embarrassed at the thought of going to a maid café by myself. Glancing at the throngs of 20 and 30-somethings with their collared shirts and glasses, I realized the advertised café was right in front of me. Exhausted from having spent most of the day walking in the heat, I staggered through the door into the first floor of the café's building, which happened to be a pornography shop. The walls were papered with pink images of blushing girls holding their inordinately large breasts, peeking over their thonged butts at the customers. I slid by a pair of guys glued to the advertisements, stubbornly making my way to the elevator. A short, awkward ride to the 4th floor with another pair of guys, and the doors tinkled opened to present the pink, dimly lit land of Mai-Dreamin maid café.

The maids shouted a welcome as I instinctively hopped out of the elevator. Most of the shop was either pink, or heart-shaped, or both. The guests looked my way, and I felt even more out-of-place in my bland, wrinkled clothes and ill-made knapsack. A smiling maid in a black ruffled dress with white accents, a white apron, black buckle shoes, and a princess-style haircut explained the terms of my stay in Mai-Dreamin: 1000 yen for 2 hours, and I had to order at least 2 dishes. I tentatively agreed, still frazzled by the clanging disjuncture between the Akihabara outside the elevator doors and the one into which I had stumbled. I sat down at the counter closest to the door, across from a pink heart-shaped stage decorated with a giant stuffed animal cat head

and some equally oversized *sake* bottles. The maid came over to perform my induction ritual. "I will light this candle on the count of three, and you will become a princess in the land of Mai-Dreamin," she explained. "Please count with me. Here we go." I sheepishly counted to three with her, and she blew on the candle to light it. We clapped and she explained the rules to me: only pictures of the food; bathrooms to the left; smoking area to the right. She left me to browse the menu.

I leafed through the plastic and decided on some deep-fried octopus and a panda pancake. In addition to selling food, the maid café offered various services: playing cards with one of the maids; having them sing you a song or take pictures with you; and a lottery of maid café "goods," or small items like pictures, key chains, and lighters. As I mused over the menu, another

Figure 9 Panda pancake at MaiDreamin. Photo by author.

maid – this time with short bleached hair and garters – stood on the stage to announce someone's birthday. They turned on colored disco lights, which started to skid crazily along the walls in time with the J-Pop happy birthday mix they had put on. We performed a birthday ritual for the lucky 36-year old: a birthday song and a charm to make his birthday cake taste good. My maid and I did the same when my food came (minus the song) – a way to infuse the food with our feelings, she explained later when I asked. The birthday boy took a few pictures with the maids, making various cat poses with them. This is marked by making a kind of paw: a loose fist, bent about 90 degrees at the wrist, next to your cheek. I asked about the cat theme. "It's kind of cute, right?" my maid said. Later, thinking that cats were just a generalized part of *kawaisa*, I joked

about wearing some cat ears to a DJ show with my friend. She made a face. "Mary, that's totally Akihabara-style…"

This style is exported abroad as part of the "cute Japan" package, along with characters like Hello Kitty and Pikachû. Akihabara is one of the sites shown in a video introducing "Cool Japan" made by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (Miller 2004, 18). Ph.D. candidate Patrick Galbraith also notes that within the last 5 years, *moe*, or Akihabara-style *kawaisa*, has appeared in global exhibitions of Japanese culture, in *Japan Newsweek* articles, and in a book sponsored by the National Tourism Board that taught Japanese how to explain aspects of Japanese culture to (English-speaking) foreigners (2009). It is another face of "Japanese cute" being popularized abroad.

Within Japan, it is positioned quite differently. Hardly the source of national pride, Akihabara is the breeding ground for discourses on perversions of maternal care, and consequently, of the next (male but not masculine) generation. As I noted in the previous section, conservative critics used the term "*shojo*" in the 1980s to criticize excessive consumerism. Even men where becoming "*shojo*-ized," some argued. Another way this apparent transformation was described was in terms of *amae*, or childish dependence. This is a term popularized by psychoanalyst Doi Takeo in the 1970s. His 1973 text on *amae* was a bestseller in both Japanese and English translation (Borovoy 2005, 21). In it, he used *amae* to describe not only an idealized nurturing relationship between mother and child, but also to "analyze" youth, and cast their apparent obsession with *kawaii* things as a symptom of pathological dependence, or twisted

amae (Doi 1981, 163; Wada 2000, 36).[10] Postwar youth demonstrated pathological dependency through what he cast as their childish, excessive consumerism.

Some commentators have drawn on Doi's vocabulary of *amae* to explain the violence associated with *shôjo*-ized men. In this narrative, women who fail to care for their children (read, "sons") breed an entire generation of inexplicably violent boys. In an article explaining youth violence, psychiatrist Wada Hideki argues that Japanese are losing their ability to depend on each other's mutual understanding[11] because mothers, who are imagined to be the comforting sources of *amae*, have less time to care for their children (2000, 36).

This violence is particularly associated with *otaku*, or geeks, who are imagined to populate Akihabara. The stereotypical *otaku* spends huge sums to collect small plastic figurines of *kawaii moe*-style dolls (Silvio 2010, 429-30). *Moe* figurines are almost exclusively of prepubescent girls, or of highly sexualized girls with childlike faces, while the *otaku* who buy them are imagined as men (ibid).[12] In her Master's thesis, art history scholar Kristen Lambertson illustrates the link between *otaku*, *shôjo*, and consumption:

> "While emancipated female youths, or *shôjo*, were criticized for lifestyles
>
> based on the consumption of *kawaii* goods, their male contemporaries,
>
> the *otaku* were demonized for a fetishization of *kawaii* girls and
>
> technology through *anime* and *manga*, or animation and comic books …

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[10] In one of his concluding sections, titled "The Century of the Child," he argues that "the 'adult adult' of the past has disappeared and the number of childish adults has increased," attributing this to their selfish dependency (1981, 163). He uses this to explain student activism in Japan and elsewhere, and of course, *kawaisa*: "the desire to look cute is, as hardly needs pointing out, a typical expression of *amae*" (ibid).

[11] This seems to indicate that he subscribes to a popular myth about a "uniquely Japanese" ability to communicate non-verbally (*ishin denshin*) (Robertson pers. com.4/7/2012).

[12] Despite this imaginary, McLelland has noted Aoyama Tomoko's argument that many women claim an *otaku* identity as well (2009).

the youth triggered fears of a growing infantilized, feminized automaton 'alien' society during Japan's economically tumultuous 1990s" (2008, ii).

The feminization of men through their obsession with *kawaii* goods became linked to violence in the late 1980s. In 1989, media outlets identified Miyazaki Tsutomu, a man who had kidnapped, raped, and murdered four elementary school girls, as an *otaku*. The subsequent police investigation revealed over 6,000 videotapes in his room, along with what were then considered high-tech electronics, like a computer and a copy machine (Lambertson 2008, 22; Treat 1993, 354). His lawyers issued the following statement tying his crime to technology and consumerism's corrosive effects on healthy parent-child (read, "mother-child") relationships:

> "The crime, which seems to be unrelated to our lives, is in fact closely related to social phenomena such as unified [coeducational] school education, the overflow of information and goods, and a distorted parent-child relationship" (Treat 1993, 354).

Thus, *otaku* stood in for the perversions bred by consumerism and technology, both of which were already linked to *kawaisa*. If *shôjo* symbolized women's irresponsible consumerism in the 1980s, *otaku* were presented as the products of twisted maternal care, deformed by the isolationism wrought by a consumerist "information society." Because of this "distorted parent-child relationship," *otaku* were believed to harbor an escapist and dangerous desire for childlike, *kawaii shôjo*. Furthermore, Miyazaki's case seemed to imply that their desire for the virtual (*kawaii shôjo anime* characters) results in the gruesome destruction of reality (actual *shôjo*).

This anxiety is tied to a more generalized worry about uncommunicative youth through discussions of *hikikomori*. These are people, especially youth, who withdraw

into their rooms, barely even communicating with their family for long periods of time –
potentially, years. The imagined, and often actual, progression is from a boy who stops
going to school (*tôkôkyohi*), often because he was bullied or could not withstand
parental pressures to succeed academically. From there, he withdraws into himself, until
suddenly he has grown into an adult-child completely dependent on his parents while he
holes up in his room, playing video games and reading *manga* (Allison 2006, 84-5).
This pathology often overlaps with the figure of the *otaku*. In the film *Nobody to Watch
Over Me* (*Daremo Mamotte Kuranai*), which disturbingly encapsulates these gender
dynamics, a girl's older *hikikomori* brother murders two elementary school students –
sisters (Kimizuka 2009). Though the film does not identify the brother as an *otaku*, his
actions overlap with Miyazaki's crimes from 1989. This implies an assumed association
between *hikikomori* and *otaku*: by cutting themselves off from "real" communication,
they become dangerous and pathological.

As playful media often associated with the technologies imagined to disfigure
youth sociality, *kawaii* characters[13] become tied to these discussions. In *Nobody to
Watch Over Me*, a group of *otaku* terrorizes the *hikikomori*'s sister. They deploy laptops,
video cameras, cell phones, and their net savviness to find her, presumably to kill her in
revenge for her brother's crimes. The laptops are plastered with pink stickers of *kawaii
shôjo* characters, marking the owners as *otaku* (Kimizuka 2009). When they finally find
a picture of her, they write, "Is it okay for a murderer's sister to look this *kawaii*?" Thus,

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[13] As anthropologist Ian Condry notes, *anime* characters are often imagined to exist outside of
their representations in various forms of media (2009). Not only are they are easily
commodifiable into cell phone key chains, stuffed animals, stationery, toys, kitschy decorations,
and other "character goods," but they also have a degree of personhood that allows them to exist
even outside of these material forms. Thus, people might interact with a character through many
media (*anime*, *manga*, character goods) that bring it to life.

the *otaku* in the film, perverted by their obsession with playful fantasy characters, incorporate these signifiers in their violent attacks on an actual *shôjo*.

Popular studies of characters also tie them to communication breakdown. A study done by Charaken, a company in the game corporation Bandai, asked elementary school students about their relationship with characters: "Among these four, which being puts you most at ease? Mother, father, friend, character." Among children they had categorized as experiencing high levels of stress, 17% responded "characters," a distant second to mothers at 56.3%, but still before the 13.3% who responded "dad," and the 10.4% who responded "friends" (Aihara 2007, 49). They also claim that almost half of adults report talking to characters – presumably in one of their many commodified forms (cell phone straps; stuffed animals; kitschy office decorations; in *anime*) (Aihara 2007, 32). They attribute these results to higher stress levels in Japan that prevent people from building trusting relationships with each other. This study has joined other popular literature on characters that explains their existence as attempts to avoid interpersonal communication in response to the stresses of contemporary Japanese society. Another pop analysis of characters, *Children That Do/Are Made to Do Characters: the New Ideal Person in an Excluding Society* (*Kyara-ka Suru/Sareru Kodomotachi: Haijokei Shakai ni Okeru Arata na Ningenzô*), writes in a similar vein (Doi 2009). Critics of *kawaii* characters argue that people hide behind them so that the characters will take care of the face-to-face interaction that youth (cast as pathological *otaku*) fear, and the responsibilities and obligations that come with these human interactions.

Kawaii characters can also create a sense of "closeness," or *shitashimi*, even as they threaten to undermine youths' belonging in more grounded communities like

family and school. The Bandai character study argues that children feel closer to characters than their friends, and that stressed adults turn to characters for solace. My friends noted similar uses, especially for soothing-type *kawaii* characters. McVeigh has noted that Hello Kitty fans in the 1990s felt a similar sense of connection, or *shitashimi*, with Hello Kitty (2000a, 238). As I will discuss later, mascot managers also often specified this as the reason why they decided to create a mascot for their place: it was something that anyone would be friendly to, that could communicate something that people could not. In particular, *kawaii* characters tend to be perceived as approachable, easily recognizable or understandable, and as beings that facilitate communication where there are communication difficulties between humans. This is evident in a wide range of *kawaii* forms. The "soothing-type" characters I will describe in the following section, for example, populate private spaces. My mother uses "soothing-type" *kawaii* objects to make our house more cheerful, and to show her support for me. *Kawaii* characters are also used by government organizations to warn, instruct, and soften impacts of some messages to the general public (Riessland 1997; McVeigh 2000b).

This is not to say that *kawaii* people cannot also have these effects. Besides *moe*-style figurines and maids, another kind of *kawaii shôjo* inhabits Akihabara: the pop idol group, AKB48. My housemates and friends described it as the most popular pop idol group in Japan, rivaled perhaps only by the Korean pop group, Kara. It started in 2005 with 48 members (hence the "48"), but currently there are 60 women, mostly between 18 and 20 years old. The youngest member is 15, and the oldest, 25 ("Member Information" 2011). AKB48 was created as a group of "idols that you can meet" (*ai ni ikeru aidoru*) that performs almost every day at their exclusive theater in Akihabara ("Special Feature" 2011).

Ironically, I never met them. In fact, I researched AKB48 at the national Martial Arts Theater (Budôkan), back near the Yasukuni shrine. I went to interview fans at the AKB48 elections announcement ceremony with my roommate Hanako, a petite 28-year-old from Nagoya who had recently started following AKB48. Each year, they hold "general elections," where fans vote on their favorite member. As Hanako explained to me, every time a fan buys an AKB48 CD, they gain one vote. When election results are announced, whomever ranks highest gets to be front and center on stage until the next election. Those who make it into the top 10 or 20 (Hanako couldn't remember which) can actually sing songs, be in promotional videos, be featured in magazines, etc. Which means those who don't make it into that select group have fewer chances to gain popularity or connect with their fans, she explained.

Figure 10 Fans in front of the Martial Arts Theater, waiting to hear AKB48 election results and hoping catch a glimpse of the members.

The election results were announced on June 9th, 2011, almost a month after I had arrived in Japan. I invited Hanako to walk there with me. As we turned onto the street leading to Yasukuni, we started to spot AKB48 fans trickling towards the Martial Arts Theater. Their density rapidly increased as we neared the theater. A girl with dyed brown hair (*chapatsu*) and a few other desperados held cardboard signs saying, "please sell me your ticket." They lined the path to the theater's gates, forming a kind of fan and food stall/character goods gauntlet. We passed through the dignified

wooden gate after overhearing a conversation between a ticket scalper and what looked like a high school girl.

"You have a ticket?"

"No ..."

"How much money you got?"

Our feet carried us steadily away as Hanako caught the tail end of their negotiation, "... the bank's still open."

When we arrived at the main entrance, a crowd was starting to form. A traffic policeman buzzed around to keep the gawking students and average Joes from standing in the middle of the street. We joined the throng as he ushered Hanako and I towards one side of the street. "It seems like you can get a lot of interviews," said Hanako. "Yeah," I replied, somewhat nervous. After I stood there a while, she nudged me a little, "So what are you going to ask?"

"Uhhh ... like why are you here; who's your favorite member; why do you like them; that kind of thing."

"Ohhh," she smiled.

Caving in to the welcome prodding, I wandered over to a nerdy-looking guy intently texting someone. "Excuse me; I'm an American college student writing a report on AKB. Is it all right if I ask you a few questions?" Having seen him shrink at my first words, I was not surprised when he muttered, "No thanks," and slid off. Feeling a little sheepish, I went to interview a pair of girls in their 20s, Hanako by my side. "Excuse me; I'm an American college student ..."

In these brief conversations, and later in extended ones with Hanako and other friends, the word I heard most often was *isshôkenmei*, or "earnest." The young men and

women I talked to explained their affection for AKB48 members mainly using this word and *kawaii*. In fact, one often indicated the other: "The way she tries so hard (*isshôkenmei ganbatteiru*) is *kawaii*," said one of the first pair of girls I talked to. "I'm cheering for Sashihara," said the other. "She's *kawaii*. She tries really hard so I want to support her (*ôen shitaku naru*)." As for what the members were so earnest about, fans talked about their favorite member's imperfections or a sense that they were somehow incomplete, and therefore unique. A group of three guy friends, squatting on the curb while waiting for AKB48 members to appear, suggested this might be part of why the group was popular. "They're popular because you can watch them grow," said one of them, who had been a fan of Takahashi Minami for the past 3 years. Along with the three guys, almost all of the fans said that they became fans because they liked watching members develop by working on their imperfections. Hanako took it a step further in a conversation we had almost a month after the elections, "I want to watch them grow (*seichô suru*). I feel like a parent to them," she said. One fan, another man in his 20s with a slightly nasal voice, said that just watching his favorite member, Shinoda Mariko, soothed him (*iyasareru*). Fans described a relationship in which they supported the growth of their favorite member through their fandom, while being simultaneously comforted or cheered by watching their member working hard to improve on her imperfections.

This differed from the image of dangerous *otaku* with a *moe* fetish. Though the men and women I interviewed desired AKB48 in the sense that they bought the group's merchandise to support their favorite members, they described a platonic, almost maternal, relationship with AKB48 members. Watching these imperfect girls soothed them, they explained. Thus, they described their relationship with AKB48 as a fantasy

about care, not desire. Of course practice rarely, if ever, matches up with representations of relationships. I'm sure many fans think of AKB48 members as their girlfriends, and the eroticism of popular members is a frequent topic of discussion in online forums and music video comments. Still, this theme of being comforted through parent-like concern for childlike idols was one that seemed to defuse the charged image of *otaku* saturating Akihabara.

KAWAII PRAGMATICS: COMFORT

Comfort was also something I found in one of my earliest "field sites": my mother's refrigerator. Compared to the rest of our tidy, blue-carpeted house, it is a patchwork of numerous postcards and *kawaii* magnets. Totoro's white friend [14] unblinkingly holds in place a postcard of pale pink cherry blossoms. Pink bubble letters outlined in white read, "filled with love / towards the mundane everyday / suddenly, / want to hold it dear." Similar postcards produced by the

Figure 11 Active Corporation postcard

same company, Active Corporation, enliven the fridge door. A smiling cloud with a faint rainbow arcing over it says, "to dream / to believe / from there / something will begin." Two lines of wide-eyed peas say, "if [you] take one step outside / the world might seem different." Instead of a period, a tiny line drawing of a face hovers to the right, the words "*chocco*" written out in Roman characters underneath it (see Figure 11).

My mom includes one of these postcards in every care package she sends to me. These also include a variety of Japanese goods: soybean powder, packets of fish bouillon, dried seaweed, small containers of pickled plums, a year's supply of "ginger drink," and, in her most recent package, a box of instant soup packets. Now my desk, too, is decorated with the pastel images of quiet encouragement she has sent me. These images

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[14]Totoro is one of the main characters from Studio Ghibli's popular animated movie, *Totoro*. He is a cat-like blob of a creature, befriended by the two sisters who are the main characters of the story. Two similar, smaller spirits follow Totoro around. One is white, and the other is blue. My mother's magnet is the white one. See Susan Napier's article, "Confronting Master Narratives, History As Vision in Miyazaki Hayao's Cinema of De-assurance," for analysis on the main animator and director, Miyazaki Hayao (2001).

of anthropomorphized characters delivering wispy comfort have been common since the late 1980s. They are most often referred to as "soothing-type" (*iyashi-kei*). The stationery company making my mother's postcards, Active Corporation, was founded on June 1st, 1987 ("Company Information" NA). The same year, San-X Corporation, another successful stationery company producing this same type of kawaisa, made its first character ("Pinny-mû" 2003). She was a hit until they made Tarepanda (Droopy Panda) in 1995 ("Stressed Out?" 1999). After his phenomenal success, San-X Corporation[15] refashioned itself into a character design company, and continued to produce popular characters like Rilakkuma (whose name is a combination of "relax" and kuma, or "bear") and others (see Figure 12).[16] Highly infantilized, droopy features on a giant head seem to be the trend among their characters. Capybara-san, for example, is essentially a blobby-looking capybara head with "mini-legs," as a friend called them. Tarepanda's eyes are more widely spaced than Hello Kitty's, and its very name means "droopy." These characters colored the everyday lives of all my

Figure 12 San-X Characters. Screenshot of animation on former San-X website.

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[15] Though San-X Corporation designs the characters, other companies are responsible for creating their merchandise. *Shufu to Seikatsusha* (Housewife Life Company) and *Shōgakukan* published the Kamonohashikamo and Tarepanda books, respectively, that I refer to in this section. RM Enterprises, based in Hong Kong, also manages San-X character merchandising. With regards to San-X, they seem to focus on sales in Taiwan and Hong Kong, though they also have branches in 9 other Asian countries ("Profile" NA). They claim to be "the leading licensing agency for the development and promotion of character licensing in Asia," and manage character licensing for characters besides those produced by San-X or Sanrio, like Snoopy, Pop-Eye, and Betty Boop ("Home" NA). As it turns out, the locus of my childhood nationalism was manufactured in Hong Kong.

[16] Other examples include two black and white pigs, Monokuro Boo (black and white boo); tiny cats that disguise themselves in food called Nyan-nyan-ko (meow-meow kid); and Koge-pan, or "burned bread" ("Character Picture Books" 2012).

Japanese school friends. I knew San-X's characters before I ever heard of Sanrio. In my 10-year-old mind, these were "really" Japanese, and Hello Kitty was for American kids who didn't know any better.

The word used to describe what these characters do, *iyasu*, literally means "to heal or cure." This was the same term AKB48 fans used to describe how members made them feel. Most of the informants who talked about *iyashi* said that it meant "to soothe" in this context. According to them, there is an entire sub-type of *kawaisa* called *iyashi-kei* (soothing-type) to describe objects that make one feel at ease. Hitomi, a Japanese woman in her mid-30s I met just as she was explaining *iyashi-kei* characters to a curious friend, said that something that is soothing-type *kawaii* makes you feel relieved (*hotto suru*) or helps you to feel rejuvenated or forget bad feelings (*sukkiri suru, iyana koto ga wasurerareru*). "For example," she said, "a picture of a tropical resort." She also noted that cats or puppies are said to soothe those with whom they interact. "Easy listening" music and certain emoticons, such as (´・ω・`) or (o´∇`o)[17] can also be *iyashi-kei*, along with people that make you feel particularly at ease. "So your friends?" I asked. "No, it's like ... someone who makes you feel especially good, or who is really easy to be with (*tokubetsu ni kibun ga sukkiri suru hito*)." Finally, she also gave characters like Rilakkuma and *yuru kyara* as examples of soothing-type things.[18] These objects' abilities to soothe are directly linked to their *kawaisa*. For example, Hitomi noted that

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[17] See http://plaza.rakuten.co.jp/love2kaomoji/5006 for more *iyashi-kei* and *nagomi-kei emoji*. Some people online appear to associate the "ω" series emoticons with *amae*.
[18] Though interestingly, she said that Hello Kitty is not *iyashi-kei*. When I asked why, she said it was because she has been around for a while (*maekara aru*), and though people generally recognize her as *kawaii*, she does not have the same effect as *iyashi-kei* characters.

an actress would be called soothing-type if she is not sexy, but cute.[19] "Soothing-type is something that makes you feel, 'Ah! *Kawaii*!,'" she explained.

The effects of soothing-type characters were made most tellingly apparent to me when I visited a Kinokuniya bookstore in Oregon in late February 2012. This shop is a common source for Japanese books and stationery for most ex-pats. Sandwiched between books on pet care and healthy living, I found an entire section featuring San-X characters. They were slim, hardcover picture books, all featuring the same kind of rounded bubble script I saw on Active Corporation's postcards. A series of comic sketches, usually lasting 3 or so panels, depicted these characters' amusing lives.

In one, a yellow platypus-like character plays an everyday middle-aged man. He walks into his office drained of energy, only to see his coworkers typing frantically. "Maybe I'll work hard too," he thinks (Abe 2008, 105). In another scene, his coworkers see him drunk with his necktie tied around his head, and arrive to work the next day trying out this new style (Abe 2008, 105). A Tarepanda book shows human characters mistaking the pandas for various seasonal items, like New Year's rice balls, or has sketches explaining the characteristics of a Tarepanda. "Many ways to swim," says one page. It then shows diagrams of the panda struggling to do various strokes: backstroke, underwater swimming, crawl, dogpaddle, breaststroke, butterfly, and finally, drowning. The latter two include parenthetical notes, "Moves by one side jump every 10 minutes. Limited to 3 times because it will become soggy" for the butterfly, and "Help immediately" for the drowning panda (Suemasa 1999, 19). After the Tarepanda book, the health section begins: *Book that Cures Adults' Headaches*; *Welcome to headache-*

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[19] When I asked if AKB48, then, was *iyashi-kei*, she laughed and made a face. "No."

free [life]; *Meals for People with Liver Disease*. Similarly, in Tôkyô I found a sign with

Rilakkuma pointing to a children's hospital.

Figure 13 San-X character Rilakkuma points the way to a children's hospital.

The location of San-X's picture books, my mother's use

of Active Corporations' postcards, and the very category these

both belong to – "soothing-type" – indicate the perceived

purpose of this kind of *kawaisa*. Soothing-type characters

cheer people up with their comic innocence, regardless of

whether these adults toil away in American suburbia or

downtown Tôkyô. Soothing-type *kawaisa* forms part of a care

package to stressed daughters, filled with personal expressions

of love written out in precise black ink. It is part of dealing with the bodily expressions

of age and stress.[20] And, it is a category to which *yuru kyara* belong. It comforts adults

without the specter of violence that underlies Akihabara-style *kawaisa*. Could this have

to do with who they are imagined to comfort?

"Comforting" Histories

As I have argued, *kawaisa* is being used to address an anxiety that centers

especially on youth, who are imagined to be disconnected from many of the major

institutions definitive of Japan. Though it is tempting to cast this as an entirely recent

phenomenon, children have in fact been one of the focal points of Japanese discourses

on nationhood since the Meiji period (1868 – 1912). As Brian Platt and other scholars of

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[20] Pets also seem related to this "soothing" function, as Anne Allison has noted (2003, 391). The section immediately preceding these character books contained pet manuals, mainly for cats. Anthropomorphized things often take "cat" form. It seems to be an animal particularly associated with *kawaisa*, as I noted in my section on Akihabara.

Japanese childhood have argued, the Japanese state first defined childhood as a stage separate from adulthood during the Meiji reforms in the late 19th century (Platt 2005; Carter 2009). At this time, it reorganized the family system to center around children (Carter 2009, 2). This is exemplified through the *ryôsai kenbo* (good wife, wise mother) policy, which construed children as the future subjects of the state, and mothers as their unfailing caretakers (Borovoy 2005, 15-9). This focused new attention on the definition of childhood, and introduced the mother-child relationship as a central medium for discussing ideas of statehood, the national future, and gender (ibid). As Borovoy argues, the imperial policy of *ryôsai kenbo* was one that set a precedent for current discussions of Japan as a nurturing society (ibid, 79).

The Japanese national government has also used children as endearing symbols of the future nation to spread the nurturing space of the Japanese nation to colonized spaces, and, as my advisor suggested, perhaps to battlefields (Robertson personal communication 4/3/2012). Women and children sent soldiers "comfort bags" (*imonbukuro*) throughout the war. These were packages containing clothing, letters, postcards, and food to boost morale on the front (Schattschneider 2005, 334). Girls were also believed to lift soldiers' spirits with their beauty, providing them with "cheerful and warm feelings" (Uchiyama 1943, 24; in Dollase 2008, 335). Comfort also carried more charged meanings during the war: Korean and Japanese women systematically forced to "comfort" Japanese troops by providing them with sexual services were euphemistically called "comfort women" (Feuillasiser 2010, 22-3).

Anthropologist Ellen Schattschneider focuses on one particular comfort object circulated between women, girls, and soldiers: mascots (*masukotto*), or comfort dolls (*imon ningyô*). These formed part of the comfort packages that soldiers received. They

thought of the women and girls sending these dolls, and consequently the dolls themselves, as their mothers and younger sisters. As Schattschneider describes, the materiality of the "mascot dolls" (*masukotto*) was important to their function. They were

> "at one level, familiar instances of the widely reported sensibility in Japan that *ningyô* (dolls) have a kind of soul (*tamashii*) and that they may carry the identity, motivation, or essence of a person who has made, given, or owned them" (2005, 330).

In some loose sense, the comfort doll was a kind of "character," a semi-human being that had the ability to go where people could not, and render a violent war theater "reassuringly familiar" through the feelings of endearment it inspired (ibid, 331).

Images of children were also often used in wartime propaganda to emphasize that everyone – even the weakest and most innocent members of society – were participating in the war effort. Figure 14, for example, is a military

Figure 14 A young girl who pledges to protect the home front, from a postcard sent to soldiers on the front. Picture courtesy "Pink Tentacle" blog, scanned from Hiroki Hayashi's book, *Nippon No Kawaii Ehagaki.*

postcard. These had images printed on the front, and space on the back where one could write a message to send to a soldier. This postcard was made in 1940, just one year before the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Japan had just allied itself with Germany and was marching on Vietnam (Earhart 2008, 266). A shyly smiling little girl, maybe 3 or 4 years old, stands behind an equally tiny toy canon holding an oversized piece of ammunition. She cradles it as

one would a stuffed animal or an infant. "Leave the home front to me,"[21] reads the caption. Hugging this enlarged bullet, she is trying hard to defend the home front, as actual women were expected to do (Earhart 2008).

Though images of girls training to defend the home front were fairly common in wartime media, they tended to emphasize the noble efforts of children who attempted to act like adults (ibid). This was embodied in practice as well. A series of reforms passed in 1940 under the umbrella term "the New Order" established ranks of "junior soldiers" (ibid, 191). In the last year before surrender, classrooms were dissolved and even elementary school students were sent to fields, factories, and military training to help the hobbling war effort (ibid). A great-aunt I visited in Tôkyô, who had been in third grade at the time, remembered training every day to kill American soldiers with bamboo spears. This policy became common after 1944 (ibid, 179). Similarly, my eccentric great-uncle, now a debonair 83-year-old uncannily up-to-date with pop culture, showed me the suicide letter he had written to his parents after he joined the Special Forces. At nineteen, he pledged his life to the emperor and started training to go on a suicide submarine mission. The war ended before he was deployed and he became a cosmetics model and amateur folk singer instead. "I was pretty hot-headed," he explained. "Only very intelligent people thought to question these things."

Unlike militarized images and policies directed at children, this postcard intended for soldiers emphasizes the vulnerability of the girl, who might be the same age as a soldier's daughter or little sister. Was this a threat or a comforting image? On the one hand, it would seem to communicate, "If you don't defend Japan, this will be all

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[21] The literal translation of the caption, which reads, "*Jûgo wa watashi no te de,*" would be, "The home front with my hands."

that's left to protect it – your daughter/sister and her toy cannon." On the other hand, it could have comforted a soldier in a violent theater of war with a reminder of what he was fighting for. Like the mascot dolls, this image conflates domestic obligations to care for family with national obligations to participate in the war effort.

Images of children were also used to project the relationship that the Japanese military state wanted with its colonies. By the time the little postcard girl pledged to defend the home front in 1940, Japan had invaded or colonized Taiwan, Korea, Manchuria, and Indochina, lumping these territories under the slogan, the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" (*Daitôa Kyôeiken*) (Earhart 2008, 46, 67). The idea was that a Pan-Asianist movement under Japan's guidance would repel European and American imperialist advances, becoming peaceful and prosperous on their own (Iriye 1999, 6). Colonies came up often in *Shôjo Club*, one of the most popular wartime children's periodicals, and one of the two girls' magazines that survived a period of scarce resources at the end of the war (Dollase 2008, 324). The Japanese government strictly censored children's literature during the Asia-Pacific War, effectively transforming children's magazines into a propagandist mouthpiece of the military state (ibid, 326). The government placed special emphasis on children's literature: even when other print media were discontinued to conserve resources, children's media continued to be printed, and with color ink no less (Earhart 2008, 203).

In one story about two Chinese rabbits, invading Japanese troops help the rabbits when they realize one is injured (Figure 15). One soldier says, "[She] has *kawaii* eyes. [She] looks just like the rabbit my little sister has" (*Shôjo Club* 1939, 40). The other soldier then notices Mimiko, the injured rabbit, and the first man exclaims, "Poor thing … Here, let me bandage [your wound]" (ibid). The soldiers are depicted as boys, while

the "rabbits" are girls wearing rabbit costumes, making their gender obvious to the reader. This constructs the colonized Chinese as pitiable beings deserving of Japan's masculine, humanistic care – a popular wartime claim, though grimly ironic given the actual violence perpetrated by Japanese troops against colonized groups (Earhart 2008, 264).

Figure 15 Chinese rabbits being aided by Japanese troops. Picture by author, from *Shôjo Club* 1939, Volume 17(2), pages 40-1.

Furthermore, children's periodicals were filled with descriptions of the future imperialist Japan would bring: "bright (*akarui*)," "fun (*tanoshii*)," " smiling (*niko niko*)." An earlier story in the same volume of Shôjo Club was written from the perspective of a girl colonized in Manchuria, which was invaded in 1931 (Earhart 2008, 50). It was titled, "In Line With the Troops" (*Heitai-san to Narande*). The girl reflected,

> "From old men and old women, to small *kawaii* children, [we] first understood that Japanese troops are upright (*tadashiku*), strong, and empathetic (*nasake-bukai*) when we were saved by the imperial troops …
> With the *Hinomaru* (rising sun) flag at our head, let's start a bright, exciting future with Japan's troops" (*Shôjo Club* 1939).

It was disconcerting for me to emerge from the library and see kawaii characters repeating a similar moral appeal today. In an exhibit of Sanrio's history in Tôkyô's Roppongi ward, Hello Kitty was depicted as saying, "Everyone nakayoshi, or "friendly and together." I saw smiling Pokémon characters telling everyone in the train station to be cheerful and nice to each other ("everyone smiling with good manners"). This

mirrored the adjectives I would find often in *Shôjo Club* that described Japan's bright future as a colonizing nation. Though most wartime imagery made its subjects look noble, figures that needed to be protected became *kawaii*. Colonized groups became pitiful animal-like girls; sisters and daughters became infantilized toddlers playing at defending the home front.

Thus, children and *kawaisa* have been embedded in government practices since at least the 1930s. During the Asia-Pacific War, propagandist media strictly regulated by the government used images of children, which were contextualized as *kawaii*, to construct an image of a bright, cheerful, and nurturing imperialist state that cared for its colonized subjects. In particular, *shôjo* were mobilized to comfort soldiers, which recast soldiers' participation in the war as a way to care for and protect these innocent girls, sometimes described as the soldiers' fictive sisters. Thus, the national government invoked dependence and affection in its governmental practices long before government organizations started to create *kawaii* mascots. How, then, do the mascots fit into the histories of *kawaisa* and governmentality? I explore this question in the next section.

PART II: MASCOTS

ROUSING THE TOWN

It's 1984. You are not shopping on Harajuku's Takeshita-dôri or eating a panda pancake at a maid café in Akihabara. In fact, you aren't in Tôkyô it all. You are some 360 miles away, in a rural mountain village on the southern tip of Honshû. Japanese companies have just started to use cute characters in advertisements (Allison 2003, 386). The booming *manga* and *anime* industries echo into your nook of Japan. In a few years, San-X Corporation will make its first cute character and the stationery company that made my mother's "soothing-type" postcards will be founded ("Pinny-mû" 2003; "Company Information" NA). Japan's bubble economy is giddily spiraling towards its collapse in the 1990s (Horiuchi 2009, 567).

This village, and others like it, was part of a localized recession that began as soon as the Asia-Pacific War ended (Iguchi 2002, 261). As the postwar economy picked up, the children in Japan's towns began to leave, steadily at first, then gushing out in a flood that rolled out the villages, down the mountains, and into the yawning cities. The 1980s brought the bubble economy, marked by conspicuous development and of course a "new humankind" (*shinjinrui*) of *shôjo*-like youth supposedly obsessed with consumption (Jain 2000, 5; Yoda 2000, 882). By the early 1990s, these sprawling complexes replaced rural areas as the bulwarks of Japan's economy and the centers of everyday life: only 20% of Japan's population lived in rural areas, drastically reduced from the 70% that lived there in the 1920s (Moon 2002, 228). Needless to say, industry left with those that emigrated (Moon 2002, 228). In the 1980s, about one-third of rural residents were over 65 years old, and annual death rates in villages classified as "depopulated" started to outstrip birth rates in the same period (ibid; Iguchi 2002, 265). American pressure to

liberalize Japanese markets in the 1980s and Japan's economic shift towards recession in the 1990s further exacerbated these effects (Knight 1994, 635; Love 2010, 221).

At best, national and local reforms to address rural depopulation had limited success. When the recession hit in the early 1990s, the national government passed a series of economic reforms under the broader label of "regional decentralization (*chihô bunken*)." This signaled an attempt to cut government spending "by demanding that local government, civic groups, and private enterprises assume greater responsibility for the needs of regional citizens" (Love 2010, 222). Starting in 1999, the national government also turned to municipal mergers as a solution to depopulation (Horiuchi 2009, 569). It introduced financial incentives to reward cities that agreed to merge by 2006, and passed a Municipal Merger Law in 2002 to "promote greater local self-sufficiency through the reorganization of Japan's municipalities into larger, more fiscally efficient cities and towns" (ibid; Love 2010, 222). Some interpreted the emphasis on "local autonomy" as abandonment – this time, by the government (Love 2010, 226). Many towns continued to stagnate.

Affected municipalities began to address these issues through *mura-okoshi* (village-revival) movements in as early as the late 1970s (Moon 2002, 228). Anthropologist Okpyo Moon describes this as "various forms of self-help efforts initiated by those living in the countryside to revitalize their economy and society" (ibid). Rural depopulation was often seen as both a psychological (*seishinteki*) and material problem. A group of men who founded a revitalization group, for example, believed that "local people no longer had pride or confidence in themselves" and depended too heavily on outside resources to fund rural revitalization (Knight 1994, 642). Currently, Japanese refer to these efforts with a few different terms: *okoshi* (rousing), *zukuri* (making), and

kasseika (enlivening). Besides villages and towns, words to describe revival may also be paired with terms like *shôtengai* (marketplace), *chiiki* (region), *shima* (island), and *chihô* (district) to describe attempts to both economically and affectively enliven Japan's rusting joints (Ideguchi 2009, 59). These terms describe efforts that focus not only on economic revitalization, but as terms like region-making and town-rousing would suggest, also on efforts to address the depression of living in a town whose ailing economy is embodied in aging residents and empty schools.

Tourism was often part of the solution. John Knight gives an example in his article on rural revitalization in Wakayama Prefecture. In 1986, the Hongu Town Country Taste Society of Friends was established. It was a group that shipped local produce to urbanites – some of whom were recent rural emigrants – nostalgic for their "hometown (*furusato*)" (1994, 644). This referred not to only to a literal hometown, but also to a popularized vision of "traditional," agrarian Japan that supposedly continues to exist in rural areas (Robertson 1997, 119). Hongu's delivery system was part of a larger state-sanctioned movement in the 1980s that channeled government funds into transforming Japan's rural areas into the repositories of Japanese "traditional culture," and consequently, into tourist destinations for nostalgic urbanites (ibid, 115; Love 2010, 225).

The shift towards tourism and revitalization assumed a number of different forms, but efforts organized around the theme of *furusato* tried to construct a sense of "regional character" by tying the specific place to "tradition." They could do this by highlighting the place's connection to any number of various things: specialty products, folklore, natural resources limited to that place, etc (Moon 2002, 228-9). Starting in the 1970s, some groups also refashioned areas into "international" entities like the Smiling

Republic and the Republic of Laugh Mania. Despite their cheerful (dare I say cute?) names, even these neighborhoods were part of the discourse of nostalgia, self-consciously constructing themselves as parodies of *furusato* (Robertson 1997, 121).

By "re-"anchoring place to its histories, organizations involved in revitalization efforts attempted to create a sense of community that they felt they had lost, even as these same efforts to distinguish themselves became part of a wider national effort to construct a national "hometown." In her dissertation on post-2000 town-making efforts, Bridget Love describes how residents in a municipality in northeastern Honshû sought to generate both resident and outside interest in their town through a number of different strategies. For example, local "treasure hunts" were organized as a way to identify the area's "hidden treasures," which could later form the basis of commercial enterprises to revive the flow of money to the area, and with it, local pride (Love 2007, 56). The town office founded a company, Kingdom of Mountain Harvest, in 2003 to transform local mountain food gathering practices into a marketable culinary form (ibid; ibid, 76).

Food has also formed an important part of tourism through developments like "B-Level Gourmet" (*bî-kyû gurume*). This started in 1985, and emphasizes good, cheap, simple food (Iwamura 2010, 97). An American translation might be the unbelievably cheap but delicious falafel shop nearby: not quite gourmet, but well-frequented by the locals. Nohara Michiko told me in one email that Japan is experiencing a B-level Gourmet boom, and many of the companies in her region, at least, wanted to jump on the bandwagon. "If you say 'tourism,' you mean 'local gourmet,' " she wrote.

Revitalization efforts drew on ideas about tourism to further ground history, food, and other resources to place. Each tourist area has its own *meibutsu*, or "famous thing,"

which (in theory) cannot be truly enjoyed anywhere besides that place (Tussyadiah 2005, 285). Of course, not every Japanese person feels this way – my advisor informed me that "hometown" shops stocked with specialty items from across Japan are very much alive and well in the train stations freckling the country. With the commercial success of these stores, though, items that are *really* only sold at the exact location become even more desirable. When a friend of my mother's took me to Ise, where the Sun Goddess's shrine[22] is located, we made a special stop to buy a certain type of cookie that was only sold at that specific store. "You have to get these for your mom," she said. "They sell the other things in train stations." For her, buying something indexical of thinking fondly of someone (or at least, remembering that you have to get her a gift) in a historic place, itself iconic of Japan, was important.

What Are *Yuru Kyara?*

Yuru kyara fit into these efforts as characters made to promote the products or other things with which regions attempt to brand themselves. Unlike the revitalization efforts described in most literature, however, these places are rarely rural. This makes some amount of intuitive sense – you need a certain level of population density for the mascot to be effective. The towns and cities whose mascots I interviewed averaged around 100,000 residents, and many had actually seen a steady population *increase* since the 1970s (*Sômushô* 2005). Furthermore, their generational demographics often overlapped with the average demographic in Japan, implying that the anxieties they

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[22]The sun goddess, Amaterasu, emerges in the *Kojiki* (Chronicle of Ancient Times) and *Nihon Shoki* (The Chronicles of Japan) as the goddess who gave birth to Japanese civilization. Her shrine at Isê has been an important site of political power (Robertson 2007, 384). During the Asia-Pacific War, and also in the Meiji period, the national government promoted "State Shinto," a system of government affording the emperor divine right to rule because he was descended from Amaterasu (Schnell 1995, 310).

experienced over economic decline and age are not the acute struggles found in rural Japan, but the generalized anxieties becoming increasingly apparent across the country as more people age and birth rates decline.

A Japanese *manga* artist and illustrator, Miura Jun, is credited with coining the term *yuru kyara* to describe mascots created by local public groups participating in these efforts ("Habatan" 2006). In the preface to his 2004 publication, the *Yuru Kyara Encyclopedia* (*Yuru Kyara Daizukan*), he defines his new term as "characters around the country made to promote local government events, village-revival (*mura-okoshi*), specialty items, and the like (2)." Subsequent articles in mainstream Japanese newspapers like the *Asahi* and *Yomiuri* often cite this definition to distinguish *yuru kyara* from characters made by private companies (for example, see "Habatan" 2006). This could be in part because Miura copyrighted the term "*yuru kyara*" after he published his encyclopedia, thus cementing himself to the increasingly popular brand while also turning himself into a seeming authority on the subject ("*Yuru Kyara Samitto Kyôkai*" NA). Japanese scholars who have published articles on *yuru kyara* in the last few years also adhere, more or less, to this definition. In his article, "Introduction to *Yuru Kyara* Theory," linguistics professor Akizuki Kôtarô defines *yuru kyara* as "Characters that have some degree of 'looseness,' or uncertain and unique movements because they were designed with commercial aims and related to regional promotion" (2010, 36).

Before Miura copyrighted this term, mascots that served this function were often referred to as "image characters" (*imêji kyarakutâ*), a term that is sometimes still applied to them. In his encyclopedia, Miura includes a subheading on each character's profile page to describe what it represents. He interchanges "mascot character

(*masukotto kyarakutâ*)" and "image character (*imêji kyarakutâ*)" synonymously. Similarly, *yuru kyara* descriptions often say that they "image" the entity they represent – in other words, that they are supposed to visually represent that place's distinctive qualities.

In her thesis, media communications student Tsukamoto Ayako tracks the use of mascot characters by Japan's National Sports Festival (*Kokumin Taiiku Taikai*, or *Kokutai* for short). Though this event has been held annually since 1946, it did not have a mascot character until 1983 (2007, 11). That year, the managing organization at the hosting prefecture, Gunma, created character for the event, Gunma-chan. Unlike the current Gunma-chan, it was an orange and purple horse character (ibid, 13).[23] After that, each prefecture made its own National Sports Festival character to encourage enthusiasm for the event. Tsukamoto describes these mascots as "cute, endearing" characters "that would make a good impression on anyone" and whose designs "appear to combine creatures with specialty products (*tokusanhin*) to symbolize 'sports' and [the hosting] prefecture" (ibid, 11). She says that they often had costumes so they could greet participants, or were sold as character merchandise (ibid).

Figure 16 Don-chan, the mascot for Sarabetsu Village in Hokkaidô (Miura 2005, 17).

The earliest mascot participating in revitalization efforts in the *Yuru Kyara Encyclopedia* was made one

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[23] To be clear, this was a different Gunma-chan than the character I interviewed. The design for the current Gunma-chan used to be called Yuma-chan, and was made for *Yuaipic*, a sports event for children with learning difficulties (Harrison and Harrison 2010, 39).

year later, in 1984. It was made by the Hokkaidô Sarabetsu Village Office Industry Foundation Department to promote the village's specialty products (*meisanhin*) (Miura 2005, 17). The mascot, Don-chan, was based on the acorns of Sarabetsu Village's many oak trees. Its name drew from the Japanese word for acorn, *donguri.* Its fuzzy brown body was shaped like an acorn, and its knobbly cream-colored hair looked like an acorn hat. Don-chan combined these characteristics with some *kawaii* ones. Its face looked that of a cartoon dog, with large pupils and an equally big brown nose. Its red tongue peeped out from its wide-eyed face. Don-chan's only clothing was a turquoise bow fastened where one might imagine a neck; black boots; and yellow gloves to cover its four fingers (see Figure 16). Like many other mascots, Don-chan's gender was undetermined, though its personality was "always smiling" (*itsumo nikoniko*) (Miura 2005, 17).

Thus, Don-chan joins the original Gunma-chan as one of the first mascot characters to be tied to a specific place. These two characters from the early 1980s were also in the forefront of a growing trend to use mascots to symbolize what makes the place a distinct community. They do this by combining existing icons of the place (*meibutsu, tokusanhin*, etc) into one embodied form. However, they are not equated with the place or the community itself. For example, *yuru kyara* are rarely as old as the town or marketplace they represent. Instead, they are fundamentally tied – through their design and often also their speech – to what is supposed to be iconic of that area's distinctive qualities.

Takinomichi Yuzuru (Figure 17), who represents Minô City, is a typical example of how an organization might decide to create a mascot character. Morita's story about Minô City mirrored the one Itô gave of Gifu City. It had a receding tax base and local

economy, and needed to find a way to revitalize their rusting

city. To this end, the City Hall Sales Department, Commercial

Tourism Department, and the Minô City Chamber of

Commerce started a tourism campaign, the Citrus and Fall

Leaves Project (*Yuzu to Momiji Purojekuto*), in 2009. They

held a public design contest for the new project's character.

They ended up deciding on Takinomichi Yuzuru, a smiling

samurai character with a Japanese citrus fruit as a head. His

Figure 17 Takinomichi Yuzuru. Image from his page on the Yuruchara Summit Organization's website.

name combines the name of Minô's apparently famous "Waterfall Path (*taki no michi*)"

with a play on the word for Japanese citrus (*yuzu*) and "to transfer or give up" (*yuzuru*).

"The Chinese character for *yuzuru* 讓 means 'modesty' (*kenjô*), so it represents kindness,

like giving someone your place in line," explained a city hall employee (email

2/27/2012). Once Takinomichi Yuzuru was made, the Sales Department and

Commercial Tourism Department at City Hall began prodding the Chamber of

Commerce to use their new mascot at events (email 2/27/2012). Like most other *yuru*

kyara, Takinomichi Yuzuru was created to assist cities and towns (rarely villages) in

revitalization efforts.

Mascots can embody their place on a number of levels.[24] Their design, name, or

manner of speech (and often, all three), incorporates some iconic aspect of the area they

are supposed to represent – or, at least it highlights something the organizers would *like*

the area to become famous for. Kumamon, for example, is a bear because he comes from

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[24] Interestingly, the vast majority of mascots are categorized as male. Most profiles list the character's sex (*seibetsu*). When I examined the statistics from the 374 characters listed on the website of the Society for Organized Yuru-Chara, I found that 55% were listed as male, 16.5% were female; 0.5% were both; 24.5% were a "secret" or "unknown;" and 3.5% specifically said they had no sex because they were beings unto themselves.

Kumamoto Prefecture, which is written with the characters, "bear" and "origin." His name, too, contains the word for "bear" (*kuma*), and he ends his sentences with puns on his name.[25] Bary-san, a yellow bird character representing Imabari City, follows this pattern as well (Imabari to Bary). In addition, it has features that are meant to be iconic of its city's unique industries. Imabari is apparently known for making towels and ships, as well as the Kurushima Strait Great Bridge (*Kurushima Kaikyô Ôhashi*), which has one foot in the city. To represent these, Bary-san has a bellyband made from towel fabric, a wallet in the shape of a ship, and a crown shaped like the bridge. Like many other mascots, Bary-san also speaks only in the dialect of the region it represents, thus linguistically embodying Imabari as well.

In addition to representing distinctive places, industries, or simply punning the place's name, mascots are also often made to resemble historical or folkloric figures. Yoichi-kun shares his name with Nasu no Yoichi, a samurai who appears in the *Tales of Heike* (*Heike Monogatari*), which is a famous epic about

Figure 18 Yoichi-kun, on left, from "Yoichi-kun's Page" on Ôtawara Chamber of Commerce and Industry website. On the right, an image of Nasu no Yoichi from a hanging scroll. Scanned from Turnbull, Stephen (1998). 'The Samurai Sourcebook'. London, Cassell & Co. (cover)
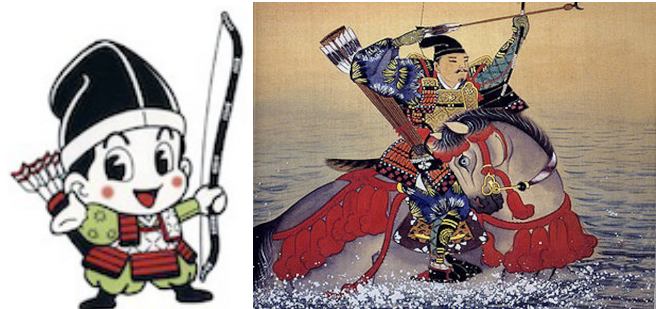
the Minamoto and Taira clans' struggle for control of Japan in 1180-1185 (*Kôjien* 2008) (see Figure 18). Besides sharing his name with the famous archer, Yoichi is made to physically resemble him as well, sporting Heian-period *samurai* garb and carrying a quiver of arrows with his bow. According to his manager, his personality is also based on what is known about the

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[25] These vary between puns on the first half of his name, kuma, and second half, -mon. If something he says has the phoneme ku in it, he might attach kuma at the end: Sankuma (thank you-bear); Tanoshikuma (fun-bear). Otherwise, he usually ends his sentences with –mon. This makes him sound childlike as well, as little children often end their sentences with the same phrase.

actual Nasu no Yoichi, though Yoichi-kun also has more contemporary hobbies, like blogging (email 3/19/2012). Other characters might resemble mythical creatures. Ibaraki Dôji, for example, is a character version of a demon that was believed to haunt a famous gate during the Heian period (Harrison and Harrison 2010, 105). Onimaru-kun is a smiling ogre (*oni*) character that represents a city known for its Ogre Sword Dance (*Oni Kenbai*) (ibid, 30). Some, like Yanana, are even registered as "special residents," or like Kumamon, are made department heads of local government offices. "It's like having a moving tourist spot," said Morita from Minô City Hall. "If the Statue of Liberty were to move, [people] would want to take pictures with her, and if they could take a picture with their arms around her, of course they would want to," he said (Skype interview 3/9/2012). Thus, *yuru kyara* tend to represent figures, places, products, or industries for which a region is, or wants to be, famous – its local strengths.

This emphasis on the distinctiveness of place was not dissimilar to a 1970s project called the "One Village-One Product Movement" (*isson ippin undô*), started by Governor Hiramatsu Morihiko in Ôita Prefecture (Knight 1994, 638). His idea was that each village in the prefecture should be associated with one product, which would then become emblematic of that village (ibid). As Knight describes,

> "The totemistic overtones of this situation were graphically presented to anyone traveling through the prefecture. Towns took names such as *tomato no machi* (tomato village) or *mikan no mura* (orange village) and used an image of the fruit as its logo" (ibid, 639).

Thus, in some iterations of town-making, at least, the area's specialty products, and produce especially, marked its distinctive character. Just as there was only one Tomato Village, there would ideally only be one product to represent it, though of course this

rarely worked out in practice. Similarly, mascots seem to be an attempt to create an iconic, commodifiable entity to represent and promote the place.

Many managers I talked to framed this as an attempt to streamline the branding of their area, so that the single mascot became iconic of the place. "We have so many characters for different events," said one public employee I interviewed at the Prefectural Hall (*Todôfuken Kaikan*) in Tôkyô. "We don't know which is for what. We wanted one character to represent the prefecture" (conversation 7/29/2012). One of Fukka-chan's managers placed similar emphasis on streamlining: "We had efforts to advertise our city's attractions before we made Fukka-chan, of course, but Fukka-chan unified them" (phone interview 3/25/2012). [26]

In Anglophone scholarship, the few scholars who discuss mascots have mainly taken them up as examples of manipulative uses of *kawaisa* by government authorities. In this, they focus primarily on mascots created by national government organizations, which is something that became increasingly common in the 1990s. McVeigh uses Pîpo-kun (Figure 19), who has been the Tôkyô police force's mascot since 1987, as an

Figure 19 Pîpo-kun (Harrison and Harrison 2010, 49).

example of "authority uses of cuteness" (1996, 310). In a later article on Hello Kitty, he appears to have elaborated on this argument, tying Pîpo-kun to a "tendency to aesthetically 'soften' controversial, sensitive, or troublesome issues" (2000a, 241-2).

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[26] Not all *yuru kyara* necessarily work alone. Many have *yuru kyara* families and friends. However, these tend to be secondary characters without costumes of their own. Their profiles are also often rather spare compared to the main character. When I asked 801-chan's manager if it had any family, for example, he said that while it did, he couldn't remember whether it had a sister or a daughter (Skype interview 3/6/2012). If anything, these characters appear to play a supporting role that demonstrates the character's participation in "average" human relationships, like owning a pet dog (Bary-san) or having a younger sister/daughter (801-chan).

Similarly, Sabine Frühstück, a Japanese Studies professor who writes a detailed analysis of the two Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) mascots, situates them in a chapter titled "Military Manipulations of Popular Culture" (2007). Much like McVeigh, she argues that they attempt to normalize the JSDF by trivializing and infantilizing it through their "cute looks" and the fairy tale story the JSDF tells of them (ibid, 136). Surely, though, the mascots have more to relate than a simple story of manipulation or trivialization. And if they *do* manipulate or trivialize, to what end?

Using *Kawaisa* in Revitalization

"Even if you talk to a stuffed animal, it won't respond.

If you talk to a pet, it seems like it's listening, or maybe it's not?

If you talk to a child, it will reply through its actions because it knows few words.

If you talk to an adult, you will receive a response as you should.

Among these, I think the entity closest to yuru kyara *is 'the child.'*

It can understand words, but can't speak so it tries its best to gesture with its body. It drops a present it got because it can't use its hands well.

It can't see its feet, so it almost falls on the stairs. Even one step is difficult … No matter what it does, it is kawaii" (Nohara email 2/24/2012).

In the quote introducing this section, Nohara Michiko describes *yuru kyara* as though they are toddling infants. Unable to speak and barely able to walk, they need someone's constant assistance to even make it onstage at an event. Once there, the same person must interpret the character's actions to make them intelligible to the audience. Thus, Nohara suggests that *yuru kyara*'s limited abilities, which allow fans and visitors

to see them struggle, make them childlike. This is what distinguishes them from stuffed animals, from which you can expect nothing, and from adults that do everything as they are expected.

In fact, mascots are associated with children more concretely as well. Most characters listed in Miura Jun's encyclopedia, as well as those made more recently, are between 4 and 10 years old. Their names tend to include

Figure 20 From left to right, Gunma-chan; kindergarten student; Negiccho.

diminutives like "-kun," "-chan," and "-py," which are affectionate terms especially used towards people who are younger or of lower social status than you. For example, you might call a subordinate named Mari, "Mari-kun" or "Mari-chan."[27] The mascots also often have nametags pinned to their front, with their name or their organization's name spelled out in Japanese phonetic script (*hiragana*) that anyone can read. This looks surprisingly similar to the nametag a kindergarten student would wear to school. Compare Gunma-chan, Negiccho, and the kindergarten student pictured above (Figure 20). Gunma-chan, who is 7 years old, wears a uniform one might see on a young kindergarten or elementary school student. His nametag clearly says, "Gunma-chan." The girl in the center similarly has a yellow flower-shaped nametag pinned in the same place on her uniform. Negiccho, who is 4 years old, also carries a pouch associated with kindergarten students ("Negiccho Profile" NA). Besides this, almost all mascots have


[27] Though "-kun" tends to be associated with boys, and "-chan" with girls, the two can be used with either.

infantilized features: widely-space eyes, enlarged heads, and small appendages. Thus, many of the mascots are made to resemble very young children.

The question that seems to follow is, why? What does creating a childlike mascot do? Well, it's difficult not to think of anxieties over Japan's aging population. Over 21 percent of the population, including

Figure 21 2005 National Census map. Percentage of residents ages 0-14 years. Redder colors indicate higher percentages; bluer indicates lower.
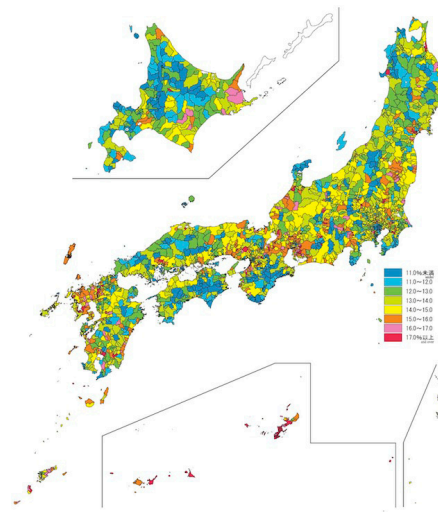
Figure 22 2005 National Census map. Percentage of residents over 65 years of age. Redder colors indicate higher percentages; bluer indicates lower.
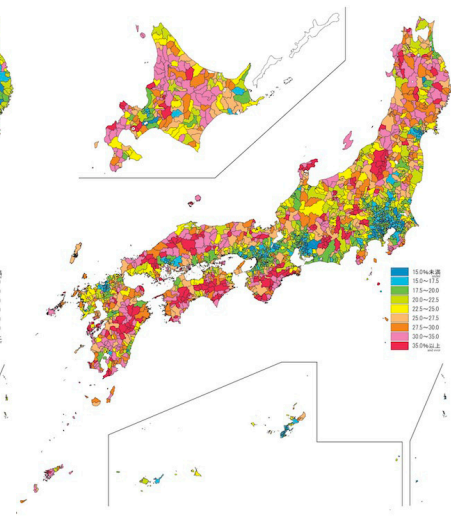
foreign residents, was over 65 years old in 2007 (Robertson 2007, 370). Furthermore, local emigration patterns tend to add generational skew: young residents who can work leave for more prosperous, exciting cities, while older generations tend to become concentrated in depopulating areas (Moon 2002, 228). Compare the two maps below, both based on census data from 2005. The map on the left represents the population density for children aged 0-14 years; the right, for persons over 65. The two are almost exactly inverse images. Where there are many old people, there are few children. Moreover, this overlaps just as seamlessly with census data about population density: youth are concentrated in dense areas (large cities), and increasingly less so in rural areas. Many of the *yuru kyara* efforts are directed towards drawing residents back into these aging and thinning spaces, and towards making current children feel more attached to their region.

Morita at Minô City, for example, told me that they used Takinomichi Yuzuru to draw in young families with children, a goal echoed by other mascot managers. Kumamon's Kumamoto Surprise campaign even specifically targets young children. To this end, he often visits elementary schools and nursery schools to "spread the Kumamoto Surprise," as the manager put it (email 3/15/2012). The other characters, too, have visited middle schools, children's Christmas celebrations, and preschool events to "make residents proud of their place." Thus, not only are *yuru kyara* in some ways symbolic of the children that are disappearing with declining birth rates and generational emigration trends, but they also use their childlike appeal to attract residents who are just old enough to be parents, and to strengthen children's feelings of affection for their community. In the next section, I argue that they do this by being deployed through the playful techne of "amateur mascot."

THE TECHNE OF PLAY

"Hello Kitty Man" was another kind of mascot I met before I started researching mascots. I saw him on my way to observe shoppers in Tôkyô's Harajuku ward. This ward, and especially its main street, Takeshita-dôri, is known as a hotspot for teens to flaunt their fashion styles, though I have also heard from a disappointed friend making a documentary on Japanese street fashion that the number of people dressing up in "crazy clothes" was diminishing. When I first saw Hello Kitty Man, he looked like a girl wearing a Hello Kitty mask and skirt handing out fliers to passersby. Curious, I asked him why he was dressed up. He said something like, "I'm in a group (*sâkuru*)," in a baritone voice. *Oh! It's a guy*, I thought. "Dressed like this, people wonder, 'Oh, what's that for?' and are more likely to approach me, don't you think?" he asked. As someone who had done just this, I couldn't disagree. To me, he had looked like an odd, interesting character that obviously wanted to be noticed. Why else would she be decked out in Hello Kitty gear, and in Harajuku no less?

About a week later, I saw Hello Kitty Man again when I visited Harajuku with my sister. Confident now that I knew who he was, I told her to go take a picture with him. It was easy to recognize him though he was not wearing a Hello Kitty mask: he still wore hot pink from head to foot. In the picture, he sports a Hello Kitty hat with plush ears and has a fluorescent pink wig on underneath. He has covered his face with a different mask this time, the plastic face of a white, smiling woman crying silver bubbles from her left eye. She has pink lipstick and eye shadow, and what looks like a cursive "H" under her right eye. He has on quite a few layers, despite the heat: white tights with pink and red hearts; a matching light pink skirt and hoodie with black and white hearts; a hot pink T-shirt with some kind of *kawaii* bat creatures on it; and white arm warmers with

black hearts. Accessories abound: lacy bow clips with *kawaii* characters (Miffy-esque[28]

rabbits, cartoonized chicks, smiley-faces, ice-cream cones) are fastened to the bangs of

his wig; a tiny koala hangs from one lobe of his Hello Kitty hat; a teddy bear, itself

encrusted with pink bows and hearts, hangs from his neck on a plush white-and-pink

polka dot lanyard. He has decorated his pink skirt with matching pompoms, and

attached other small things (including a photo booth picture!) to the cord on his hoodie.

He has a cute pink bear puppet on one hand, and holds a heart-shaped wand decorated

with maid characters in the other. In short, his outfit is exuberantly *kawaii.*

Later, I wondered why I had assumed he was a girl. Had I in some ways conflated

him with Hello Kitty herself? I was similarly confused about the character-actor

dichotomy when I met Kitty at a Sanrio exhibit, *Character Memories: Always Kawaii*,

in Roppongi district. As the scheduled time for her appearance drew near, the small

space began to fill with visitors, mainly women in their 30s. A few had brought their

daughters to look at the display on Sanrio's characters. As she walked through the

display, one woman pointed out a cup patterned with tiny pink strawberries to her

daughter. "Mommy used to have one of those when she was young," she said.

When the staff announced Hello Kitty, everyone gathered near the end of the

exhibit. One woman decked out in hot pink clutched eagerly at her Hello Kitty bag. In

fact, everyone seemed to have little mementos of affinity tucked away somewhere: a

Hello Kitty bracelet here; a cell phone strap there; a pastel pink dress with strawberries

that matched Sanrio's first set of "fancy" stationery. As I was noting these things, Hello

Kitty appeared. We all said, "*Kawaiiiiii!*" She was wearing a dress made to look like the

British flag, with a matching bow, and holding a little brown teddy bear (See Figure 23).

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[28] Miffy is a popular children's book character in Japan illustrated by Dutch artist Dick Bruna.

She came towards us in brisk little hops, giving little high-fives to the fans, who had formed a line. A staff member, dressed simply in black jeans with a royal blue sweatshirt sporting Hello Kitty's face, directed us to take pictures. Kitty's every movement was a pose: she would hold one for a second, then switch to another in time with the fans' flashing cameras and video recorders. When she curtsied, they clicked more rapidly, saying "*kawaii.*" Kitty continued to take her poses, sometimes covering the empty space where her mouth would be, sometimes bowing or hugging her bear close. Unsure of what to do exactly, I went to take my picture with her and the boy-gendered panda, Go-chan, who had come with her. I gave the staff member my camera, and Kitty a little high-five. We held each other's shoulders and smiled for the camera. (Well, I did.) Growing up, I had never cared for Hello Kitty because I thought she was kind of kitschy, but that moment was fun. Still, as I watched other visitors take their pictures with Kitty, I couldn't help thinking about the person wearing Kitty's costume. *How would you even apply for this job?* I wondered.

Hello Kitty as well as Hello Kitty Man draw attention to the actual ways that mascot fans interact with the characters. Fans would often describe the mascot being as something that was "OK to touch," something with which you could interact closely – at least, for the brief moment you saw them. Anne Allison similarly argues that *kawaii* characters soothe or comfort fans (2003). Thus, the techne of *kawaisa* – the actual forms it takes; the media through which it is experienced

Figure 23 Hello Kitty and Go-chan.

– is also key to considering what it does. Here, I agree with Paul Manning's paraphrase of anthropologist Tom Boellstorf, who writes on virtual communities:

> "Avatars exist on a continuum with more tangible performance objects and nonhuman actors, a heterogeneous collection of masks, costumes, dolls, puppets, animations, automatons, machines, and robots. What avatars share with other performing objects, as a kind of techne, is their capacity to produce a "gap," to divide or distribute a unitary human agent across multiple roles of a single performance" (Manning 2009, 318).

Like other performance technologies, or techne, the *kawaii* costume creates a "gap" in which visitors can interact playfully with a stranger who is entirely unknown (the actor has no face or personality, since he or she has assumed Kitty's).

In fact, Manning's take is not so dissimilar to the idea Gregory Bateson outlines in his famous essay, "Theory of Play and Fantasy." Bateson, too, posits a kind of "gap" created by metacommunicative signals, which indicate to playful actors that they are engaged in play. He compares this to the function of a picture frame: it indicates that the viewer should interpret objects within the frame differently from the things surrounding the frame (1972, 177-93). Similarly, a man inside a mascot costume is no longer a man *or* a costume, but a "costumed man." To some degree, this describes all of us: even nakedness, the "bare self," is perceived as the absence clothing. This broad application is partially due to Bateson's broad definition of play, which includes all interactions with metacommunicative signals – so all human interactions; and takes non-human animal behaviors as the definition of "real" interaction. Neither does Bateson pay attention, as Manning does, to what impact performance has on agency.

Manning's framework, then, allows us to see how Hello Kitty Man and Hello Kitty distribute the agency of their actors across multiple *kawaii* surfaces. This allows Hello Kitty Man to attract people as he couldn't as merely himself. But even this, the "himself," is not so whole. He *was*, in a sense, the Hello Kitty mask he wore – but only as a being split between her appealing character and his body.

To Be Loose

Mascot managers, fans, and journalists describe the effects of the amateur mascot techne with the word, "*yurui*," or loose. This is where *yuru kyara* get their name, which is an abbreviated combination of the words, "loose" (*yurui*) and "character" (*kyarakutâ*). This "looseness," which refers to both the amateur, unfinished feel of the characters and the blurriness of their performance, is key to distinguishing the *yuru kyara* from more refined privately owned characters like Mickey Mouse or Hello Kitty. By framing their mascots as childish amateur characters, managing organizations are able to create close, friendly relationships with the fans they attract.

According to Nohara Michiko, the *yuru kyara*'s association with children allows them to act *yurui*. Because the mascot looks and acts like a child, fans and visitors will forgive the managers even if they are not able to pull off a seamless performance of their characters. Fans do not expect *yuru kyara* to have perfect (*kanpeki na*) movements. In other words, they need not seamlessly perform the character as a Disney actor would Mickey. "Visitors talk to them kindly (*yasashiku*), as they would interact with a small child," Nohara wrote. "Even if they mess up, they forgive that as *kawaii* and interesting" (email 2/19/2012). Thus, in Nohara's telling at least, being childlike allows the characters to make mistakes that might not be forgiven by fans that expect a perfect

performance. In fact, it recasts them as "*kawaii* and interesting." Thus, because the *yuru kyara* play at being children, the actors behind them can be as equally amateur. To speak in Bateson's terms, the picture is framing the frame.

This is what mascot managers, journalists, and the 20-year-old friends who first told me about *yuru kyara* meant when they said a character was "*yurui.*" I realized this in an interview with a member of the group managing 801-chan (read, *Yaoi-chan*). Asano Ken was one of the five college friends who created this character, and often switches between being its actor and caretaker. When planning for an event, he and his friends often decide 801-chan's routine the night before. Instead of calculating each action, Asano said, they aim to be "*yurui*, doing whatever comes to mind" (Skype interview 3/6/2012). According to Morita and Nohara, because visitors know that the people running the mascots are amateurs, they may forgive the managers for messing up at events (Skype interview 3/9/2012; email 2/19/2012). Thus, the *yuru kyara* aesthetic is in some ways a material expression of the managing organizations' lack of professionalism. Even if it is run by a professionalized media planning company, as Kumamon is, the informal context the character creates also allows its managing organization to run its mascot in a more carefree manner than if they interacted with the public as merely themselves.

Besides childlikeness, the reframing of the frame is facilitated by the characters' amateur design. According to Nohara Michiko, amateur mascots are distinct because they are not complete or perfect (*kanpeki*[29]). Neither is their design calculated, as is often evidenced by some mascots' uncool (*dasai*) look. Morita Shinichi from Minô City

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[29] The literal translation of *kanpeki* is "complete/perfect sphere." It originated as a term to describe precious balls without any scratches on them (*Kanjigen* 2002). It also describes something that is not lacking in anything.

also explained to me in our interview that since city hall members often have no special artistic skills, some of the characters they make are, well, hopeless (*shômonai*) (Skype interview 3/9/2012). Additionally, characters are often named by children, and their designs often originate in public design contests held online. Even if a professional illustrator eventually streamlined the final submissions into a more effective design, managers tended to emphasize that the design came from a public contest, to which "everyday people" (*ippanjin*) from across the country submitted their ideas. A *Mainichi* newspaper article described this "looseness" another way: "Compared to private companies' polished characters, *yuru kyara*'s special feature is their debatably *kawaii*, somewhat refined, but somewhat not, '*yurusa*'" ("Habatan" 2006). This aesthetic, in turn, allows both mascots and their managers to let their faults show through – the mascots, by struggling to walk up steps, and the managers, by creating such a ridiculous-looking mascot in the first place.

Figure 24
Fukka-chan

This, then, implies a tense relationship between the actor and the *yuru kyara*, between frame and picture. In fact, one conversation with a manager indicated to me that they exist simultaneously without one rupturing the other. According to Fukka-chan's actor, a city hall employee, adults are aware that another adult is inside the costume. When he was wearing Fukka-chan's costume, many adults would come to introduce themselves and tell him to "hang in there." "Many people say supportive things," he explained. But these comments were not directed at Fukka-chan. They were meant for him, the faceless person inside the costume. Simultaneously, he says this interaction *would not be possible* without Fukka-chan mediating between them. Much like Hello Kitty Man and his mask, *because* Fukka-

chan's actor is wearing a costume of a cute creature with green onions for ears, visitors feel able to approach him in this friendly manner. So, the picture has framed the frame, and through this each has become both picture and frame. Or, in Manning's terms, the techne of the (*kawaii*) childlike mascot creates a "gap" in which the (singular) agency of the person is divided into the dual agencies of "mascot" and "actor." In creating this "gap," however, the "original" agent (person) is transformed, so that she is able to act as a different kind of self, in part constituted by the mascot. This is what avatars do (Manning 2009, 318).

In this case, though, because the mascot also symbolizes the future and the distinctiveness of a community, rather than a persona or "self," it never *had* any kind of singular agency to begin with. This is expressed literally, through the fact that it is performed by many people who, unlike other kinds of mascot actors (e.g. Mickey), have *not* been trained to act as the mascot. In fact, few managers I interviewed saw the need for such training. "People understand how to act because they know he's a well-behaved *samurai*;" "It's *kawaii*, so ..." they said. Despite this, when I pressed a few on the subject by asking how they felt when they lent out the costume to someone who was not part of their organization, they acknowledged differences. It was fine as long as someone from the group modified the mascot's personality by adding a new movement or pose, because he was already involved in constructing the mascot's personality. But when someone who was just borrowing the costume for a day changed something, *then* the difference became noticeable – at least, according to some managers. Others insisted that everyone more or less understood that it was a "*kawaii* mascot," and therefore they knew how to perform. Even if things did result in a "blurred" performance, in which the mascot's movements (read, personality) did not quite match up with its movements at

the last event, these managers argued, fans probably didn't notice. This implies a shared understanding of the mascot's personality, which many managers measured by how well they knew the actor.

Caring and Community

The mascot techne is underlied by *kawaisa*. As I have described, mascots are often childlike and purposefully amateur, which allows managing organizations to play at these roles ("amateur," "child"). Managers described an additional layer of complexity: as a *kawaii* character, which overlaps with being childlike and amateur, the mascot draws visitors into a playful, friendly space that is, in some ways, outside of the conventions that adult (people) should follow.

When I asked mascot managers why they decided to make a *yuru kyara* or how it contributed to the purpose of their organization, their responses seemed organized around two main categories: they are a medium for communicating something (in this case, the unique features of a community); and they make it easy to create relationships with people. The managers I talked to said these two things are accomplished through their mascot's *kawaisa* and because it is a character, not a person.

When I asked them why they decided to make a character, most managers responded that it was so it could "PR," or promote, their town or place. This was often related to increasing a place's name recognition (*chimeido*) or to communicate its charms (*miryoku*) to residents across Japan. 801-chan also appears on advertisements for shops in its marketplace, and Minô City Hall uses Takinomichi Yuzuru as one of a number of mediums to disseminate information to city residents. The city decided to use

Yuzuru because he was eye-catching and is fun – in other words, explained Morita, a good marketing tool.

Similarly, government organizations and companies often use mascots in bulletins. In the poster pictured to the right, election mascots warn community members about politicians who might try to bribe them for their votes: "NO donations!" "The electorate doesn't want [it]! Politicians won't give [it]!" Though the sign is strongly worded, the feminine version of the election mascot, with her pink bow and wings, smiles happily. Similarly, I saw the mascot for Tôkyô's Nerima Ward, Neri-maru, pictured on a poster asking the ward's residents to participate in energy conservation efforts in the wake of the March 11th disaster (Figure 25). The mascot for one of the main train lines in Tôkyô, Seibu, encouraged commuters to remember their train manners.

Of course, the question that follows is why it is effective in Japan for government organizations to use *kawaii* mascot characters for this purpose. This seems connected to an ability characters, and *kawaii* characters in particular, have to demonstrate approachability and create familiarity with a wide range of people. Negiccho, for example, is managed by a department in town hall whose goals are to enliven the town and manage tourism. Negiccho was made on the 50th anniversary of the town's founding to help with these efforts. Until then, said Negiccho's manager, "We didn't have that 'something' to answer the question, 'What kind of town is Ginanchô?' " When I asked how having a *yuru kyara* helped to answer this question, she replied, "It's something that anyone can instantly understand" (phone

Figure 25 Neri-maru asks Nerima Ward residents to save electricity.

interview 3/14/2012). Managers also often said that having a costumed character drew people's interest, so that they would form a group that was then easy to address (3/6/2012). Thus, *yuru kyara* are the mouthpieces to communicate information about the resources of the place.

This was something the two managers of Yuzuru that I interviewed also mentioned. In fact, because he is so adept at drawing a crowd and leaving them with a good impression, one manager said, Yuzuru is essential for events that city hall organizes within the city. Moreover, the same manager wrote that having Yuzuru makes their Citrus and Fall Leaves Project easy for all kinds of people to feel close to (*haba hiroku shitashimiyasui mono ni suru*)" (email 2/29/2012). Other mascot managers noted their mascot's same broad appeal, often writing or saying that it appealed to anyone, from small children to adults to elderly persons. Thus, they described mascots as able to draw people from any generation.

This also came out in conversations between characters and their fans on Twitter. Mascots thank individual fans for coming to an event, ask for advice, tweet about their hobbies, and start or end their days with "good morning" and "good night." Besides the usual tweets with updates about their blogs or new merchandise that fans can buy, some characters have extended conversations with fans. Takinomichi Yuzuru in particular communicates often with his fans – so much that Morita, one of the people running Yuzuru's Twitter, once told me he is increasingly unable to separate his life from his work. For example, one fan who has been obsessively following Yuzuru since January 2012, tweets almost exclusively to him and Kumamon. The fan and Yuzuru talk about how his events are going, the weather, when he can come to the fan's town, and offer each other encouragement. In one tweet from mid-January, she writes, "It's cold so be

careful when you come back (waving emoticon). When you get home I recommend warming up with a citrus (*yuzu*) bath lol." The next day, apparently having caught a cold herself, she writes, "Yuzuru-kun my throat hurts (crying emoticon) Share some of your citrus… (crying emoticon)." Her tweets are filled with emoticons, like o(*Ψ∀Ψ)ノ, a smiling and waving figure; (艸 д+。悲), which is apparently a crying emoticon; and (つ Д｀), another crying emoticon ("Crying" 2007). The density of these emoticons, and the grammatical forms she uses, casts this communication as something written to a friend. Yuzuru's other fans sometimes call him Yuzucchi, an endearing abbreviation of "Yuzuru."

Such trends are evident, to varying degrees, in other mascots' tweets. In March 2012, one fan wrote to Bary-san, "Today was a bad day~ If you can, please encourage me (crying emoticon)," to which Bary-san replied, "No worries, no worries (smiling emoticon). I'm sure something good will happen tomorrow (smiling emoticon)." Yanana thanked fans for their Valentine's Day gifts to her, adding individual comments like, "Let's ski together someday," that may have been in response to what a fan had written in a card. Fans tweeted happy birthday to Kumamon, to which he replied with a pun, "Thank you bear-☆" (*Sankuma-☆*). Besides this, mascots receive holiday gifts from fans. This New Year's, for example, Hikonyan received *only* 11,079 New Year's cards (*nengajô*), down 718 from 2011 ("'Hikonyan' Clouded Popularity?" 2012).

Managers often stressed that this was something a character could accomplish precisely because it wasn't a person with his own personality. When I asked Kumamon's manager why RKK Media needed Kumamon to realize the prefecture's "Kumamoto Surprise" campaign, she talked about all the things Kumamon had accomplished: fans

from Kumamoto Prefecture discovered new places; children, parents, and even grandparents bonded over having the same Kumamon character merchandise; the prefecture raised about 2.5 billion yen from selling said goods; they had a few hundred billion yen's worth of free advertising time from news reports on Kumamon's activities; seriously depressed fans who couldn't leave the house were able to get out; and fans made new friends outside the prefecture. "If this wasn't Kumamon, but a person, what would have happened?" she asked rhetorically. Then she wrote, "I think that *yuru kyara* are entities that can realize things that people can't" (email 3/14/2012). Both Negiccho and Bary-san's managers said something similar.

In fact, Bary-san's manager and designer, who works at a web design company, surprised me by finishing one of her emails with the sentiment that *yuru kyara* are neither "costumes" nor "people." She wrote,

"In my opinion, Bary-san is not a costume, but Bary-san. I think any *yuru kyara-san* feels the same way. Fundamentally, the moment someone becomes Bary-san, even the most amateur person won't talk or take off the costume where someone might see. Visitors come to see Bary-san. From children to adults, many people touch Bary-san and take pictures with [it]. It is important to act as Bary-san to not destroy the thoughts and feelings of those people, so even the most amateur person, if they have common sense and social skills, will make sure to fulfill that role." (email 3/11/2012, emphasis mine).

This implies that characters have an important role to play in communication – in this instance, between organizations and people. This association has material impacts. Akizuki, who wrote the "*Yuru Kyara* Theory" I mentioned earlier, has also

pointed out that currently, mascots have become popular enough that it has become essential for organizations involved in local revitalization to have one. Otherwise, the area can be effectively shut out from opportunities to promote itself because without the costume, the organizations can't go to the *yuru kyara* events.

Some managers emphasized that having a costumed character made the mascot, and through it, their place, approachable. When Morita was explaining that he felt like he could do unconventional things when wearing Yuzuru's costume, I asked him why *kawaii* characters could get away with so much. He suggested it might be because "there are places in Japan where 'character culture' has taken root … If you have a *kawaii* character, it creates an atmosphere of 'let's all have fun together' " (Skype interview 3/9/2012).

This approachability helps mascots to attract interest, and to create a playful space where visitors can enjoy themselves. Their approachability is often expressed by the word, *shitashimiyasui*, which means that it has a kind of friendly warmth that makes it approachable. Often, this is used almost synonymously with "*kawaii*." Gunma-chan's manager wrote, for example, that Gunma-chan helps to increase interest in their prefecture because he is a "*kawaii*," "*shitashimiyasui*" character (email 3/22/2012). A character design book also notes the importance of creating this "*shitashimiyasusa*" and "*kawaisa*" through proportions that are similar to those of popular characters like Totoro, Doraemon, Snoopy, Mickey Mouse, and Hello Kitty (Muta 2010, 96, 100).

This seems evident in the mascots' performances as well. As I described in my introductory section, mascots entertain event participants with dances, hula-hooping, comic dialogues, or other such performances. In keeping with this, managers often described their mascot's role as enlivening an event or making it more fun (*moriageru*).

Fukka-chan's manager, for example, said that when Fukka-chan comes to events, it's as though "it's coming to play for a little while" (phone interview 3/25/2012). Kumamon's main purpose, according to his manager, was to "have fun, play together, and create memories" (email 3/15/2012).

Caretakers at *yuru kyara* events often model this relationship. I will give one example from a YouTube video. Yanana's caretaker, Dokin-chan,[30] introduces Yanana at the 2010 *Yuru Kyara* Festival and explains the symbolism behind her features. Dokin-chan interprets what Yanana is doing by either suggesting interpretations of her actions or by representing her speech ("quoting" her).

The video begins with a festival staff member onstage. She wears a white oversized T-shirt, black shorts, and boots, and is holding a microphone. The staff member drops a few hints about Yanana's personality: "Everyone in front, make sure you don't get hurt. And everyone around them, make sure your heart doesn't…" The audience laughs with her. She banters a few seconds more, then raises her voice a little. "And now! I would like to call [the character]. Gifu Prefecture, Yanagase Marketplace's Unofficial Character, Yanana-chaaaan!"

Yanana skips onstage, spreading her arms out to take in her audience's scattered applause. Today, her ankle-length skirt is a rich pink that thins out as it meets her tan T-shirt. A canvas bag swings from one shoulder, revealing a jack-lantern pouch at her hip. Once center-stage, Yanana strikes her "number one" pose, legs out and right hand

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[30] Unlike most caretakers, Dokin-chan is also a model ("Dokin-chan's Profile" NA). Once Yanana started to become popular, Itô Eiji did a search for women who were interested in becoming famous. In part, he wanted to give local girls who wanted to become idols or celebrities a chance to appear in public. Of course, he also had other reasons. "What is *yuru kyara*'s biggest obstacle?," he asked . Immediately, I knew. "They can't talk." He thought the speechless Yanana needed to be paired with someone who was good at talking, who was either funny or cute. That, or an equally silent partner. He just happened to meet someone who was *kawaii* (Itô 2012).

boldly pointing up. Her head is cocked to the side, held in place by her more modest left hand. She swivels into a new pose every few seconds, waving her hand excitedly or patting her mouth with equal liveliness.

The same staff member announces Dokin-chan, who takes the stage in her cowboy boots and jean shorts. I have transcribed part of what Dokin-chan says, underlining when she quotes Yanana:

"This is Yanagase Market's unofficial character from Gifu City, Gifu

Prefecture, Yananaaaa! [audience starts to clap]

[No subject given] is saying, 'Hand over more,' um, 'applause.'

A little rain has begun to fall. I wonder if it's OK. Yanana, are you OK?

Now, though I think many of you know her, I would like to introduce

Yanana. Yanana is, um, an 8-year-old mermaid who lives in a place in

Yanagase Market called Aquage. [audience murmurs]

Hey, I can hear some voices saying, 'Whaaat?,' but any way you look at it,

[no subject given] am/is an eight-year-old mermaid girl. [laughs and

murmurs]

Hey Yanana, if you say things like that, [no subject given] will get mad."

Dokin-chan quotes Yanana twice in this passage.[31] First, she asks for more applause. This is an example of a caretaker interpreting a mascot's actions. When the audience didn't respond enthusiastically to her appearance, Yanana put her hands out, palms up. She beckoned vigorously, walking a little towards the audience in front. After she announced Yanana, Dokin-chan looked over at her, and, noticing what Yanana was

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[31]There is another moment earlier in the clip when she could be representing Yanana's speech, but it was more ambiguous, and since talking about the fascinating logistics of this performance is unfortunately outside the scope of my thesis, I did not include it.

doing, offered an interpretation, "Hand over more applause (*Hakushu wo yokose*)." Some 20 seconds later, Dokin-chan describes Yanana as an eight-year-old mermaid girl. The audience murmurs, obviously not convinced. Again, Dokin-chan looks to Yanana after she finishes her statement. As soon as people start to talk, Yanana stops pretending like she's swimming and grabs a corner of her face, pointing an accusing finger at the audience.

Dokin-chan catches on instantaneously. She ventriloquizes Yanana's actions as Yanana continues to tell off the skeptical audience members. After this initial cue from Yanana, Dokin-chan takes the lead. When she says, "any way you look at it, [no subject given] am/is an eight-year-old mermaid girl," Yanana adjusts her movements accordingly. She stops pointing at the audience, plucks up part of her skirt, pops her left foot, and bobs into a curvy curtsy, nodding her head in agreement with Dokin-chan's commentary. Because of the sentence structure, it is not completely clear that Dokin-chan is quoting Yanana until she says, "Hey Yanana, if you say things like that, [no subject given] will get mad." Thus, the caretaker constructs a playful, if chiding, relationship with the mascot character, ideally in which fans participate.

As some of these stories indicate, *kawaisa* underlies this techne. It is embedded not only in the medium of the mascot character, but also in its childlike movements and appearance. Like the AKB48 fans I interviewed, managers said that mascots were both *kawaii* and childlike because they allowed their shortcomings to show through, because they were not perfect. Even managers who said that not all *yuru kyara* are *kawaii* would later explain their appeal using *kawaii*. "It's like, 'Oh, something *kawaii* came to me,'" said Morita. He was explaining how people feel when a mascot character interacted with them. This indicates that *kawaisa* is also embedded in the techne of the

mascot. As I have argued, animated characters became techne of play in the 1980s, especially so if they were infantilized, anthropomorphized, and childlike. Thus, by virtue of being *kawaii* characters, mascots invite strangers to create a playful relationship with the mascot, and through it, the community embodied in the blurred figure of the "mascot-actor."

Finally, as I have touched upon when discussing mascots' tweets and their association with children, both fans and managers emphasize mascots' dependency on others' kindness. Strangers encourage mascot actors to "keep it up" during difficult events. Some mascots and fans encourage each other when they are having a rough day. As Nohara said, many mascots can barely walk up a few steps on their own. Some visitors encourage them in this case. In many videos I watched, caretakers, and sometimes surrounding spectators, would say, "*Yoisho!*" every time a mascot seemed to be struggling. This is represented speech that ventriloquizes effort, especially when referring to small children or infants. Managers and fans would also compare mascots to pets, whose relationship after all is based on their dependency on their owners' care. When Takahashi, a fan, wrote that he thought the mascots were *kawaii* and I asked him to elaborate, he responded, "I think it's the same way you like animals (like dogs and cats), or feel affection towards them (YouTube message 2/23/2012).

Though managers described affection as a natural response to the *kawaii* characters, I believe it is to some extent modeled by the caretakers that appear at mascot events. Nohara Michiko, for example, compared new fans to those who were used to interacting with *yuru kyara*. Visitors who had never interacted with *yuru kyara* before would ask open-ended questions the character couldn't answer because it can't speak,

she said. They are not mindful of the character's limitations. On the other hand, experienced fans will attend to the character's (actor's) needs:

"When walking with the mascot, they let it know there's a step even if it's small, so they don't trip. When I see visitors who are used to interacting with *yuru kyara* like this, I think they are kind, as they would be if they were interacting with a child" (email 2/24/2012).

This is, in fact, exactly what caretakers must do. They make sure the actor does not fall or become overheated. Otherwise, as one manager wrote, it will mean that the mascot collapses or stumbles, and people will worry. Even the term "caretaker" (*tsukisoi* 付添い) is telling. Based on definitions from a number of dictionaries, it mainly seems to be used to describe someone who attends to sick persons and children (*Kôjien* 2008; *Goojisho* 2012; *Weblio* 2012). When explaining in what contexts to use the word, one dictionary even said, "use '*tsukesoi*' when sick, weak, or small persons are in need of actual care (*sewa*) or assistance" (*Goojisho* 2012). Most often, it is used in reference to nurses that care for the elderly (who are associated with children – once you hit 60, some say, you've made a full cycle and can return to being a spoiled child).

The symbolism is difficult to ignore: incomplete, childish, *kawaii* characters made to represent the distinctiveness of a place are further embedded within comforting relationships that cast people of any age as caretakers for the mascot – and through it, the place. Thus, participation in the mascots' performances takes the form of sympathetic consideration for the limitations of these childlike, unfinished mascots. By comforting and caring for them, one not only participates in place-making – in

rebuilding the relationships that constitute a grounded community – but one is also comforted and healed.

Furthermore, this is not done simply through "play" but also through the act of turning a community into a living being whose vitality is directly tied to that of the place. I made the mistake of asking Kumokkuru's manager what would happen to Kumokkuru if his volunteer group ever fell apart. I wanted to know how mascots died, since mascot birthday celebrations, weddings, and tweets clearly indicate that they live. He laughed a little uncomfortably at my blunt question. "I think it would just disappear as the group fell apart or as people lost interest," he finally said (Skype interview 3/22/2012). Yanana, too, embodied the community. At the end of our interview, Itô reminisced,

> "Like Yanagase marketplace, she was rusted; she had a hole in her head; she was melancholy and would collapse at the slightest thing ... but if she kept on like that, the people in the marketplace [depending on her to revitalize it] would get angry, so she forced herself to be energetic ... Now, she's pretty much always energetic." (Skype interview 3/12/2012)

CONCLUSION

The mascots and I have led you through crowded, sweaty streets; an aging country; maid cafés and threats of young male violence; American suburbs; bizarre children's books; through the monumental gates of imperialism; and back into the resuscitating city where we started. Through this narrative, I have demonstrated the need to pursue a culturally situated analysis of aesthetics. *Kawaisa* is not a postwar phenomenon limited to "fancy goods," but encompasses a network of associations as complex as the relationships in which it is embedded. When deployed as part of *moe* aesthetics, it becomes a threatening perversion of Japan's future, which is represented by *hikikomori* and *otaku* – *shôjo*-ized men who are criticized as attempting to escape responsibility through a narcissistic fixation on *kawaii shôjo* characters. Simultaneously, much of the responsibility for their perversion falls on the women who have supposedly failed to properly care for their sons.

To some degree, the threat of violence and perversion may be defused by portraying *otaku*'s relationship with *kawaii* beings in terms of comfort. *Yuru kyara* and a broader array of soothing-type *kawaii* characters demonstrate how companies and government organizations are using playful techne to comfort and reconstruct belonging to "grounded" communities, thus addressing the issue of children's isolation in an aging society. This has ties to propaganda during the Asia-Pacific War, which represented subjects deserving of care as *kawaii* children or animals dependent on others, while also comforting the viewers of this imagery by reminding them of their responsibility to these endearing figures.

More broadly, the mascots have demonstrated, as one professor put it, the daily and often unnoticed importance of aesthetics (Mueggler 4/1/2012). By making

something material, by giving it certain features and then by deploying those through a techne with its own significances, people are connected; places are built; the ebb of currencies circulating around us is redirected; and we are able to say things that we could not say as selves expressed as one complete body. Like the mascots, our agency is broken down into something multi-surfaced and loose, with gaps that we fill with fragments that somehow did not exist when we were (if ever) a fleshy whole.

APPENDIX 1. *YURU KYARA* INDEX

Name	Managing Organization(s)	Description
801-Chan 801 ちゃん	801 Marketplace	"Disgusting-*kawaii*" mascot made in 2005 by a college art student in Kyôto. Design is based on a local type of eggplant. Ranked 276 in the 2011 Yuru Kyara Grand Prix. Actors are 5 volunteer men, all in their 20s. Sex unknown. Related to another *yuru kyara*, perhaps its sister or daughter. Special Skill: Comic Dialogue (*manzai*)
Akahon あかほんくん	Higashi Honganji	Made to promote the 2011 "Kids *Go-Onki*" held at the Buddhist temple, Higashi Honganji, in Kyôto. Cared for by mascots Ren-chan and Ranon-kun. Curious and loves to meet people. Likes history and walks on the beach ("Akahon-kun" 2010).
Bary-san バリィさん	Number One Printing Corporation[32]; Imabari Area Tourism Association	Representing Imabari City since 2009. Designed and acted by employees at the Number One Printing Corporation. Design incorporates symbols of Imabari's industries: towel production, ship production, and their famous chicken. Bary-san's crown is also made in the shape of the Kurushima Strait Great Bridge. Ranked 2nd in the 2011 Yuru Kyara Grand Prix. Sex unknown. Has a pet dog. Special Skill: becoming an egg.
Don-chan どんちゃん	Sarabetsu Village Office Industry Foundation Department	Made in 1984 to represent Sarabetsu Village in Hokkaidô. Design is based on the acorns of the village's many oak trees. Created to promote the village's specialty products (sugar beets, potatoes, etc). Not officially named until 2001. Sex unknown (Miura 2004, 17).
Fukka-chan ふっかちゃん	Fukaya City Hall, Planning Finance Department	Made in 2010 to represent Fukaya City. Design solicited through public contest. Design incorporates Fukaya's specialty green onions. Ranked 6th in the 2011 Yuru Kyara Grand Prix. Has a kind and perseverant personality. Sex depends on place and time ("Profile" NA).

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[32] Japanese name is, Dai-ichi Insatsu Kabushiki-gaisha

Name	Managing Organization(s)	Description
Gunma-chan ぐんまちゃん	Gunma Prefecture, Planning Department	Originally named Yûma-chan, and was a mascot for the Yuaipic, a sports festival for children with learning difficulties. Renamed "Gunma-chan" in 2008 (Harrison and Harrison 2010, 39). Original design solicited through public contest. Boy. Ranked 18th in the 2011 Yuru Kyara Grand Prix.
Gunma-chan (original) ぐんまちゃん	Gunma Prefecture	Made for 1988 National Sports Festival in Gunma Prefecture.
Hikonyan ひこにゃん	Hikone City Hall, Tourism Development Department	Made in 2005 to promote the 400th anniversary festival of Hikone Castle. Design by character designer Moheron, but name was selected from among 1167 submissions to a public contest ("Hikone Castle" 2006). Moheron caused some ruckus when he started to sell merchandise featuring a similar character, "Hikone's Good Kitty" (*Hikone no Yoi Nyanko*), in 2009 ("Hikonyan Double!?" 2009). Boy.
Ibaraki Dôji 茨木童子		Made to resemble the demon Ibaraki Dôji, which was believed to haunt the Rashômon Gate during the Heian Period. Helps to promote Ibaraki City in Ôsaka. Male.
Kumamon くまモン	RKK Media Planning Corporation; Kumamoto Prefectural Government	Made in 2010 to promote the Kumamoto Surprise campaign. Designed by Mizuno Manabu at Good Design Company ("Hello Kitty" 2012). Boy. Spunky and curious personality. Kumamoto Prefecture's Sales Department Head ("Kumamon Self-Introduction" 2011).

Name	Managing Organization(s)	Description
Kumokkuru くもっくる	Shibuhana (volunteer group)	Made to represent the Shibuya Flower Project (Shibuhana). Designed to look like a cloud; has flowers to represent the flowers planted by volunteers in the Shibuhana flower project. Acted by volunteers in Shibuhana. Sex unknown, though rumored to be male.
Negiccho ねぎっちょ	Ginanchô Town Hall, Local Government Development Department	Design by picture book illustrator, Takabatake Jun. Supposed to look like town's specialty green onions, Tokurada Negi. Sex unknown. Ranked 167th in 2011 Yuru Kyara Grand Prix.
Oni-maru-kun おに丸くん	Kitakami City Hall, Commerical Tourism Department	Made in 1994 for a high school sports competition. Later used represent Kitakami City. Designed to look like a kind ogre, in reference to the city's "Ogre Sword Dance" (*Oni Kenbai*). Male (Harrison and Harrison 2010, 30).
Parsley-chan パセリちゃん	Ministry of Defense	Prince Pickles' female counterpart. Made in the 1990s to represent women in the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) (Frühstück 2007, 128-9).
Prince Pickles ピクルス王子	Ministry of Defense	The prince of Paprika Kingdom, studying with the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) to learn how to protect his country. Made in the 1990s to represent the JSDF. The public relations division in the Ministry of Defense published several comics detailing his adventures in the 1990s (Frühstück 2007, 128-9).
Pîpo-kun ピーポくん	Tôkyô Metropolitan Police Department	Made in 1987 to represen the Tôkyô Metro Police. His big ears are for hearing people in trouble; his antenna for detecting quick movements; and his big eyes for seeing into every nook of society (Harrison and Harrison 2010, 49).

Name	Managing Organization(s)	Description
Ranon-kun 鸞恩くん	Higashi Honganji	Made to promote the 2011 "Kids *Go-Onki*" held at the Buddhist temple, Higashi Honganji, in Kyôto. Father of the mascot Ren-chan, caretaker of Akahon, and uncle to another mascot, Button-kun. Strict disciplinarian who is good at cleaning and foot races ("Ranon-kun" 2010).
Ren-chan 蓮ちゃん	Higashi Honganji	Made to promote the 2011 "Kids *Go-Onki*" held at the Buddhist temple, Higashi Honganji, in Kyôto. Cousin of Ôsaka mascot, Button-kun; daughter of Ranon-kun. Bright, easily embarrassed personality. Good at cooking, swimming, taking naps. Likes gardening and reading by the lake ("Ren-chan" 2010).
Saiban Inko サイバンインコ	Ministry of Justice	Parrot from Kyûshû that wants to become a juror. Made to promote the jury system ("Saiban Parrot" NA).
Sugamon すがもん	Sugamo Jizô Street Shopping Center Promotion Association	Created to enliven Sugamo Street in the Jizô Street Shopping Center, otherwise known as "old people's Harajuku." Designed by an advertising student group. Does not have a mascot form that goes to events, but you can pat his butt in a "Sugamon" booth set up at the entrance of the street.
Takinomichi Yuzuru 滝ノ道ゆずる	Minô City Hall, Sales Department; Minô City Tourism Association	Made to promote Minô City's Citrus and Fall Leaves Project. Design selected from a public contest. Designed to look like a *samurai* character with a citrus head; accordingly has a well-behaved personality. Placed 9th in the 2011 Yuru Kyara Grand Prix.

Name	Managing Organization(s)	Description
Yanana やなな	Person-to-Person Group	An 8-year-old mermaid girl who promotes Yanagase Marketplace in Gifu City. Ranked 8th in the 2011 Yuru Kyara Grand Prix. Writes to fans in a notebook at events.
Yoichi-kun 与一くん	Ôtawara City Tourism Association	Design from public contest. Made to resembe Nasu no Yoichi, a famous *samurai* archer from the Heian Period. Ranked 4th in 2011 Yuru Kyara Grand Prix.

GLOSSARY OF JAPANESE TERMS

Amaeru (甘える)
    To be pampered or spoiled; to demand attention, especially from one's mother.
Amayakasu (甘やかす)
    To pamper or spoil
Animé (アニメ)
    Japanese animated cartoons
Basho (場所)
    Place
Bî-kyû gurume (B 級グルメ)
    B-level gourmet. Cheap local "gourmet," or well-prepared everyday dishes like noodles, *donburi*, etc.
Bunka (文化)
    Culture
Burikko (ぶりっ子)
    Literally, "fake child." Derogatory term directed at women who act too *kawaii*.
Chapatsu (茶髪)
    Dyed brown hair.
Chihô (地方)
    Region, locality. The provinces (vs. the capital). Neighborhood.
Chihô bunken (地方分権)
    Regional decentralization
Chiiki (地域)
    Region; area; zone.
Chimeido (知名度)
    Level of recognition or popularity. Notoreity.
Daiben (代弁)
    ~suru: To speak for somebody. To act as spokesperson.
Dasai (ダサイ)
    Unfashionable; unsophisticated.
Donguri (どんぐり)
    Acorn
Eroi (エロイ)
    Sexy; erotic.
Furusato (故郷)
    Hometown; native place. Became nostalgic descriptor for Japan's agriarian past during the 1980s.
Ganbaru (頑張る)
    To do one's best, to work hard. To persevere or hang on.
Genki (元気)
    Healthy; energetic; cheerful; full of vigor.
Gokokushin (御国神)
    Nation-protecting deity

Gunshin (軍神)
> Warrior god(s)

Haiden (拝殿)
> Shrine hall

Hikikomori (引きこもり)
> People, especially boys, who shut themselves in their rooms for over 6 months, barely communicating even with family members. Associated with stresses related to education and deficient maternal care.

Hinomaru (日の丸)
> Japan's national flag. Literally, "flag of the rising sun."

Hotto suru (ほっとする)
> To feel relieved.

Imonbukuro (慰問袋)
> Literally, "consolation bag." Comfort packages sent to Japanese soldiers during the Asia-Pacific War (1931-45).

Inko (インコ)
> Parrot

Ippanjin (一般人)
> Everyday or average person.

Ishin denshin (以心伝心)
> Tacit understanding. Ability to understand each other without exchanging words.

Isshôkenmei (一生懸命)
> To try as hard as one can; with one's whole heart. To be determined.

Itsumo (いつも)
> Always

Iya (嫌)
> Disagreeable; unpleasant.

Iyasareru (癒される)
> Healed; soothed; comforted

Iyashi-kei (癒し系)
> Soothing-type. Literally, "Healing-type."

Iyasu (癒す)
> To heal

Jichi shinkôka (自治振興課)
> Department of Local Revitalization

Jinrei (人零)
> Human spirits

Kami (神)
> Spirit(s); god(s)

Kanekusai (金臭い)
> Literally, "stinks of money." Greedy; calculating.

Kankei (関係)
> *Ni~ga aru:* Related to

Kanpeki (完璧)

Perfect; flawless; impeccable.

Kasseika (活性化)

Revitalization

Kawaii (可愛い)

1. Pretty; sweet; cute. 2. Endearing; dear. Something that must be loved. 3. Pitiful; pathetic.

Kawaikunai (可愛くない)

Not cute; ugly.

Kawaisa (可愛さ)

Cuteness

Kenjô (謙讓)

Modesty; humility.

Kibun (気分)

Mood; feeling.

Kimono (着物)

Type of Japanese garment.

Kokka (国家)

Nation; state.

Kokumin gakkô (国民学校)

Citizen's school. Established under the New Order reforms during the Asia-Pacific War (1931-45); re-named under the Occupation government (1945-52).

Kokutai (国体)

National Sports Festival, held annually in rotating prefectures since 1946.

Kuma (熊)

Bear

Kumiai (組合)

Civic organization or association.

Kyarakutâ (キャラクター)

A character, especially an *anime* character.

Machi-okoshi(町おこし)

Town revitalization. Literally, "town awakening."

Manga (漫画)

Japanese graphic novels. Comics.

Maniakku (マニアック)

Maniac; enthusiast.

Masukotto (マスコット)

Mascot. Also used to refer to dolls sent to Japanese soldiers as part of comfort packages during the Asia-Pacific War (1931-45).

Meibutsu (名物)

Well-known product; a product for which an area is famous.

Meisanhin (名産品)

Specialty product(s).

Miryoku (魅力)

An attraction; appeal; allure.

Moriageru (盛り上げる)
> Enliven; pump up.

Mura-okoshi (村おこし)
> Village revitalization. Literally, "village awakening."

Nagomi (和み)
> Relief; calm.

Nasake-bukai (情け深い)
> Merciful; compassionate. Full of pity.

Niko niko (ニコニコ)
> Smiling; beaming.

Ningyô (人形)
> Doll

Ôen (応援)
> Cheer on or support. To root for.

Okoshi (おこし・興し・起こし)
> Development; revitalization.

Ryôsai kenbo (良妻賢母)
> Literally, "good wife and wise mother." Meiji Period (1868-1912) ideology that emphasized women's roles as nurturing mothers and docile wives.

Saiban (裁判)
> Court

Saiban-in (裁判員)
> Juror

Sake (酒)
> Rice wine

Samurai (侍)
> Warrior class established under Taika Reform in the 600s.

Seichô (成長)
> Grow; develop

Seinen kaigisho (青年会議所)
> Japan Junior Chamber. A civic organization for youth.

Seishinteki (精神的)
> Psychological; emotional.

Sewa (世話)
> *~wo suru*: To take care of or look after. *~ni naru*: To be indebted to. To cause trouble for someone by one's dependence.

Shima (島)
> Island

Shinjinrui (新人類)
> Literally, "new humankind." Term that came into use in the 1980s to refer to youth who were believed to have radically different values and sensibilities compared to generations previous.

Shinmon (審問)
> Main gate to a shrine

Shinrei (心霊)
    Divine spirits
Shinsei (神聖)
    Sacred
Shitashimi (親しみ)
    Familiarity; closeness; intimacy. Affection.
Shitashimiyasui (親しみやすい)
    Easy to familiarize or become friends with.
Shôkokumin (少国民)
    Junior citizens. Term used to refer to children during the Asia-Pacific War (1931-45).
Shômonai (しょうもない) [しょうがない]
    Word in Ôsaka region dialect: can't be helped; inevitable; hopeless.
Shôtengai (商店街)
    Marketplace; shopping district.
Sukkiri suru (すっきりする)
    Feel refreshed; rejuvenated; clear-headed.
Supiricharu (スピリチャル)
    Spiritual
Tadashiku (正しく)
    Correct; upright; proper.
Taki no michi (滝の道)
    Waterfall path
Tamashii (魂)
    Soul; spirit. Can also refer to a ghost.
Tokubetsu (特別)
    Special. Exceptional. Peculiar.
Tokusanhin (特産品)
    Specialty product(s)
Torii (鳥居)
    Shrine gate
Tsukisoi (付添い)
    Caretaker; attendant; escort. Especially used in reference to nurses that provide care to the elderly.
Wasureru (忘れる)
    To forget.
Yasashiku (優しい)
    Kind; gentle; tender.
Yoisho (よいしょ)
    Expression of effort or strain. Similar to "oof."
Yokose (よこせ)
    Rough way to say, "hand over; give me" (imperative).
Yuru kyara (ゆるキャラ)
    Amateur mascot(s)

Yuruku (ゆるく)
　　Loosely; relaxed
Yurui (ゆるい)
　　Loose; lax (rules); gentle (slope or curve).
Yuzu (柚子)
　　Japanese citrus fruit. Looks like a tangerine.
Yuzuru (譲る)
　　1. To give up, transfer, part with. 2. To be concede or yield; to give in. 3. To put
　　something off; to postpone.
Zukuri (作り)
　　Making

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