



A Softer Side

Consumerism is not the only force driving kawaii. Brian McVeigh, a professor of Japanese studies at the University of Arizona, says that while Japanese cultural values infuse social interaction with formality and rigidity, “cuteness helps soften things.” Indeed, as anyone who’s been to Tokyo knows, colorful characters pop up on warning signs everywhere, even at the police department. However, lawbreakers should take note. Just because they’re greeted at the precinct by two mousey mascots, Pipo-kun and Pipo-chan, they shouldn’t expect to be sipping tea inside with Hello Kitty.

NRT

Japan
The Rising Fun

Hello Kitschy

These Japanese characters harness the super power of ... cuteness.

THE FIRST TIME I HEARD THE WORD *KAWAII* ECHO THROUGH MY CLASSROOM, I MISTOOK it for the laid-back Hawaiian island. But I soon learned that kawaii was why my Japanese students were going ga-ga over cartoon-covered pencil cases. *Kawaii* isn’t merely the Japanese word for *cute*. As Ken Belson and Brian Bremner point out in their book *Hello Kitty: The Remarkable Story of Sanrio and the Billion Dollar Feline Phenomenon*, kawaii is a full-fledged cultural movement. In the early 1970s, vast numbers of teenage girls were confounding their teachers with highly stylized handwriting embellished with cute characters. Fueling kawaii’s initial ascent was the Sanrio company’s feline, **Hello Kitty**. The now-ubiquitous cat helped elevate kawaii to icon status, thus inspiring countless manifestations of cute. Whether it’s **Wanroom** toaster charms dangling from cell phones or up-and-coming robots like **eMuu**, it’s easy to see why Belson and Bremner say kawaii is “the most widely used, or overused, word in modern Japanese.” Marketers have developed countless characters to pitch items not commonly associated with cuteness. Consider **Pichon-kun**, a water droplet that debuted

in the spring of 2000. The mascot helped Daikin Industries improve its air conditioner sales and propelled the ad’s jingle onto the music charts. Kawaii is by no means confined to Japan (think **Murakami**’s underwear-clad elephant sculptures that graced Manhattan last summer or Beijing’s 2008 Olympic mascots, **The Five Friendlies**). Massachusetts-based consumer electronics toy studio **Mimoco** recently introduced a line of cute flash drives. Need quick data access? Just grab **Vera**, the vamp with the ghoulish smile, and plug her into your USB port. ■—*Arnie Cooper*

Hello Kitty and her twin, Mimmy, were “born” November 1, 1974. Hello Kitty has a bow on her left ear; Mimmy’s is on the right.



Pichon-kun



Mimoco's Vera

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