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Chapter 19

The genealogy of *kawaii*

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19 The genealogy of *kawaii*

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'*Kawaii*,' typically translated as 'cute' and understood more specifically as the cute style of the 'Japanese girl,' belongs to the exclusive list of Japanese words that have become integrated into the global lexicon since the turn of the twenty-first century, along with *anime*, *manga*, *otaku*, *emoji,* and *tsunami*. The Japanese government officially endorsed *kawaii* in 2009 with the appointment of three young female fashion trendsetters as the so-called 'Kawaii Ambassadors,' thereby promoting *kawaii* as one of the core images of 'Cool Japan' (on this 'soft-power' diplomacy, see Tseng, Chapter 17 in this volume). The ascension of *kawaii* to global prominence, with its anticipated promise of greater sales opportunities for *kawaii*-injected commodities, represents an incredible shift in the cultural position of, and the social attitude towards, *kawaii* that has occurred since the 1980s. In this respect, *kawaii* is comparable to the male-dominant subculture of *otaku* (manga and anime fans) (see Galbraith, Chapter 18 in this volume), another culture with a 'low' origin that conventional wisdom would have deemed unfit and even inappropriate to serve as a state-authorized symbol of an advanced nation. The commodity culture of *kawaii*-character goods emerged fully in the 1970s as a minor taste that was then considered good enough only for girls, with all its condescension: 'lovable' (one literal meaning of *kawaii* as rendered in Chinese characters), but 'deserving of pity' (an etymological origin of *kawaii* that is related to *kawaisō*). By 2010, however, it rose to bask in the spotlight of national celebration and global acknowledgement as an ahistorical quintessence of 'Japanese aesthetic' (Figure 19.1).

This essay is not about the national branding and global marketing of Japan as '*kawaii*' (Allison 2006; Yano 2013), however, or about how this imagination has often capitalized on the Orientalist fantasy of a feminized Japan as a consumable difference and excess of an 'elsewhere,' epitomized by the eye-catching, exuberant, and quirky icon of the Japanese girl (Miller 2011; Iseri 2015). Instead, this essay returns to the 'original' subject of *kawaii*, so to speak, which is about how *kawaii* as a mainstream social and cultural value has mediated the lives of girls, and more broadly women, in Japan since the 1990s. I am especially interested in considering how the permeation of *kawaii* has intersected with ongoing attempts at female empowerment.

Kawaii and imperial authority

Does a reflection on the bracketing of time in Japan as the regnal era 'Heisei' shed light on the subject of *kawaii*? Well, perhaps more so than one might expect. It was accidental, but nonetheless symbolic that the Japanese public first came to take serious notice of the permeation of *kawaii* among schoolgirls around the time of Hirohito's death in 1989

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Figure 19.1 Cover of *Geijutsu shinchō* (September 2011).

and saw it as a social 'problem.' In December 1988, the cultural studies critic Ōtsuka Eiji published a seminal essay on the utterly 'out-of-place' (*uite iru*) sighting of schoolgirls outside the Imperial Palace, who went there on their own—and some reportedly against the will of the parents who blamed Hirohito for his responsibility in World War II—to show their sympathy for the dying emperor (Ōtsuka 2003: 17). Eavesdropping on their conversations, in which Hirohito was described as '*kawaii*' prompted the critic to write his essay (Ōtsuka 2003: 265). He argued that these schoolgirls, or the critic's idealized representation of them as *shōjo*, rather, were projecting onto the figure of the emperor a narcissistic self-image of themselves (Ōtsuka 2003: 26). *Shōjo* refers to school-age girls, but its discourse tends towards an idealization of who they should be, rather than serving as a purely descriptive word (Yokokawa 1991: 7–42; Robertson 1998: 65–6, 156–9). Ōtsuka proposed that such projection of the self onto the emperor was symptomatic of the girls' alienation from the postwar history of Japan that in a way also resonated

with Hirohito's own new postwar existence (Ōtsuka 2003: 265), and his interpretation became influential despite its hyperbole.

In hindsight, it was perhaps not surprising that the intellectual discourse on *kawaii* and *shōjo* began to emerge just before the bursting of Japan's economic bubble in the late 1980s. This first wave of critical discourse came to interpret *kawaii*-infected *shōjo* as an ominous warning against the decay of Japan into the non-(re)productive and infantile state of pure consumption (Ōtsuka 1989: 17–21). As Ōtsuka himself admitted later, there was a great deal of male fantasy that informed his discourse of *shōjo* at the time (Ōtsuka 2016: 149). An attitude of concern and dismay was detectable in other influential texts on *kawaii* written by male scholars, including Yamane Kazuma's classic work on the schoolgirls' adoption of the aberrational (*hentai*) round script (Yamane 1986) and Masubuchi Sōichi's *Kawaii shōkōgun* (The Kawaii Syndrome) (1994). The ultimate subject of these studies was moreover often not young women themselves, but rather their capacity to symbolize 'Japan' more generally (Yokokawa 1991: 31). Male critics such as Ōtsuka and Miyadai Shinji moreover occupied the position of authority on *kawaii*, and the discourse did not develop into a sustained analysis of young female subjectivities and was more motivated by adult male anxieties in the face of economic collapse and concomitant social disintegration that coincided with the transition from Showa to Heisei imperial reigns.

With respect to *kawaii*'s unexpected imperial connections, what is perhaps more important to acknowledge than *shōjo*'s alleged identification with the aged emperor on his deathbed is the development of Harajuku as the capital of the *kawaii* empire, which began to take shape from the late 1970s. The official address of Harajuku is 'Jingū-mae,' literally meaning 'in front of a Shinto shrine,' the shrine being the Meiji Shrine dedicated to the deified spirit of Mutsuhito, the archetypal imperial patriarch of modern Japan. In 1957, the Harajuku area received the designation of '*bunkyō-ku*,' a protected area for educational facilities and high cultural institutions. The 'kiddy land' identity of Harajuku has thus been imperially sanctioned, as this zoning prevents the establishment of 'adults-only' businesses such as hostess clubs, love hotels, and pachinko parlours. The local business associations in the Harajuku area have systematically sought to prevent the infiltration of 'eros' and 'gambling' into the neighbourhood (Yoshimitsu and Nishihara 2017: 17). This aspect has been foundational to the identity of Harajuku—at least its 'front' face on Takeshita Street and Omotesandō that leads to the Meiji Shrine and the JR Harajuku station—which has remained, on the whole, a daytime destination.

Harajuku's relative inoculation from aggressive adult contamination has made it easier for young women to experience the space as their own (Yoshimitsu and Nishihara 2017: 19). While it is impossible for young women to escape the objectifying gaze and advances of adult men, and especially those of male scouts in Harajuku, organized criminal undertakings have been closely patrolled and policed due to the area's proximity to the Meiji Shrine and the active efforts of local business associations (Aoki et al. 2020: 1253). The same cannot be said for its neighbouring areas of Shibuya or Roppongi. Harajuku's location as 'Jingū-mae' has secured its image as a space for girls to enjoy hanging around on their own and, for some, to put on their most outrageous fashions that would be out of place anywhere else. Harajuku, in this way, highlights the ambivalent 'minor' identity of *kawaii* that simultaneously averts and yet depends on the protection of adult male authority, and here an imperial and sacred one at that.

The minorness of *kawaii*

It is important not to lose sight of the fact that *kawaii* remains a minor taste. It is minor, not in the sense of being the opposite of 'major' or 'mainstream,' which *kawaii* has obviously become—a mainstream taste that enjoys wide circulation in majority culture. Rather, it is minor in the sense of juvenility and its associations with dependency, liveliness, and inexperience, and also for its intrinsic failure to ever be given full dignity and serious respect. It is this admixture that has made *kawaii* the most recognizable mode of aesthetically desirable and socially desired femininity in contemporary Japan. The social orientation of *kawaii* is structurally downward, of casting a downward gaze upon an inferior, vulnerable, and lightweight being or entity. Like the cute, the *kawaii* affect sets in motion a hierarchical relationship of power (Ngai 2012: 65). The subject who regards someone or something as *kawaii* is positioned in relative superiority to the object/subject so claimed as *kawaii*. This is why it appeared so incongruous that a mere girl dared to call Hirohito *kawaii* in the late winter of 1988.

The word *kawaii* is most used in Japanese today as a response to the sweetness of children and to characterize other child-like beings and things (Ishikawa 2015: 24). *Kawaii* is an aesthetic of vulnerability that invites a response of protection and empathy, and young children are the prime recipients of being loved, adored, and cared for as *kawaii*. *Kawaii*'s 'minor' association has thus an ethical dimension of loving care towards the vulnerable. As a consequence, the failure to be treated as *kawaii* can be tragic; for instance, admission of child abuse and neglect is often confessed by the parent as her or his failure to feel and treat one's child(ren) as *kawaii*. This deep psychological investment, responsibility, and pressure of custodial love are unrelated to the English word 'cute' but are integral to how *kawaii* is experienced in modern Japanese. It is also the reason for the centrality of *kawaii* in the Japanese paedophilic imagination, which creeps in and out of the *otaku* sensibility (Ōtsuka 2016: 488). This is all the more problematic, as the adult's emotional interest in minors slides into an eroticized taste *for* minors. What is equally disturbing but illustrative of the asymmetrical power relations that *kawaii* sets in motion is the slang use of '*kawaigaru*,' which literally means 'to treat someone as *kawaii*,' but as a slang word, it ironically means the very opposite in flaunting aggressive masculinity: to abuse and assault someone in a subordinate position and often as a group.

It has been widely observed that the *kawaii* affect produces 'social and emotional connectedness' (Yano 2011: 23), which Christine Yano has characterized as 'specifically female touch' (35). Back in 1986, Yamane pointed out the conformist tendency in this type of communication that allows individuals to endorse one another through their shared acknowledgement of *kawaii* (Yamane 1986: 162–3). In a different vein, Marilyn Ivy has proposed that *kawaii*'s empathy-encouraging sociality has the potential to politicize *kawaii*, 'the aesthetic marker for the most reified of objects and the most vulnerable of subjects' (Ivy 2010: 24), into what she has termed 'parapolitics,' 'a mode of politics "beside" public politics' that can forge 'unexpected solidarities' (23). While these studies examine the impact of *kawaii* in different social and cultural contexts, they all agree that *kawaii*, when employed to solicit empathy, induces a sociality that avoids overt confrontations, conflicts, and threats.

For this reason, Ikeda Taishin has stated that *kawaii* can be regarded as 'the general term for a strategy that women have employed to make life easier for them' in contemporary Japan, where the expansion of female participation into hitherto male-dominated public and professional domains has been met with hesitation and ambivalence (Ikeda

2017: iv). *Kawaii* has given women the double-edged sword of gaining approval in a male-dominant environment while their visibility and recognition have often been contingent upon being contained within the subordinate realm of the non-threatening '*niryū no kokumin* (secondary citizens)' (Miyamoto 2011: 88). Ueno Chizuko has thus labelled *kawaii*-based sociality 'a survival strategy' that women have adopted in a patriarchal society for quite some time and has criticized the lifelong societal pressure placed on women to remain *kawaii* in order to be taken care of, even into their old age (Ueno 2005: 28). Ueno's criticism also raises a larger concern about *kawaii*-based sociality: it accepts the existence of subjects in vulnerable positions, whether children, or women, or men, or any members of a minority or a disadvantaged group, but only if they can be presented as *kawaii* to others. What if one is not *kawaii*?

Since the 1990s, *kawaii* has become a majority taste to be enjoyed by many different demographic groups in Japan, but it has particularly followed women into their adulthood. This 'forever *kawaii*' phenomenon is related to the fact that the first generation of women to benefit from the 1986 Equal Employment Opportunity Act (*Danjo koyō kikai kintōhō*) grew up just as the commodity culture of *kawaii* 'fancy goods' for girls was on the rise. As adult working women, their financial independence has augmented their cultural relevance as tastemakers and consumers, and instead of outgrowing *kawaii*, they have held onto their attachment to *kawaii*. For example, the fashion model Kuroda Chieko (1961–) embodied the '*otona kawaii*' (mature kawaii) concept in the 2000s when she was in her 40s (Yonezawa 2010: 93–6), and now 60 years old, she is still giving advice to women about how to incorporate *kawaii* into one's fashion with taste (Kuroda and Jibiki 2020). It is moreover ironic but telling that Matsuda Seiko (1962–), the original '*burikko*' or 'the phony *kawaii* manipulator' idol from the 1980s, seduced male fans with her *kawaii* looks and demeanour in her youth, but today, almost 60 years old, she attracts more female fans who find her adult *kawaii* quality to be an 'authentic' marker of her survival as a woman who has maintained her career and youthful looks while overcoming life challenges including multiple divorces as well as her reportedly complicated relationship with her daughter. In this sense, the potential to be loved as *kawaii* had come to dictate the aspirations of adult women as much as young girls in Japan by the early twenty-first century.

Kawaii as paraesthetics

The 'minor' status of *kawaii* is moreover derived from its definition as what can be termed 'paraesthetics' or 'para-esthetics,' by which I mean the aesthetics of being supplementary and '*para*-' (beside or alongside) in relation to something held as the main or the dominant. The prefix 'para' is also useful as it captures the elasticity of the power dynamics between the supplement and the host, as 'para' can also mean 'beyond' ('paranormal') or even 'against' itself ('paradox'). The history of *kawaii* merchandise attests to such '*para*-' identity in its full range, whether one traces it to the consumer-enticing culture of *furoku*—literally meaning a supplement or an appendix to a document and referring to the 'extra' and 'bonus' goodies (small toys, make-it-yourself kits, stationery sets, etc.) that are inserted into children's magazines for the readers' 'additional' pleasure—or the 'para-stationery' merchandise that became the hallmark of Sanrio, best known for its Hello Kitty merchandise. The consumer appeal of Hello Kitty erasers or Little Twin Stars pens resides precisely in their para-aesthetic nature in excess of their 'use' value for being both 'besides' and 'beyond' just functional items.

The paraesthetic nature of *kawaii* also comes to the fore when one reviews the changing trends in girls' fashion over the past three decades. To take one example, an epoch-defining style associated with high school girls in the 1990s was known as '*kogyaru*' (literally meaning 'little gal') (see also Robertson, Chapter 14 in this volume). In a typical *kawaii* move towards the diminutive, it was first defined by its juvenile difference from the then more established '*gyaru*' (gal) fashion that was popular among female college and junior college students in the 1980s. Typical *kogyaru* fashion was characterized by 'loose' long white socks, a very short plaid skirt, an oversized sweater or cardigan, and a school bag that was highly accessorized with *kawaii* mascot characters and keychains. In other words, this style was a paraesthetic adaptation—and an exaggerated and possibly deviant one at that—but nonetheless still a recognizable variation of the classic template of a schoolgirl in uniform at a well-to-do private school (Mori and Uchida 2019: 53).

The insistent pursuit of *kawaii* by young women in their fashion has frequently been interpreted as an expression of soft 'resistance' and even 'revolt' against 'the dominant ideology of uniformity' (Slade 2018: 407) and adult values (Kinsella 1995: 243, 251; McVeigh 2000: 135–6). The projected outcomes of this rebellion, aside from ostensible defiance, have not been clearly identified, however, and a sense of vagueness and ambivalence surrounds this alleged resistance and what it was meant to achieve, despite the claim that it is 'potent and political' (Slade 2018: 407). I argue that this ambivalence is rooted in the paraesthetic structure of *kawaii*. I would not classify the *kawaii* culture in general as parodic, but the theories of parody (another 'para' concept) and the related genre of adaptation by the literary scholar Linda Hutcheon are instructive in understanding why observers have interpreted *kawaii*-inflected deviances as 'ambivalent' by qualifying them as 'soft' or 'quiet.' This ambivalence stems from what Hutcheon terms 'authorized transgression' (Hutcheon 2000: 26). 'In imitating, even with critical difference, parody reinforces,' Hutcheon writes, and thus '[p]arody is fundamentally double and divided; its ambivalence stems from the dual drives of conservative and revolutionary forces that are inherent in its nature as authorized transgression' (26). A taste for parody, in this respect, is also related to the pleasure that one finds in consuming adaptations, which is 'wanting to retell [and be retold] the same story over and over in different ways' (Hutcheon 2013: 8). The significance of the model gets modified through parodies and adaptations, but its authority is never replaced or rejected *in toto.*

To see this logic in *kawaii,* in the case of *kogyaru*, their styled difference gained meaning in relation to the normative paradigm of the good old schoolgirl in uniform. Even with the more intentionally transgressive adaptations of *kawaii*, for instance, in some contemporary art (Matsui 2005; Borggreen 2011), their critical power emerges through their calibrated difference from the normative *kawaii* recognized by majority society. In her analysis of the popular 'magical girl' *anime* genre, Kumiko Saito has similarly concluded that the genre 'implies the society's embrace of the paradox that resistance to gender roles simultaneously secures the conservativeness of the roles' (Saito 2014: 161). This is not to deny the critical potential in appropriating *kawaii*, but one must acknowledge that its effectiveness, paradoxically, depends on the orthodox working of *kawaii* to remain intact. Therefore, these appropriations and adaptations remain authorized transgressions.

Another paraesthetic aspect of *kawaii*, which has presented lucrative marketing and ideological potential in the past few decades, is its ability to attach itself to a variety of different qualities and affects: *yurukawa* (lazy *kawaii*), *kimokawa* (grotesque *kawaii*),

busukawa (ugly *kawaii*), *kowakawa* (scary *kawaii*), *ero-kawaii* (sexy *kawaii*), etc. *Kawaii* in these compound affects behaves a bit like a parasite, though it is sometimes difficult to tell which of the two elements is the host and which the parasite. The injection of *kawaii* is always intended to result in making the host or the main affect—such as the grotesque or the ugly—more benign, more light-hearted, more appealing, and therefore safer for consumption. These paraesthetic variations have become essential to the expansion of *kawaii* culture in this century. Together with the popularity of the so-called '*yurukyara*' or 'loose (or lazy) characters,' they have shown the extraordinary malleability of *kawaii* to lend flavour to any range of subjects that bear no intrinsic or historical relation to the *kawaii* taste, including a professional master player of the cerebral-game *go*, local prefectures, municipalities, even the Japan Self-Defence Forces and the synthetic recreational drug MDMA. The consequence of being disarmed into easy consumption can be and has been disastrous. For example, in an attempt to deny the gravity of the accident at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant on 11 March 2011, the media artist Hachiya Kazuhiko released a short animation on YouTube within a week after the accident that became an immediate media phenomenon, in which the Daiichi Plant is depicted as a *kawaii* boy '*yurukyara*' (Genpatsu-kun) suffering from a stomach ache. The animation uses this analogy to explain that the accident in Fukushima is more like a 'fart' than 'diarrhoea' (Chernobyl), and in any case, he will not make a big mess as he is wearing a diaper.

From *hirahira* to *kirakira*: post-feminism, anti-feminism, and *kawaii* in the age of 'gender equality'

True to its paraesthetic nature, the permeation of *kawaii* has intersected with the paths for female empowerment in ambiguous ways since the 1990s. The onomatopoeic aesthetics of *kirakira* will help me illuminate my points. '*Kirakira*' indicates the quality of twinkles, sparkles, glows, and glitters. It is mostly used to describe stars and the moon and then gemstones. It appears that *kirakira* had become a representative onomatopoeia of idealized young femininity by the beginning of the twenty-first century, eclipsing *hirahira*, the onomatopoeia for fluttering. The aesthetics of *hirahira* held a central place in defining the *shōjo* look in modern Japan. The literary scholar Honda Masuko captured the essence of being idealized as a *shōjo* in her classic essay '*Hirahira no keifu* (The Genealogy of *hirahira*)' (1992). The onomatopoeia '*hirahira*' indicates the soft and subtle movements of delicate things such as butterflies, ribbons, frills, and skirts fluttering in the air. *Kirakira* and *hirahira* are closely associated, and this shift is not a matter of replacement but rather of emphasis. In classic *shōjo* manga and anime, if *hirahira* has fashioned the girl characters with their frilly dresses, it is *kirakira* that has animated their impossibly large eyes. The cultural ascendency of *kirakira* can be seen, for example, in the enormously successful *shōjo* manga and anime series *Pretty Guardian Sailor Moon* (1992–97) and its magically empowered girls. It has further intensified with the ongoing anime series *Pretty Cure* or *Purikyua* (2004–) and its various media-mix merchandise. The dizzying proliferation of 'pretty-girl fighter' (*sentō bishōjo*) characters that appear in glossy, high key-tone colours defines the *kirakira* visuality of *Purikyua* (Figure 19.2).

For Honda, *hirahira* symbolizes the liminality of being a *shōjo*, signifying impending metamorphosis. Girlhood is compared to a cocoon with life evolving inside; one goes in as a 'child' and breaks out as a 'woman,' however reluctantly (Honda 1992: 182). Yokokawa Sumiko has critiqued Honda for essentializing the significance of being a

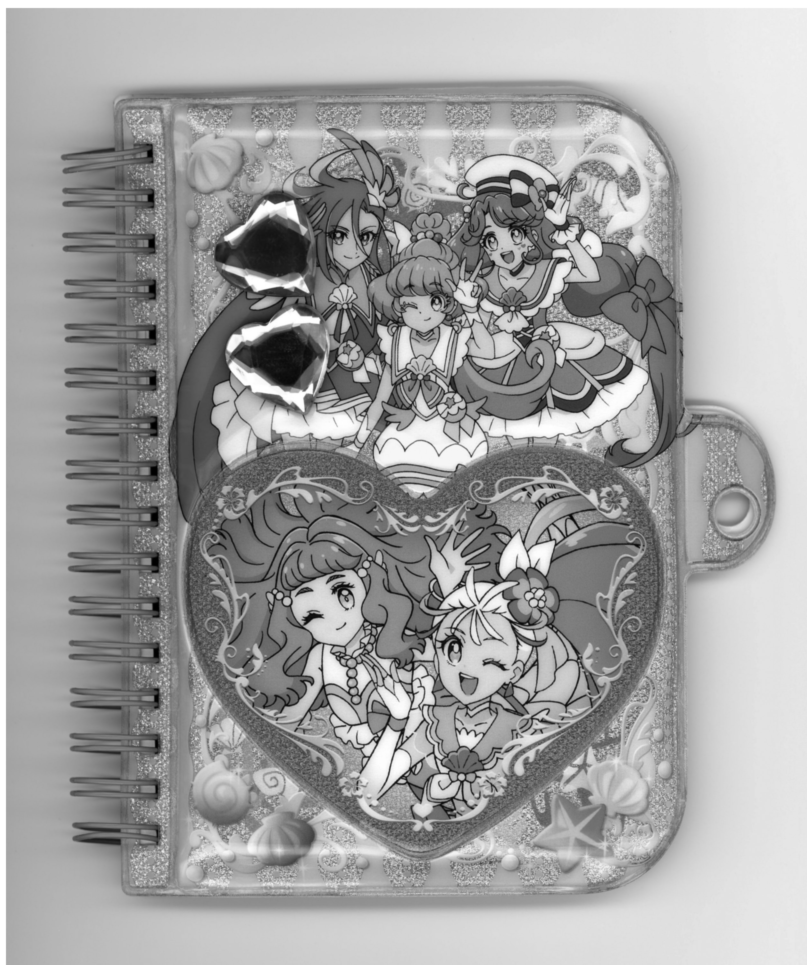

Figure 19.2 Purikyua (*Pretty Cure*) Notebook, 2021. From the Author's Collection.

girl to the biology of her female sex and to the awakening of her reproductive potential with menarche (Yokokawa 1991: 56). Catherine Driscoll has moreover argued that 'adolescence is not a clear denotation of any age, body, behaviour, or identity, because it has always meant the process of developing a self,' and has defined 'feminine adolescence' to be 'in transition or in process relative to dominant ideas of Womanhood' (Driscoll 2002: 6). It then follows that many subjects who self-identify as female are likely to remain a 'girl' in one sense or another in societies such as contemporary Japan. This is because if 'womanhood' denotes a 'completed' self, such a state of perfect closure is systematically deferred in a highly capitalistic society that thrives on incompletion and potentials. In other words, today the notion of liminality in connection to being a girl can no longer be framed within the developmental narrative of puberty.

Indeed, the concept of the 'girl' has been thoroughly appropriated by women today far beyond puberty as a mode of self-identity in many late-capitalist societies, including Japan, with various iterations from the Spice Girls to the Guerrilla Girls. For instance, the slogan for *Sweet*, a popular young woman's fashion magazine launched by

Takarajima-sha in 1999, exhorts readers, 'at 28-years-of-age, proclaim to be a "girl" for the rest of your life! (*28sai, isshō "onnanoko" sengen!*).' To give another example, a 32-year-old character named Yukiko from Okuda Hideo's best-selling short-story collection *Girl* (2006) has similarly resolved to remain 'a lifelong girl [*shōgaiichi gāru*]. That's the path I am also going to take, Yukiko thought. I may marry or have a child. But it's up to me. I am not inconveniencing anyone' (Okuda 2006: 153). These examples show how 'being a girl' has been reconceptualized as a lifestyle choice that a woman can make, rather than a biologically determined phase or social label.

As a marker of such freedom to choose one's life path as one pleases, being *kirakira* at first seems more empowering than *hirahira*. Unlike the passive and fleeting fragility of *hirahira*, *kirakira* sparks are self-generating. *Kirakira* calls attention to itself, is confident, self-affirming, and as such is always positive. The media routinely praises women's professional accomplishments and initiatives as '*kirakira*.' The *kirakira* quality can be said to represent the increasing social visibility of women and their independence and empowerment in Japanese society, a newly gained status that has been supported legislatively by the 1986 Equal Employment Opportunity Act and the 1999 Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society (*Danjo kyōdō sankaku shakai kihonhō*).

The fact remains, however, that Japan has continued to perform rather dismally in the Global Gender Gap Report published by the World Economic Forum. Japan lags behind other developed nations in gender parity (see Miura, Chapter 12 in this volume). While women have been encouraged to shine *kirakira*, for the most part, it has not taken place in terms of social equality and political empowerment. But predictably, one finds *kirakira* in commodity culture where the *kawaii* style returned with vengeance as mainstream fashion for young women in the 2000s, after the *kogyaru* style morphed into the para-*kawaii* '*ganguro*' (literally meaning 'tanned or blackened face') phase that diverged too much from the standard *kawaii* with its excessive tanning, hair bleaching, and contrastive make-up. This renewed engagement with more conventional 'prettiness' is represented, for example, by the semi-annual fashion event Tokyo Girls Collection (TGC) that began in 2005. It is also this look that became integrated into the Japanese government's marketing of consumable Japan worldwide.

The iconic darling of this unabashedly feminine *kawaii* fashion was Ebihara Yuri (Figures 19.3a and 19.3b), nicknamed Ebichan, who modelled for the fashion magazine *CanCam*, along with other 'charisma models' (Koga 2009: 132–3). Ebichan came to embody the new trend of '*mecha♡mote*,' with a paraesthetic emblem of the heart in the middle, and which can be translated as 'super desirable.' The putative target for '*mote*' were eligible single men, but the '*mecha♡mote*' fashion marketed feminine desirability to be more versatile. It promised the consumer of this trend not just popularity with young men but also to become adored and loved by everyone, including female friends and work colleagues (Yoshimitsu and Nishihara 2017: 33; Takahashi 2020: 126–8).

Unsurprisingly, this trend coincided with the height of the anti-feminist backlash that was occurring in close tandem with a heavy rightward swing in Japanese politics (see Nakano, Chapter 3 in this volume). Anti-feminism was especially directed towards what were condemned as the 'radical' practices of the so-called 'gender-free' education that included what conservative politicians exaggerated as 'unnecessarily' provocative sex education. They also claimed that feminists wanted to abolish the traditional doll's festival (*hina matsuri*) on 3 March because it forced girls to celebrate dolls. This criticism intentionally confused gender equality with a denial of gender distinctions altogether

Figures 19.3a and 19.3b Cover of *CanCam* (January 2006) and a Glossy Page Featuring Ebihara Yuri. © Shōgakkan. (*Continued*)

(Ueno et al. 2006). In this ideological climate, women's fashion trends in the '*mote*' style that reverted to more traditional gender differentiations were welcomed.

As elsewhere, anti-feminism in Japan also overlapped with the rhetoric of popular post-feminism, characterized by the 'it's my own choice' discourse and 'the tropes of freedom and choice' that assume gender parity has more or less been achieved (McRobbie 2004: 3). An Ebichan-styled young woman with a college degree and a job with career potential might say, 'what's wrong with maintaining my youthful looks and enjoying being praised as *kawaii* for my appearance that I paid for with the money I earned?'

Indeed, it is this neoliberal 'choice' ideology that sustains the *kawaii* business. The availability of fast fashion, cheap cosmetics and step-by-step manuals about how to apply them, guided exercise and diet routines, cosmetic surgery, and other means of body 'enhancements' and 'refinements' (Miller 2006) means that there are no excuses

Figures 19.3a and 19.3b (*Continued*)

not to look 'perfect.' In addition, the availability of easy-to-use apps that manipulate and 'touch up' one's photos for posting on SNS leaves little room for anyone to not look their best, whether or not the image they are projecting is *kawaii* or otherwise. In this respect, it is indicative that a term '*joshi ryoku'* has come into popular use since the early 2000s to exemplify this cultural ethos of feminine self-production. '*Joshi ryoku*' literally means 'girl power,' but in contemporary Japanese this word means 'the desire to become prettier, and the power to act upon that desire' (Yonezawa 2014: 5). This desire and labour, Yonezawa Izumi argues, is no longer directed exclusively at receiving the attention of the male gaze but is also more peer-oriented, aiming to gain approval from other women. For some, it has also become self-directed, a method of becoming 'the woman that I want to be' (Yonezawa 2014: 186).

The multiplying 'choices' that women are presented with in early twenty-first-century Japan urge us to revise the widely held assumption that women's lives continue to be dictated by the classic modern paradigm of '*ryōsai kenbo*' or 'the good wife,

wise mother.' It has become evident that the life of a stay-at-home-wife-and-mother is largely untenable in Japanese society, given the unstable employment opportunities for both men and women (See Osawa and Kingston, Chapter 10 in this volume). As in many other societies, it has become increasingly difficult for a single-income household to sustain a comfortable lifestyle in urban and suburban Japan, and nearly impossible with multiple children. According to the data provided by the Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training, the number of households with a no-income wife was surpassed by dual-income households in 1992, and as of 2019, the number of dual-income households (12.45 million) was more than double the number of households with a no-income wife (5.75 million) (The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training). Furthermore, becoming 'just' a wife and a mother is no longer perceived as a fulfilling life goal for women in Japan, as Jennifer Robertson has observed with regards to the so-called 'charisma housewives' (see Robertson, Chapter 14 in this volume).

To sum up, what mainstream Japanese society today demands of its young women is to strive to become a good wife, a wise mother, *and* additionally a productive worker, a forever youthful and charming *kawaii* lady (Yonezawa 2010: 176), *and* an enthusiastic consumer who makes the right choices to realize all of these life goals. In this ideal scenario, remaining a 'girl' and continuing to participate in *kawaii* culture no longer indicates resistance against 'adult' values in a way that might have been possible in the past. On the contrary, *kawaii* has been thoroughly integrated into the vision of an ideal adult femininity in contemporary Japan. Providing a case in point, Ebichan, now aged 41, who is a wife, mother, and business owner, continues to update her *kawaii* looks, which she now also sells through her own fashion brand. The life of such a 'have-it-all' girl surely shines like *kirakira*.

As someone who belongs to the same generation as Hello Kitty (b. 1974), I have witnessed the transformation of *kawaii* from a minor taste that only young girls cared about, to a privileged marker of Japan's contribution to global culture, with a mixture of pride and reservation. Pride because *kawaii* is just about the only culture in which Japanese women born after 1960 can categorically and collectively claim authoritative expertise—it is (or was) *our* culture. And reservation, precisely for the same reason. As of 2021, *kawaii* remains the most mainstream, pervasive, and beloved quality about being a girl in Japan, and this is due to its minor and paraesthetic nature that this essay has discussed. Furthermore, it has been shown that the disarming quality of *kawaii* can be injected into any '*kyarakutā*' (character) that can be designed to brand and market a product, an institution, a public agency, or even a nation by staging an obsequious gesture of adorable 'reaching out,' a Heisei-style '*burikko*,' if you will, that clearly masks other motivations and intentions. As for its meaning for women, the cult of youthfulness that has intensified in recent decades shifted the significance of *kawaii* from the bittersweet memories of growing up to a lifelong project of producing the *kawaii* 'self' that one may choose to work on from puberty to menopause, and possibly beyond. In the long and ongoing process of demanding gender parity, it may be that *kawaii* has served as what Donald Winnicott has termed a 'transitional object' for women to navigate through new social situations for which there were no precedents. It is always easier to find comfort in the familiar, even if it is demeaning. If so, a different, post-*kawaii* paradigm for women will emerge only if the core cultural and social structure, which the paraesthetic *kawaii* feeds on to sustain its ever-expanding and multiplying lives, loses its authority. At this moment, this change appears a long way off.

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