

Kawaii!

By Masakazu HOSODA

Among non-Japanese readers of this magazine, not a few should have heard of the Japanese word *kawaii*. On the basis of our news-gathering activities, we have reached the conclusion that this adjective is becoming an internationally accepted Japanese word in a swell of momentum that has put to use such words as *sukiyaki*, *bushido*, *sushi*, *tsunami* and *karaoke* in many parts of the world.

If you consult an ordinary Japanese-English dictionary, you will find *kawaii* translated as pretty, cute, sweet, lovely or little. Such translations are not necessarily wrong. But the internationally accepted meaning of *kawaii* is different in nuance from the Japanese original ordinarily spelled in the *hiragana* syllabary. It is an unusual adjective which had better be spelled in the *katakana* syllabary, usually used for the notation of foreign words, or which should rather be pronounced *kawayui* as young girls say.

An easy-to-understand example of *kawaii* is *gal*-ish fashion for teenage girls characterized by false eyelashes thick and long enough to place a matchstick on them; heavy eyeliner reminiscent of bear cubs; freely curled brown-dyed hair; one-piece dresses with bright printed patterns; miniskirts so short that you don't know where to look; and high-heeled boots.

You can hardly walk through Tokyo's trendy Harajuku and Akihabara districts without noticing young women clad in *gal*-ish costumes as depicted in *manga* books for teenagers. Even young tourists from Asian and Western countries, dressed in similar outfits, can be seen frolicking on the streets of Harajuku and Akihabara.

A reporter in my news section, who is interested in such a novel phenomenon, insisted that coverage in Tokyo alone is not enough to grasp the real nature of the fashion trend and that she had to go abroad to find out the truth. So she flew to Thailand after prevailing upon me to authorize her trip as budget director of the section.

What she witnessed there was a fashion trend among young Thai girls that is absolutely identical with the Harajuku fashion as described above. "*SCawaii!*," the popular Japanese fashion magazine, has its official Thai edition regularly published with a circulation of 120,000. In the American state of California, meanwhile, a Harajuku



Young people visit a shop filled with "kawaii" goods on the pedestrian-only Takeshita-dori street in Tokyo's fashionable Harajuku area, which has become a trendsetting town for youth fashion.

shop has reportedly opened, though for a limited period.

The history of proliferation of *kawaii* vividly reflects the trend of popular culture in Japan's contemporary history.

Japanese society has been flooded with *kawaii*-related things since the birth of the *Hello Kitty* bobtail cat figurine in 1974, followed by the opening of the fashion building "109" in Tokyo's Shibuya district; the creation of weekend vehicle-free zones; the production of the animation film "*Sailor Moon*"; and the invention of *purikura* (short for *purinto kurabu* or print club), an instant photo booth which prints photos on small adhesive stickers. In the past, such a trend would have been criticized under the orthodox cultural theory as infantilization and retrogression of Japanese society and considered problematical in terms of gender theory as well.

But *kawaii* spelled out in roman letters and accepted internationally has gone beyond the framework of serious arguments, gradually permeating young people of the world. The reporter of my section who covered the *kawaii* fashion in Thailand analyzed the *kawaii* phenomenon as follows: It can be said that *kawaii*, which has become an international word understood in Europe, America, Asia and even Russia, is different from mere childishness and should be regarded as the symbolic sign of a culture that cherishes the unique value of small selves' own world.

It remains to be seen whether the current situation represents the infantilization and retrogression of youth culture of the world or a new phenomenon of post-modernism. We intend to pursue our coverage of the trend to find out truth.

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