

Long Love Affair with Hello Kitty

Feline Character Charms Mothers and Daughters Alike

By Kurosawa Tsuneo

FROM young girls to grown-up women, by far the most popular merchandise character in Japan is a little white cat named Kitty. Kitty-chan, as Japanese affectionately call her, was created by Sanrio 30 years ago. Today Hello Kitty has fans all over the world.

Britney Spears, Mariah Carey, Cameron Diaz, Christina Aguilera — one thing these pop stars and Hollywood celebrities have in common is their unabashed affection for the Hello Kitty character. They have publicly declared their fondness for Kitty the kitten and reportedly collect Hello Kitty products.

Sanrio Puroland now a big draw

There is no larger collection of Hello Kitty creations than the Sanrio theme park in Tama City on the western outskirts of Tokyo. When movie and pop stars tour Japan, some of them make a point of including the theme park in their itinerary. Some even insist on making the trip however tight their schedule, so much so that their staff would have to bear the brunt of their disappointment once they find out that it would take half a day to see the place. For super-busy celebrities whose schedules are fine-tuned down to the minute, it would be a logistic nightmare to make a side trip to Puroland even if they stay in central Tokyo.

Built in 1990, Sanrio Puroland is not an outdoor theme park like Disneyland. Puroland is an indoor facility, housed in a mammoth structure, its façade crafted like a fairy-tale castle. The theme park features shows and attractions with Hello Kitty and other Sanrio characters. You would be in the wrong place if you were looking for rollercoaster types of thrills and other speed sensations. This is perhaps why Puroland wasn't popular in its early days. It was in the late 1990s that it started drawing crowds and today the theme park is so well known that tourists from Asia have become a prominent presence.

Kitty's blood type: A

According to her official biography, Kitty's birthday is Nov. 1. She was born in suburban London. She is five apple lengths, and weighs three apples. Her blood is Type A, Sanrio's Japanese-language website says.

You may wonder why Sanrio has assigned a blood type to a cat. As far as I know, neither Mickey Mouse nor Donald Duck, nor Snoopy for that matter, has been given a blood type. The fact that Kitty's blood type is only given on the Japanese website, and not on the English one says something about the Japanese fondness for fortune-telling, especially among women. Horoscopes and fortune-telling through blood types have become the most popular methods of inferring individual character and personality traits — hence, the keen interest among Japanese women to find out their friends' blood types and zodiac signs.

In Japan, many girls are fond of finding out whether they “click” with their friends by matching each other's blood types and zodiac signs. They don't

necessarily take this sort of thing seriously; to them, it is simply a good way to start a friendship. To please their fans, Japanese pop stars not only disclose how tall they are, but they also give out their date of birth and blood type. As a celebrity herself, Hello Kitty has to let her fans know her “blood type” in the human fashion, as well as her date of birth, which would make her a Scorpio.

Kitty's star begin shining in the late '90s

By bestowing Kitty with human characteristics, the designers at Sanrio created more than a cute feline character in 1974. In the following year, plastic Hello Kitty purses hit the market. And then came Hello Kitty stationery and stuffed dolls. Sanrio targeted these character goods at children, girls in particular, and they were well received.

My two daughters, like many of their peers, grew up surrounded by Hello Kitty paraphernalia. Pencil boxes, pencils, socks, lunch boxes, chopsticks, handkerchiefs, pillows, blankets, swimming suits, swimming buoys — many children's belongings are stamped with Hello Kitty designs.

One secret of Hello Kitty's sustained popularity lies perhaps in the innocence of the feline facial design. Hello Kitty characters never intrude their presence, however ubiquitous they may be. The simple, clean design of Kitty's face features a pair of round eyes, a tiny nose and three whiskers on each chin. There is no mouth and there is little facial expression. No laughing, crying, or anger — since Kitty is expressionless, the little white cat doesn't get on your nerves, even if you are in a foul mood. Unlike other famous characters that always present big, sycophantic smiles, Hello Kitty projects serenity and peace. She is just there, and her presence doesn't make you tired.

Hello Kitty's huge popularity started sometime in the late 1990s. Girls who grew up with the Hello Kitty character have now become mothers and they must have started buying Hello Kitty products for their daughters. The sight of mother and daughter shopping for Hello Kitty merchandise is quite common in Japan, and at Sanrio Puroland it is easy to find young mothers lighting up more enthusiastically than their daughters.

What do we make of this passion for Hello Kitty in Japan? Does it mean, as some critics suggest, that all Japanese behave like kids? Or does it have a deeper meaning — that all young women, whatever their age, simply love cute things? I myself have yet to find an answer.

J.S.

The first Hello Kitty product, “Petit Purse”, made in March, 1975

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