















Similar to the English word “cute”, formed from the abbreviation of the lexeme “acute”, meaning “smart, sharp, insightful”,<sup>35</sup> “*kawaii*” derives from the word “*kawayushi*”, “*kaohayushi*”,<sup>36</sup> previously discussed. In English, the removal of the vowel “a” changed the meaning of the word from “agile, insightful” or “cunning” to “childish”, and “vulnerable.”<sup>37</sup> Similarly, “*kawayushi*” or “*kaohayushi*” had a pejorative nuance, that of “pathetic”, but, in time, through variations and changes, it came to have only positive ones. Moreover, the aesthetics of *kawaii* has become of national importance.<sup>38</sup>

A similar style to that proposed by *kawaii* aesthetics today is found in the Kōfun period (300-538 A.D.), more precisely in the way *haniwa*, terracotta clay figures, were made. These figurines were highly appreciated for their small size and minimalist style. *Haniwa* were placed in tombs to show the deceased’s social status and were believed to provide protection in the afterlife.<sup>39</sup>

By analysing medieval literary and artistic texts, the Japanese art historian Inuhiko Yomota concludes that the concept of “*kawaii*” has its roots in Japan’s socio-historical aesthetic of small and delicate things,<sup>40</sup> which took various forms over time. On the same note, Shiokawa<sup>41</sup> argues, based on the analysis of ancient texts and dictionaries, that the first mentions of the word can be traced back to the year 1000, when it was used in a slightly different form, “*kawai*”. Indeed, in one of the most important writings of the Heian period (794-1185), “The Pillow Book” (1002),<sup>42</sup> a vividly detailed writing about the court life, compiled by a court lady named Sei Shōnagon, the Japanese sensibility to fragile, helpless and small objects and beings is mentioned in several journal notes: “*Kawaii to wa osanakute, muku de, junsuina mono*” (“Childish, innocent and pure things are *kawaii*”); “*Nandemo, nandemo chīsai mono wa mina kawaii*” (“Any little thing is cute”).<sup>43</sup> The following passage from the

<sup>35</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 87.

<sup>36</sup> Sharon Kinsella, “Cuties in Japan”..., 221-222.

<sup>37</sup> Gary Cross, *The Cute and the Cool: Wondrous Innocence and Modern American Children’s Culture* (New York: Oxford, 2004), 43.

<sup>38</sup> Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, *The cool-kawaii: Afro-Japanese aesthetics and new world modernity* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2011), 3.

<sup>39</sup> Koji Mizoguchi, *The Archeology of Japan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 265.

<sup>40</sup> Matthew Burdelski, Koji Mitsuhashi, “She Thinks You’re Kawaii: Socializing Affect, Gender, and Relationships in a Japanese Preschool,” in *Language in Society*, vol. 39, no. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 66.

<sup>41</sup> Kanako Shiokawa, “Cute but Deadly: Women and Violence in Japanese Comics,” in *Themes and Issues in Asian Cartooning*, John A. Lent (ed.) (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999), 95.

<sup>42</sup> See Sei Shōnagon, *The Pillow Book* 「枕草子選釈」, Satoshi Matsuo, Kazuko Nagai (Eds.) (Tokyo: Musashino Shoin, 1977).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, section 144.



diary describes in detail a scene in which the walk of a chubby little girl, wearing adult clothing, is deeply touching:

“[...] *Futotteiru ko de ni sai gurai ni naru no ga, benibana to ai de someta usui kinu no kimono nado wo, take ga nagakute sode wo himo de musubi ageta no ga hatte de dekita no mo, mata mijikai kimono de sode dake ga ōkiku medatteiru yōsu de aruiteiru no mo kawaiirashii*” (“[...] A very white, plump child of around two, who comes crawling out wearing a lavender silk-gauze robe with the sleeves hitched back, or a child walking about in a short robe that looks more long sleeves than robe.”)<sup>44</sup>

In the passage above, the adjective “*kawaiirashii*” (“cute, adorable”) is used to describe a chubby little girl, far from the Japanese ideals of traditional beauty, who dreams of becoming a lady at the Heian Imperial Court. This episode reveals that it is used to express both feelings of pity and the desire to protect the dreams of the innocent child. There are many other characteristics that can be encompassed in the aesthetics and culture of *kawaii*, some of which are even opposites, according to Western standards of “cuteness”, such as “grotesque” (*gurokawa*), “ugly” (*busukawa*) or “sickly” (*yamikawa*), but the essential characteristics of a *kawaii* object or being are inoffensiveness and the absence of any intention of doing harm.<sup>45</sup>

Many of the must-have “qualities” mentioned in the list of “Things That Make One’s Heart Beat Faster” are still valid today.

Another interesting aspect that emerges from the journal is the interchangeable use of the adjectives “*utsukushii*” (“beautiful”) and “*kawaii*” (“adorable, cute”), which now have completely different meanings. The former is commonly used in relation to “high culture” elements, whilst the latter is associated with pop culture and it is used to describe unsophisticated things and behaviour.

### **Contemplating the Cute and the Vulnerable. Short History of *Kawaii* Culture**

If, during World War II, there were strong anti-Western movements that pleaded for banning the use of neologisms, called “*tekiseigo*”, or “the language of the enemy”, and for the importance of using only *kanji* logograms in order to prevent the influence of other cultures, after the end of the War, interest in foreign cultures has grown tremendously. In this regard, pop culture, and especially *kawaii*, reflects the

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., section 144.

<sup>45</sup> Kanako Shiokawa, “Cute but Deadly: Women and Violence in Japanese Comics” ..., 94.

social, economic and political dynamics and is not merely a simple trend<sup>46</sup> that resulted from the rebellion of young people who no longer resonated with the traditional values of the Japanese society, but rather an expression of pathos, of intense feelings and a statement, a pledge for self-expression. Although the expression of affection is a recurring theme in Japanese literature and arts, *kawaii* gained power over the masses (especially due to young Japanese girls, “*shōjo*”) only in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Following this idea, Tsutsui & Ito<sup>47</sup> discuss how elements of Japanese pop culture have influenced the image of Japan abroad, and try to identify the factors that contributed to the rapid spread of this creative force, responsible for the creation and popularity of *kawaii* products and characters, *manga* (Japanese comics), *anime* (Japanese animation) and *tokusatsu* (special effects used in audio-video productions) globally. The first element identified by the two researchers, the element that massively contributed to the “jet-propulsion” of the phenomenon in the West and in the United States, is *Gojira* (Godzilla), a character created by Tōhō Studio in 1954. Following the success of the saurian mutant, an entire series of other Japanese productions, such as *Astro Boy* (*Tetsuwan Atomu*), *Ultraman* or *Speed Racer* (*Mach GoGoGo*), “invaded” the world by proposing a new vision, an exotic and futuristic one, different from the narrative tradition and visual conventions offered by Hollywood.<sup>48</sup>

Godzilla was not only the pioneer who paved the way in the West and in the US for this new Japanese culture, but also came to symbolize Japan itself; therefore, in 1985, the green monster was ranked among the top three best-known Japanese among Americans.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, the “pop explosion” also influenced the way Japanese values and culture came to be represented in foreign advertisements. By analysing several ads in a previous research, we identified three (major) patterns: 1. Japanese traditional cultural symbols, such as samurai, geisha, *sakura* (“cherry blossoms”), sake (an alcoholic beverage made from rice), green tea (*matcha*), are used to suggest the idea of uniqueness (the *nihonjin-ron* theory); 2. fictional characters (such as Godzilla, Hello Kitty, etc.) and colloquial expressions, affect words and childish language are frequently used to suggest the multifaceted nature of Japanese culture and to make it accessible to a wider audience (especially after the 2000s); 3. elements from these two categories fuse in a harmonious intertwining of tradition and modernity. Cultural exchanges and the tendency to adapt foreign elements in order to fit Japanese expectations, require the discussion of the concept

---

<sup>46</sup> Kumiko Sato, “From Hello Kitty to Cod Roe Kewpie. A postwar Cultural History of Cuteness in Japan,” in *Education about Asia*, vol. 14, no. 2. (2009), 38.

<sup>47</sup> William Tsutsui, Michiko Ito, *In Godzilla’s Footsteps. Japanese pop icons on the global stage* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006).

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

of “*mukokuseki*”<sup>50</sup>, meaning “without nationality”. This “neutrality” in the overall appearance of the characters facilitated the rapid spread and acceptance of Japanese pop culture abroad. Iwabuchi<sup>51</sup> argues that the term “*mukokuseki*” can refer to two distinct things: 1. the combination of elements of different origins or 2. the elimination of any cultural, historical and linguistic peculiarities. An example in this regard are *anime* characters, regarded as “neutral” due to their appearance (large “Bambi eyes”, vivid hair colour, androgynous look). However, the popularity of Sanrio’s Hello Kitty is strongly related to her “hybrid origin” and the mix of intercultural elements used, which make her accessible to a wide audience. To sum up, this technique makes it possible for traditional elements to coexist with foreign ones and it offers Japan an advantage in the context of globalization, in an era in which it is more and more difficult to stand out from the rest of the world.

Even though the emergence of pop culture and *kawaii* style in the 1970s is associated with the “soft rebellion” movements of young Japanese people, we believe that it should not be treated as a form of counterculture. Whatever the reasons behind these movements, it does not violate the fundamental principles and norms of the society, it merely reinterprets or updates them; therefore, it should not be regarded as counterculture. *Kawaii* promotes the appreciation of small, stylized objects and of childish or atypical looking characters considered vulnerable for various reasons (size, looks, attitude, etc.). This culture spread rapidly among students (especially female students), who started to express their feelings through a nonconformist writing style, considered more modern and closer to the Western world: *maru ji* (rounded letters), *koneko ji* (“kitten writing”), *manga ji* (“comic writing”), *burikko ji* (“imitation of children’s writing”).<sup>52</sup> This “soft” rebellion of young people implied “sabotaging” the traditional way of writing by adding small, cute symbols to induce positive feelings and combat alienation. The Japanese traditional writing style follows the Chinese one, which is vertically, from right to left (*tategaki*), evenly, carefully and neatly done, while this trend promotes the adoption of the horizontal style, from left to right, specific to the West (*yokogaki*). This new style is easily recognizable by the roundness of the characters and promotes spontaneity and the importance of expressing momentary emotions. These were not mere choices made for practical or aesthetic reasons, but offered young Japanese people the possibility to convey their desire for emancipation and intention to embrace Western values. These “ornaments” or “embellishments”, such as hearts and circles (☆, ♡) added to *kana* syllables (*hiragana* and *katakana*), or the stylization of the

---

<sup>50</sup> Christine Yano, *Pink Globalization...*, 16.

<sup>51</sup> Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (London: Duke University Press, 2002), 71.

<sup>52</sup> Sharon Kinsella, “Cuties in Japan”..., 222.

component features of the logograms, were followed by the tendency to shorten words and imitate small children's pronunciation difficulties.<sup>53</sup>

Adopting a lifestyle based on *kawaii* values was associated by the Japanese intellectuals with the defiance of traditional society norms, a pretext for postponing adulthood responsibilities, “*sekinin*” and “social debt”, “*giri*”. As a result, in the 1970s, various movements emerged to counterattack this trend that was considered antisocial<sup>54</sup> and a threat to the traditional Japanese culture. The young Japanese people's egocentric way of thinking of was blamed because it was considered not only an attack towards traditional values, but also an extension of the principle of individualism, which (theoretically) cannot exist in a collectivist society. Surprisingly, even though initially condemned and harshly criticized by the Japanese elite (especially by academics and scholars), this nonconformist style gradually became not only an integral part of the contemporary Japanese culture, but an indispensable tool in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' (MOFA) strategic plan to promote Japanese culture abroad. In 2012, a year after the tragic nuclear disaster at Fukushima Daiichi, MOFA aimed to regain its citizens' and, in the end, the worlds' trust through a five-episode series entitled “Japan: Fascinating Diversity”. The purpose of the videos was to make people rediscover the appeal of Japan through five central concepts in Japanese culture: “*Oishii*: The Magnificent Flavors of Tohoku”, “*Kawaii*! Inside Japanese Pop Culture”, “*Takumi*: Japan's Artisan Tradition”, “*Omotenashi*: Japanese Way of Hospitality” and “*Mirai*: Technology for a Better Future”.<sup>55</sup> By including the concept of *kawaii* alongside the traditional arts and customs, the Japanese government has officially recognized the importance and merits of pop culture.

The biggest “fans” of Japanese pop culture, mostly students and teenagers, created their own language by distorting the pronunciation of words, a trend later used by many public and private Japanese companies in advertising campaigns. In this context, the *kawaii* style and culture can be perceived as a form of combating the feeling of alienation caused by consumerism.

The heyday of the 1980s (see Kinsella 1995: 222) was due to the “fancy goods” industry (*fanshī guzzu*), *manga* and the new style of writing with decorative elements. Trivial, mundane objects were (and still are) anthropomorphized, represented as fantastic beings in order to make the target audience or the potential buyer relate more easily to the advertised idea or feel comfortable using the product, rather than merely being aware of the usefulness of the product or service. The popularity of Sanrio's characters among *kawaii* goods “consumers”, made

---

<sup>53</sup> See Takeo Doi, *The anatomy of dependence* (New York: Kodansha, [1973] 1981), 163.

<sup>54</sup> For more on this subject, see Sharon Kinsella, “Cuties in Japan,” in L. Skov and B. Moeran (eds.), *Women, Media and Consumption in Japan* (London: Curzon Press, 1995).

<sup>55</sup> Rodica Frențiu, “The ‘Self-Shaping’ of Culture and its Ideological Resonance: The Complicity of Ethos and Pathos in the Japanese Advertising Discourse,” in *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 13, no. 39, 106.

financial, health or tourism services companies adopt this strategy of making everything look cute and endearing.<sup>56</sup> Since the 1980s, prestigious financial institutions like Sumitomo, Mitsui, or the famous car manufacturer, Mitsubishi, have created their own *kawaii* mascot to attract customers. The use of *kawaii* symbols in advertising not only guarantees economic success, bringing huge profits to companies due to consumer's "dependence" on these mascot's "sweetness", but also brings benefits to social and civic life, as a means of involving citizens in various activities and maintain group cohesion and harmony (*wa*).

### Rune Naito – The Pioneer of *Kawaii* Aesthetic

Although the *kawaii* culture boom took place in the 1980s, the first "enchanted, caricatured, cheerfully" visual representations<sup>57</sup> appeared shortly after the end of World War II, in teen magazines (e.g., Junior Soleil). Rune Naitō, whose real name is Isao Naitō, was inspired by the work of his mentor, Junichi Nakahara, and created bold illustrations at a time when the feminine ideal was particularly associated with modesty (*shitoyaka*) and domestic responsibilities. In Rune's works, female figures seem to be from another world, with big "Bambi eyes", thick lips and brightly coloured clothing. Through this style, the artist Rune tried to suggest that it is time for women to be aware of their real value, an idea also emphasized by the Japanese psychologist Rika Kayama in an interview for Asahi Shimbun in 2007: "*Kachi ga utsukushiku, shitoyaka*" by *wa naku "kawaii, genki"* by *aru koto ni kizukaseta.*" ("[Rune Naitō] made us realize that the value of a woman does not reside in "beauty and modesty", but in "sweetness and vitality"). In this statement, we can see the essential difference between *utsukushii* ("beautiful, splendid, pure"), perceived as the ideal of traditional beauty, and *kawaii* ("cute, adorable, playful, dreamy").

Rune, influenced by the trends proposed by America's *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* magazines, as well as by the creations of the French director René Clément (after whom the artist chose his stage name), tried to "colour" the gloomy reality of the times, proposing a utopian getaway. Rune's works were to determine the ideal of beauty in the modern era (the emblematic "Rune girl"). Beside the atypical female representations guided by the desire to combat stereotypes, the artist also reinterpreted, in his illustrations, household items, animals (e.g., "Rune Panda"), flowers and children. As Rune stated, the role of these creations is to bring fantasy into everyday life and to "give life" to otherwise overlooked items: "*seikatsu no naka ni fantajikkuna yume o*" ("fantasy dreams in everyday life"), "*sore made daremo ga*

---

<sup>56</sup> Sharon Kinsella, "Cute Studies in Japan"..., 226.

<sup>57</sup> See Takashi Ogawa, "Aichi exhibition showcases Rune Naito, pioneer of '*kawaii*' culture" (2019), URL: <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201912250001.html> (Accessed in March 2021).

*misugoshiteita [...] inochi o fukikomi* (“give life [to things, objects] that had hitherto been overlooked”).<sup>58</sup> Through his vision and creations, the artist managed to remove the preconceptions related to this style, and most importantly, the word “*kawaii*” and related expressions no longer had negative connotations.

### **Kawaii Imagery**

Although we refer mainly to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>59</sup> as the moment of the *kawaii* culture boom, the source of this creative force manifested in *manga*, *anime*, mascots (*yuru kyara*) and “cute products” resides in *amae* (“need-love”) psychology.<sup>60</sup> On the same vein, the concepts of *mono no aware* (“pathos of things, sensitivity to ephemera”) and *iki* (“chic; stylish”) seem to have significantly contributed to the development of this phenomenon. If the *mono no aware* aesthetic arouses melancholy in the viewer, suggesting the impermanence of life through symbols such as *sakura* (“cherry blossom”) or moon phases, *kawaii* triggers intense reactions through fictional characters and fantasies. *Kawaii* is perceived by some researchers as a “mutation” of *iki*, a popular term in the Edo period, used to describe elegance and good taste, as well as a way to postpone responsibilities and help release anxiety through pleasure<sup>61</sup>). The common feature among these two, in addition to escaping from reality into a utopian universe, is the possibility of expressing one’s own style and uniqueness, not in an egocentric way, but in harmony with the rest of the community. Surprisingly or not, Yomota<sup>62</sup> (2006) places *kawaii* aesthetic alongside the traditional beauty ideals mentioned above.

*Haiku* poems, in which nature is evoked in a delicate manner, and small animals are described in relation to the grandeur of the Universe, are also an expression of *kawaii* culture; other examples are given by the Japanese attention to detail, minimalist art forms, the naive attitude displayed by geishas, etc. This idea was also developed by Miki Kato, a Japanese designer and artist, who emphasizes the connection between *kawaii* and traditional Japanese aesthetics, defined in terms of “simplicity, irregularity and perishability.<sup>63</sup>” The artist compares the Japanese flag (*hi no maru*), representing a simple red circle on a white background, and the

---

<sup>58</sup> See full statement at: <https://www.naitou-rune.jp/>

<sup>59</sup> Sharon Kinsella, “Cuties in Japan”..., 222.

<sup>60</sup> For a deeper understanding of this concept, see Takeo Doi, *The anatomy of dependence* (New York: Kodansha, [1973] 1981).

<sup>61</sup> Pellitteri, Marco, “Kawaii Aesthetics from Japan to Europe: Theory of the Japanese ‘Cute’ and Transcultural Adoption of Its Styles in Italian and French Comics Production and Commodified Culture Goods,” in *Arts*, 7(3), 24, (2018).

<sup>62</sup> Inuhiko Yomota, *Kawaii Ron* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 2006).

<sup>63</sup> See *Eye Magazine*, no. 44/2002: <http://www.eyemagazine.com/feature/article/cute-culture> (Accessed in March 2021).

simplicity of Zen gardens, with *yuru kyara*, also created in a minimalist style, but with a powerful effect. In everyday life, a *kawaii* symbol added to a school uniform, a suit or even to a writing instrument gives it a sense of uniqueness, the feeling of “breaking” the rules, and “invests” the possessor with a certain status, making him feel part of a community. The concept of *kawaii* is related to fantastic symbols, intense emotions, fantasy, and it basically implies turning any entity into an object of affection and desire. Often, the colours used to represent *kawaii* characters have an important sociocultural significance. The vivid combination of colours is similar to that used in *yamato-e* (Japanese) paintings or found on the *jūnihitoe* kimono (12 layers garment), worn by the ladies of the imperial court.

Masuda Sebastian, a Japanese artist and designer, considered to be the father of contemporary *kawaii* culture, links the *kawaii* universe to a personal cosmos filled only with things one adores: “It is not something fashionable - dressing up for others or trying to be someone else - but rather collecting things because you simply love them.”<sup>64</sup>

Colours can arouse emotions and lift one’s spirits, and, as such, *kawaii* objects and entities abound in the richest shades. *Kawaii* is considered to be an expression of one’s sensibility, a refuge from daily life, not a superficial aesthetic, like kitsch. Adopting a *kawaii* style and attitude allows the individual to create an alter ego through which he can temporarily suspend responsibilities and place himself in other’s care or custody; therefore, we can admit that it has social implications. In this scheme, the other embraces his status of “protector” and places himself on a higher scale, in a position of power (considering the hierarchical structure of Japanese society).

The quality of being “cute” is culturally determined and cannot be analysed without taking cultural factors into consideration<sup>65</sup>. The need for love and affection is a natural, instinctive feeling and can be expressed in many forms, but people’s perceptions and expectations considerably differ from one culture to another. If, in the Western countries, the beauty ideal is constructed around the idea of flawless perfection, in traditional Japanese aesthetics, beautiful usually equals imperfection (*wabi-sabi*), a principle promoted by *kawaii* aesthetic as well. Unlike the somehow superficial Western perception of “cuteness”, in Japan, “*kawaii*” is not regarded as a simple aesthetic for children, but a means for creating connections and maintain group harmony.

From *kawaii* ambassadors to *kawaii* clothes and accessories, attitude, workspace or gastronomy, *kawaii* comes in various forms and reflects a wide range

---

<sup>64</sup> See the interview here:

<https://insidethemagic.net/2015/10/photos-japan-pavilion-in-epcot-features-sebastian-masuda-art-celebrating-cute-culture/> (Accessed in April 2021).

<sup>65</sup> Joel Gn, “A lovable metaphor: On the affect, language and design of cute,” in *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 2 no. 1 (2016), 50.

of emotions, feelings and beliefs. It started as a “soft rebellion”, showing the intention to embrace foreign ideas and principles and to question traditional values, but now it is said that it is a reflection of the Japanese worldview and sensitivity. Considering its origins, evolution, forms of manifestation and importance to Japanese culture, the concept refers not to momentary pleasure or to basic human needs, but to more complex ones, such as relational situations of harmony and balance. In other words, *kawaii* can be perceived as a stimulus, being able to trigger strong emotional reactions and help create long-term relationships.<sup>66</sup>

### From Hard Power to Soft Power: Japanese Pop Culture

Cultural studies concentrate on the dominant beliefs and values, the structure and organization of a society, and also on its members’ way of interacting. Many studies on the Japanese society seem to come to the same conclusion: Confucian doctrine, Shintō beliefs and increased interest in foreign cultures have facilitated the harmonious coexistence of the traditional with the modern, of the indigenous elements with the foreign, and encouraged adaptation. Starting from this idea, *kawaii* culture is the result of different elements combined that fuse in perfect harmony.

Intercultural encounters have always been an important factor in the evolution and change of cultural and social practices, perceived as an expression of the individual’s sensibility and the group cohesion. These cultural exchanges, along with the historical events, led Japan to reconsider its priorities and to make various attempts to regain its superpower status. If, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, only traditional arts and aesthetic forms, such as *ukiyo-e* (Japanese woodblock prints; “pictures of the floating world”), were considered valuable and were accessible only to the privileged class, after World War II, a new culture appeared, guided by the desire to make everything “cute”, “adorable” (*kawaii*)<sup>67</sup>. The emergence of a new culture is strongly related to the Japanese people’s new sensibility determined by the rapid changes and acute alienation in the modern world. This transition from “high culture”, traditional forms of culture (literature, art, decorative objects, etc.) based on Buddhist values and teachings, to “low culture” or mass culture influenced all spheres of society and social life, as well as the Westerners’ image of Japan. *Kawaii* culture arose from people’s need to escape reality and from the nostalgia for childhood freedom.

---

<sup>66</sup> For more on this topic, see Hiroshi Nittono et al., “The Power of Kawaii: Viewing Cute Images Promotes a Careful Behavior and Narrows Attentional Focus,” in *PLoS ONE*, 7(9): e46362 (2012). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0046362>.

<sup>67</sup> William Tsutsui, Michiko Ito, *In Godzilla’s Footsteps. Japanese pop icons on the global stage...*, 4.



After the end of World War II, Japan's goal was to regain its position as a global power; therefore, the strategic plan focused on the educational system, on political reforms and management and many scholars believe that the most important factor that led to the "Japanese economic miracle" was the internal stability.<sup>68</sup> The geographical isolation, the meritocratic system and the discipline perpetuated in Japanese society through Buddhist teachings, have made it possible to preserve traditional values in the modernization process. Surprisingly, after World War II, Japan regained its power through the export of a new type of culture based on values that differed from the traditional ones (sobriety, austerity, simplicity) embedded in arts such as *shodō* (calligraphy), *ikebana* (floral arrangements) or in the *nō* theater, and regained its place through cultural diplomacy (soft power) in which *kawaii* plays a central role.

According to Nye,<sup>69</sup> power and world order in the 20<sup>th</sup> century leaves behind militarism and is determined by the power of visual and cultural symbols. In Japan, the transition from hard (coercive approach) to soft power (persuasive approach) is often associated with *kawaii* culture (camouflaged in the form of cultural consumption), engaged in promoting nostalgia and values such as vulnerability, sweetness, innocence, purity, etc. In 2009, Douglas McGray, a journalist at the prestigious journal *Foreign Policy*, described Japan in an article<sup>70</sup> as "a new kind of superpower" and presented the transformation steps which made this "miracle" possible. The journalist associates the nation's surprising shift from the economic power of the 1980s to today's cultural superpower with the ideas conveyed through cultural goods. McGray argues that the power of Japanese pop culture captured millions of people across the globe mainly because of the positive emotions and strong feelings it evoked, and managed to create a global community. From this point of view, the country's comeback is not due to ideology, but rather to the particular way of doing things, to management and to the capacity to see the potential in mundane things.

The popularity and rapid spread of Japanese pop culture was mainly due to the fact that it allowed people to slow down the speed of life and postpone or pause the process of growing up and facing the adult responsibilities ("*sekinin*"). Through *manga* (Japanese comics), *anime* (Japanese animations), video games and the variety of *kawaii* ('cute') products and characters, pop culture offers an escape ticket from reality into a utopia. At first perceived merely as a youth subculture,

---

<sup>68</sup> Bowen C. Dees, *The Allied Occupation and Japan's Economic Miracle: Building the Foundations of Japanese Science and Technology 1945-52* (Surrey: Japan Library, 1997), xiv.

<sup>69</sup> See Joseph S Nye, *Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), chapter II (epub verison).

<sup>70</sup> See McGray, Douglas. 2009. "Japan's Gross National Cool," *Foreign Policy Journal*, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/11/11/japans-gross-national-cool/> (Accessed on 19 January 2020).

with no significant meaning, in the context of the development of consumer society, Japan's culture of cute (*kawaii*) became known worldwide.

## Conclusions

In Japan, *kawaii* is perhaps the most commonly used word to express and show affection. Used to describe small, helpless entities and basically anything that seems to require special care and protection, it is not a mere adjective, but a symbol of (social) dependency (*amae*). Alike *nihonjinron*, a genre popular in the second half of the last century that focused on the Japanese national and cultural identity, *kawaiiron* (discourse on "cuteness") texts draw attention to the uniqueness of Japanese culture in the context of globalization. The rapid changes and the necessity to differentiate from others contributed to Japan's "reinvention" via *kawaii* goods and fantasy. Due to this phenomenon, Japan and everything Japanese ended up being described perhaps too often as "*kawaii*".<sup>71</sup>

This new research field entitled "Cute Studies" is trying to explain what characteristics make an entity or an object seem "cute" and why people's response and reactions differ, depending on cultural factors. As stated in the introductory part, our intention was to answer a fundamental question: Why is it important to study and analyse the concept of "cute" and "cuteness"? As discussed in the present paper, "cuteness" is not merely an aesthetic, but a powerful force promoting socialization and, in the end, a reflection of a country's national character. Understanding this complex phenomenon makes it possible to understand cultural differences and, most importantly, how social problems, anxieties or fears are addressed or how basic human needs like protection, affection, idleness or identity (sense of belonging) are satisfied in a specific culture.

In the present paper, we focused on the Japanese concept of "*kawaii*", which, as we have already seen, plays a significant role in maintaining group harmony (*wa*) and in "filling in an emotional need", as prof. Christine R. Yano states.<sup>72</sup> Used either to promote inclusion, raise awareness or promote Japanese culture abroad, "*kawaii*" is a versatile concept which can take many different forms (*busukawa*, *yamikawa*, *yumekawa*, etc.), and perhaps the common point these various forms have is the capacity to trigger emotional responses.

As prof. Dale points out, even though "cuteness" is part of our everyday life and it "has proliferated widely in the global Internet age, it remains relatively unstudied".<sup>73</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Rodica Frențiu, "The 'Self-Shaping' of Culture and its Ideological Resonance: The Complicity of Ethos and Pathos in the Japanese Advertising Discourse"..., 107.

<sup>72</sup> Christine Yano, *Pink Globalization...*, 67.

<sup>73</sup> See the Cute Studies Portal at: <https://www.cutestudies.org/about-cute-studies> (Accessed in April 2021).