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Kyara Nihon: uncovering Japanese characters

A study on some of the characters that inhabit the Land of the Rising Sun.

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『人を信じよ、しかし、その百倍も自らを信じよ。』
手塚治虫

“Believe in people but believe in yourself a hundred times more.”

—Osamu Tezuka

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to show the importance that the *kyara* phenomenon has got within the Japanese society.

This research will start with a brief introduction on the feature of anthropomorphism. Why start by off by taking a look at anthropomorphism?

Because, over the years, anthropomorphic representations have been absorbed by Japanese society and have become a sort of innate characteristic of Japan: they can be found in *emakimono* dating back to the 12th and 13th century, in some of the *ukiyo*e prints realized between the 17th and 19th century and, even more, in the contemporary manga, anime and, of course, *kyara*. Revealing that, these characters, aren't just some *kawaii* representations created to entertain children or sponsor a company product.

They are real inhabitants of the land, taking part in many aspects of the everyday life of Japan: nobody would be startled to go to the bank and find there to greet him the fluffy mascot of an otter. There is nothing to be surprised of. In Japan is perfectly normal.

The purpose of this research is to point out the uniqueness of *kyara*. Hence, it will focus especially on *yuru kyara* ("wobbly characters") and on some of the other types of the countless characters that inhabits the Land of the Rising Sun.

The *kyara* phenomenon is more than a simple *kawaii* representation, it is part of the Japanese culture. Since, only something that has been completely absorbed by a culture to the extent that it is no more detachable from it, could be really called part of it. Under the exterior surface of mascots are hidden a thousand of layers, from the bond with historical art representations, to the active role that they have in the contemporary society.

Keywords: Japan, Japanese art, Japanese society, *Yuru kyara*, Japanese characters

要旨

日本はキャラの国である。だから、このキャラの検討を通じて、日本も知られる。外国的な目で見ればこのキャラは変な物として考えられるかもしれない。でも、キャラは日本の文化に対して大事な意味がある。実のところ、キャラの中では日本の文化と関係する物が隠れている。本研究の目的は、日本で生み出したキャラを分析し、このキャラは日本の社会と密接な関係があることを証明する。また、キャラ文化が日本だけの典型的な現象なので、すっかり理解できるようにキャラの代表的な例を検討する。

この本論文は3章に分割されている。第1章では、過去に注目し、簡潔にキャラの由来についての仮説を立てる。大勢のキャラは擬人化された動物や人間のような生物なので、出発点は擬人化になる。なぜなら、擬人化は日本の宗教と関係があるからである。具体的に日本の神道と仏教に対しての擬人化の思想を分析する。また、擬人化が最も使用された分野は美術である。だから、日本の歴史を通じて、擬人化された美術品を配慮する。古代の縄文時代の土偶、平安時代で制作された鳥獣人物戯画と付喪神絵巻と江戸時代の浮世絵を紹介する。特に、平安時代の二つの優れた画家に注目し、彼らのキャラの特徴を分析する。この第1章では、擬人化の傾向は日本人の真の表現だということを論証する。

第2章は現在日本に住んでいるキャラの章である。まず、キャラという人物はどのようなものであるかという疑問点を明らかにする。だから、例として、伊藤剛と東浩紀と Marc Steinbergの「キャラ」論を手短に検討する。

可愛いという概念を分析する。可愛さはキャラを企画の大事なポイントになり、可愛さを伝えるための特別な特徴を紹介する。そして、日本なら可愛いキャラの代表者はハローキティである。キティの魅力と有力を紹介する。次に、漫画とアニメの世界に入り、ハローキティの前任者キャラを紹介する。というのは、治虫手塚が制作された鉄腕アトム

である。鉄腕アトムは初めて「キャラ」になり、この章は彼の独立の例を紹介する。また、このキャラクターとして重要なキャラデザインの変化が目にし、今後のキャラ制作に影響を与える。そして、アンパンマンを紹介する。このヒーローはキャラの一番代表ということを証する。最後に労働キャラに注目し、さまざまな例を分析する。特にマーケティングキャラの中ではキウイブラザーズというキャラを分析し、キャラのマーケティング前略の例として決められた。

第3章では日本の社会におけるゆるキャラの現象に焦点を当てる。ゆるキャラはなぜ日本の社会に大事な意味があるかという質問を答える文章である。この答をうまく見つけるためにいろいろなゆるキャラの人物を分析する。なぜかという、ゆるキャラは他のキャラより人間と密接な関係が結ばれるからである。ゆるキャラは着ぐるみとして制作し、日本人に対して着ぐるみだけでなく、本物の生物である。くまモンとふなっしーというゆるキャラの検討を通じて、ゆるキャラは精神と心を打たれる力があることを証明する。最後ににゃんごすたーというゆるキャラを紹介する。にゃんごすたーはの主な目的は当地を宣伝されるけれども、日本人は本当にこの目的に関心があるかどうか最後の章では明らかにする。

最後に、本論文を要約し、この研究の結論をのべる。そして、問題点をあがり、この研究を進める課題を提案する。

Introduction

Japan is the land of characters. At the same time characters are a part of Japan. By analyzing them it is possible to discover many facades of the Land of the Rising Sun. Considered by a foreign point of view, they could seem strange or bizarre. But they have a great significance in Japanese culture.

What lies underneath *kyara* is a substratum of multiple connections with the culture that created them. This research main goal is to prove the bond between the world of characters and the culture who gives them life; to disclose *kyara*'s communicative power. To fully understand that this phenomenon is typical of Japan, it is necessary to analyze this type of characters more closely.

The first chapter is a brief overview of the past. Following the course of Japanese history, it tries to present which could have been the ancestors and first representations of *kyara*. Since a great number of them is depicted as anthropomorphized animals or human-like creatures, the starting point will be anthropomorphism. The religious relevance of anthropomorphism and its link with religious beliefs, with *Shintō* and Buddhism, will be also analyzed in this chapter. Then, the attention heads towards the field in which it is expressed at its best: art. Catching some of the most representative examples of anthropomorphism from the great artworks of the past: from possible connection with the ancient *dogū* of Jōmon period, to the amusing scrolls of Heian period, and the extraordinary *ukiyo-e* of Edo period. The chapter ends with a focus on the characters created by two of the most unique *ukiyo-e* artists: Kawanabe Kyōsai and Utagawa Kuniyoshi. This focus on the *kyara* of the past aims to underline that anthropomorphic representations have become, over the years, a true expression of Japanese people.

The second chapter gives a brief overview on the different typologies of characters that permeate contemporary Japan, introducing some examples of Japanese *kyara* born in the 20th century. It will start with a brief overview of *kyara*'s definitions from some famous scholars.

Then, the following section will analyze the concept of cuteness since it is a key feature when designing a character. Moreover, it has a relevance in Japan since it is connected to the *kawaii* aesthetics and culture. A phenomenon that will be explained right after the

analysis of cuteness. Then, Hello Kitty will be taken into consideration as a representative character of *kawaii*-ness. Right after, the attention will be focused on other types of characters. From Tezuka Osamu's Astro Boy, one of the first "independent" *kyara*, and Anpanman, from the same world of manga and cartoons. To the category of working *kyara*, who inhabit the daily life of Japanese people. Among working *kyara* will be examined the three categories of instructional, warning and advertising *kyara*. The last category, of advertising characters, focus on the case of Kiwi Brothers; as an example that proves the impressive power of using a marketing strategy with *kyara*.

In the third chapter the main protagonists will be *yuru kyara*. This part will try to clarify the reason why this type of *kyara* is so significant for Japanese people. To do so, the following sections of the chapter will present the cases of various characters like Kumamon, Funassyi and Nyango Star. *Yuru kyara* distinguish from other characters because they can create a bond with people, making them feel at ease and carefree. Moreover, they are considered as real, true "creatures". For Japanese people there is nobody inside the customs, the *kyara* are just *yara*. At the end of the chapter, the example of Nyango Star will try to point out if people that love *kyara* are really after the message or sponsoring purpose, or if they are just following *kyara* because they like them.

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Chapter 1 - A bond with the past

1.1 Anthropomorphism and religions

Japanese predilection for characterization and personification that extends for centuries before the modern era. [...] A whimsical synthesis of Buddhist beliefs in the relational nature of life and of the animism underlying Japan's native religion, Shinto. Today, this tradition manifests itself most visibly in the country's seemingly insatiable appetite for anthropomorphic character designs. Then and now, the Japanese possess a knack for transforming inanimate objects and abstract concepts into characters, complete with their own names, personalities, and even histories.¹

As underlined in Matthew Alt and Yoda Hiroko's book about characters from Japan, there is an invisible thread that connects *kyara* キャラ² with religions and anthropomorphism. The last one has been part of Japan since ancient times.

Early traces of it can be found in the first piece of Japanese literature, the *Kojiki*³, "Record of Ancient Matters" (712 AD). The princess Toyotama-hime during the birth of her son transforms herself in a *wani*⁴ and the god Ōkuninushi tries to help a talking hare in need of help.⁵

The field, in which anthropomorphic representations have been portrayed the most, is art. Before diving deep into some of these representative Japanese artworks, it is important to clarify the meaning of anthropomorphism.

This term derives from the Greek *anthropos* (human) and *morphe* (form, appearance). It refers to the act of attributing human characteristics, traits, intentions, emotions to non-human animals or objects. Even Charles Darwin in his book *The expression of the emotions in man and animals* (1872) noticed this human tendency to portray non-human beings and animals as humanlike beings.⁶

¹ Matthew Alt and Yoda Hiroko, *Hello, Please! Very Helpful: Super Kawaii Characters from Japan*, (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2007), 12.

² See glossary.

³ See glossary.

⁴ See glossary.

⁵ Paolo Villani (a cura di), *Kojiki. Un racconto di antichi eventi*, (Venezia: Letteratura universale Marsilio, 2006), 52,75.

⁶ Daniel Mota-Rojas et al., "Anthropomorphism and Its Adverse Effects on the Distress and Welfare of

For which reason do human have this habit of anthropomorphizing parts of the reality around them?

From a psychological perspective, professor Nicholas Epley tries to give some explanations to this tendency. The first one concerns social reasons; to create a connection, empathize with the other part, like in usual social relations. The second one, to make sense of the world, of what we don't know very well, to feel like having a sort of control over it. The third reason is cognitive and automatic.⁷

Since we are humans, we see the world from our lenses. Human brain is always in the seek for explanations and, as we are social animals, when we face another being, unconsciously, we try to decode what it is thinking or trying to do. It is a habit that is part of humans since young age. Children name their toys and give them a humanlike behaviour in a way that is totally natural, almost instinctive.

Another important aspect, that should not be forgotten when considering anthropomorphism in Japan, is its strong connection with Shintō (神道, “the way of the gods”).

Shintō has no founder or chief figure, no canonical manuscripts, it is an ethnic religion, indissolubly rooted in Japan. Core of it is the communication with *kami* (神). They are spiritual entities, mysterious and evasive, bearers of a powerful energy that could be good or evil. Therefore, rituals become essential to maintain the relationship with them. The ritual must be perfectly conducted, it needs a strict self-discipline and requires self-abandonment inside of it.

The energy that lives in the *kami* is also inside humans and nature. Then animals, but also objects, could be containers or manifestations of the *kami*. Unity is at the base of everything. All is invisibly connected. The first humans were born from the divine world, nature too, also the ancestors from the past become some protective deities that take care of their family. Everything in nature is sacred: forests, rivers, mountains, fields; where life flows, there the mystical energy flows too.⁸

Therefore, the animistic aspect of this religion perceives nature and all its elements not

Companion Animals”, *Animals (Basel)*, no. 11 (November 15, 2021). <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani11113263>

⁷ Nicholas Epley, “A mind like mine: The exceptionally ordinary underpinnings of anthropomorphism.”, *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*, Vol 3 no.4 (August 2018): 591-598. <https://doi.org/10.1086/699516>

⁸ Massimo Raveri, *Itinerari nel sacro. L'esperienza religiosa in Giappone, 2nd ed.* (Libreria Editrice Cafoscarina, 2006), 253-256.

as something detached from humans, but as indivisible from it. For this reason, in ancient Japan, there was no word to describe nature since the concept of it didn't exist. It was conceived as "an ensemble of mountains, rivers, trees, and so on". Only with the influence of Chinese culture Japanese people started to conceive "nature" and call it with some new nouns and expressions.⁹

Since, from ancient times, this religion has been influencing a lot the Japanese way of life and thinking, Japanese people are already accustomed to the idea that an object, plant or animal could have his own "soul".

In Shintō a lot of animals are included in the religious cults and belief. For example, the fox is associated to Inari, the *kami* of rice and harvest. She is supposed to be a goddess, descended from heaven during a famine at the time of creation of Japan. To help the poor starving inhabitants of the land she carries with her some cereal or grain, after identified with *ine* 稲 (rice); something precious and treasured by Japanese people.¹⁰ Then, why did Japanese people start to associate this deity with fox?

Japanese people of the past noticed that foxes have the same biological "rhythms" of Inari: foxes started to get close to villages from the day in which people believed the goddess¹¹ had descended on earth, until the end of the harvest, in autumn. Moreover, like her, they "climb down" from a divine realm. In fact, mountains were considered to be the residence of divine and treated as a holy place. Given the incredible similarities between the two, as an unconditional reflex, villagers started to adopt foxes as Inari's messengers.¹²

This way of perceiving the *kitsune* (狐, fox) shows how, for Japanese people, there is a link between the "worlds" (divine-animal-human). Most of the time foxes are depicted as mischievous, they can take possession of a person's mind and body. Moreover, they

⁹ Aldo Tollini, "Japanese Buddhism and Nature. Man and the Natural Phenomena in the Quest for Enlightenment," in *Rethinking Nature in Contemporary Japan*, ed. Bonaventura Ruperti, Silvia Vesco and Carolina Negri (Venezia: Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 2017), 81-82.

<http://edizionicafoscari.unive.it/it/edizioni4/libri/978-88-6969-172-0/>

¹⁰ Morris Edward Opler and Robert Seido Hashima. "The rice goddess and the fox in Japanese religion and folk practice" *American Anthropologist* 48, (1946):44.

<https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1946.48.1.02a00050>

¹¹ *hatsūma* 初午, "first 'horse day' in lunar calendar", usually in February or March. It is also the anniversary of establishment of Fushimi Inari Shrine in Kyōto, one of the most ancient shrines built to celebrate the *kami* Inari.

¹² "稲荷神社とおキツネさん", Kasama Inari Jinja official site, accessed December 2, 2022, <http://www.kasama.or.jp/history/index3.html>

can transform into humans, in particular, beautiful women.¹³

It was after the arrival of Buddhism, in the 6th century, that anthropomorphic representations have made a more concrete appearance in the Japanese scene.

In the Japanese Shingon school (真言宗, *shingonjū*)¹⁴ all the phenomena, including those belonging to nature, and human beings, are in the realm of Buddhahood.

At the end of the 13th century, Dōgen¹⁵ introduced a new conception of Buddhahood and nature. There is *no difference* between animate and inanimate, they both are equally Buddha-nature, since all the universe is enlightened. Accepting reality for “what it is”, in her all buddha-nature constitution.¹⁶ So humans might be reborn as animals in one of the six realms.¹⁷

Shintō and Buddhism, unconsciously or not, have influenced the first anthropomorphic representation of animals and objects in the history of Japan. Both religions share the same “appetite” for anthropomorphic representations. This desire lays too in the substratum of Japanese culture and, through the course of history, has shaped the conception that Japanese have of nature and animals. Creating a sort of thin and easy-to-cross boundary between the human and animal world. Leading to the creation of a thousand of characters in Japan. A tendency that has been developing, and intensifying, over time.

1.2 Taking a sneak peek at *kyara*'s ancestors

To have a look at one of the first anthropomorphic representations of animals in Japanese history, it is necessary to go back in time until the origins of the archipelago; rewinding back until the Jōmon¹⁸ period (10.500- 300 BCE)¹⁹.

People of that time were hunters, gatherers and fishermen. Despite this tendency to be a

¹³ Morris and Hashima. “The rice goddess and the fox in Japanese religion and folk practice”, 46-48.

¹⁴ Esoteric Buddhist sect, introduced in Japan from China in the 9th century. In Shingon the attainment of the final wisdom of the Buddha can be obtained through special rituals. Employing body, speech and mind, symbolic gestures and mental concentration.

¹⁵ Dōgen Zenji (1200-1253), one of the greatest Japanese Buddhist philosophers and masters. Founder of the Sōtō Zen Buddhism in Japan and the Eihei Monastery. (Today the main training temple for Sōtō Zen)

¹⁶ Tollini, “Japanese Buddhism and Nature. Man and the Natural Phenomena in the Quest for Enlightenment,”: 85-89.

¹⁷ *Rokudō* (六道, “Six paths”), a Buddhist term that refers to the six posthumous worlds to which the soul transmigrates, in an endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth until it achieves the enlightenment.

¹⁸ The meaning of Japanese word Jōmon (縄文) is “straw rope pattern”. It refers to the custom, that characterized the period, of decorating pottery with cord patterns.

¹⁹ The division for this period varies between the academics. In this research has been considered the division in six periods given by Encyclopædia Britannica:

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Japan/History>

nomadic society, they started to settle and cultivate. This change of habits is reflected in the production of Jōmon artifacts. The manufacture of portable vessels, useful in campsites and easy to carry during the migrations, had a variation: their purpose wasn't only practical, they started to be seen also as something that could be decorated. Decorations started to change, experimenting with a variety of materials and new patterns.²⁰ This new point of view, that considers a more “artistic” side of the manufacture, is present in some of the following productions of ceramic vessels from the Middle Jōmon period. (2500-1500 BCE) Some ceramics were characterized by their exuberant shapes, especially the “flame” ones. Others had a less peculiar shape, but they were decorated with modeled images on their rims.²¹

Jōmon people had their own system of belief and religious rites. Thanks to this religious system of beliefs *dogū*²² were born. These little clay figurines were probably representations of spirits, supernatural beings, worshipped by people of that time.

They had such an important meaning to them that their production multiplied. Most of figurines are different female representations, a theory suggests that could be a sort of Earth mother goddess²³. Among them there is one peculiar creation that could be considered the first figurative representation of anthropomorphism in Japanese art.

This figurine (Fig.1) is a mixture of human and feline features. The face and head have features of a cat, while the lower part is a female human body. This bizarre anthropomorphic figure seems to represent a spirit, beyond the horizon of human experience; probably the Jōmon people chose a cat for its mysterious, shy and fugitive character. An animal that could stimulate people's fantasy and religious imagination.²⁴

This *dogū* is obviously a concrete example of the influence that religious beliefs have on the daily life of Japanese since ancient times but, most of all, it shows the indissoluble connection that exists between animals and the human world. Even in ancient times humans tended to associate a human character to animals. This animism, giving importance to objects and nature elements, survives time and emerges, as seen before, also in the Shintō religion.

²⁰ Penelope Mason and Donald Dinwiddie, *History of Japanese Art, 2nd ed.* (New Jersey: Upper Saddle River, Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004), 14-17.

²¹ Mason and Dinwiddie, *History of Japanese Art, 2nd ed.*, 18-19.

²² See glossary.

²³ Mason and Dinwiddie, *History of Japanese Art, 2nd ed.*, 20.

²⁴ Johannes Maringer, “Clay Figurines of the Jōmon Period: A Contribution to the History of Ancient Religion in Japan”, *History of Religions*, Volume 14, no.2, (November 1974): 130-131.
<https://doi.org/10.1086/462719>



Fig. 1 Human/Feline figurine, Kurokoma site, Yamanashi Prefecture. Middle Jōmon (2500-1500BCE). Earthenware: height 10 in. (25.2 cm).Tōkyō National Museum

A possible connection between *dogū* and *yuru kyara*²⁵ has been pointed out even by Jun Miura, illustrator, mangaka²⁶, novelist, essayist, and musician; the first one who coined the name *yuru kyara*.²⁷

In a 2021 interview²⁸ with Akihide Mochizuki (Chie editor of the magazine *Jomonzine*, official Jōmon Ambassador for southern Hokkaido), he converses about *dogū* at an exhibition (*Jōmon 2021: Jōmon people who lived in Tōkyō*) hold at the Edo-Tōkyō Museum. While looking at “Makku” (Fig.2) *dogū* he noticed that he resembles the features of a local mascot:

This is totally a promotional local mascot “*Yuru-kyara* “! There must have been a popular mascot designer in Machida back then.²⁹

His intuition was correct since, the Machida city has its own “Jōmon inspired” *yuru kyara*: Makkuu (Fig.3). As the name suggests, the character is the accurate transposition of the clay figurine in a more “mascot” way.



Fig. 2 Hollow *dogū* (known as “Makku”), Excavated from Tabata-higashi Site, Machida. Machida City Designated Tangible Cultural Property. Collection of the Machida City Board of Education.



Fig.3 “Makku” mascot created by Machida City

²⁵ See glossary. An insight on these characters will be given in chapter three.

²⁶ See glossary.

²⁷ To have a look at Jun Miura’s non-stop activity consult the website:

<http://miurajun.net/profile/profile.html>

²⁸ James Watt,” On Being a Fan – A conversation between Jun Miura & Akihide Mochizuki: It’s time to talk about the Jomon period”, interview by Murayama Akira, Art News Tokyo, Tokyo Metropolitan Foundation for History and Culture, November 2021.

<https://www.rekibun.or.jp/en/art/artnewstokyo/interview/Jomon/>

²⁹ Watt, interview.

1.3 Animals and monsters

To find some other anthropomorphic traces in the history of Japan let's fast forward the time machine until Heian period (794-1185).

At that time Japan was under the control of some few aristocratic families, the country spent a period of relatively long peace where new forms of arts flourished: the cultivation of Japanese poetry, narrative masterworks like the *Genji monogatari*³⁰ and the birth of *yamato-e*.³¹ These new creations are the evidence of the desire, born in that period, to distance from Chinese influence, to create forms of expression exquisitely Japanese. As a result, *emakimono* (絵巻物, "Painted scroll") emerged for the first time. The tradition of illustrated scrolls also existed in China, but it was in Japan that the narrative potential was taken to its highest levels of expression.³²

A very innovative type of narrative, almost a precursor to illustrated books. In the horizontal oriented scrolls, the narrative passages are accompanied by illustrations, so that the reader could really immerse himself in the story.

They belonged not only to the court but also were useful to Buddhism; the scroll format was perfect for the monks who utilized them to pray, study or teach around villages.

The *Chōjū jinbutsu giga*³³ was born in this lively environment, more specifically around the 12th century, and it is nowadays a property of the Kōzanji temple of Kyōto. Traditionally the commissioning of this work is associated to the Emperor Go Shirakawa³⁴ (1127-92; r.1155-58), and the realization by some possible authors like aristocratic Buddhist monk Toba Sōjō (1053-1140). Even though, scholars like Mimi Yiengpruksawan question its "aristocratic" origin and suppose that it could have been made by someone coming from a lower social class. Entailing that its purpose could also be a satirical critique to the upper-class told by the painted tales of these folkloristic animals.³⁵

It is an *emakimono* composed by four scrolls, with painted illustrations and portions of texts. Unfortunately, over the centuries, it was cut apart by some collectors or warriors

³⁰ See glossary.

³¹ See glossary.

³² Mason and Dinwiddie, *History of Japanese Art, 2nd ed.*, 116.

³³ See glossary.

³⁴ He was a canny and unscrupulous politician, but also a very tolerant patron of arts.

³⁵ Mimi Yiengpruksawan, "Monkey Magic: How the 'Animals' Scroll Makes Mischief with Art Historians", *Orientalism. The monthly magazine for collectors and connoisseurs of Asian Art*, Vol 31, no.3 (March 2000):83.

who sold or keep it for personal studies. For this reason, some of the pieces were after reconstructed following what could have been the original order of the paintings. Some portions have also become part of private and museum collections.³⁶

The first two scrolls have some peculiar scenes of anthropomorphic animals painted inside. It is a “one of a kind” type of production. These new protagonists, the humorous scenes, a dynamic way of representing the facts, make them a unique form of art.

The scenes don't have passages of texts between the illustrations, they are a continuous narrative, black and white, resembling the contemporary comic strip type of language.

"Possibly the 'Animals' scroll was inspired by the ancient Indian stories of the Buddha's past lives known as jatakas, which often depict the Buddha and his disciples as monkeys, frogs and other animals in sometimes in comical situations. However, it remains to be determined in whether or not such stories were well known even in the monasteries at that time. The prospect is tantalizing and hints at an allegorical reading of the scroll in keeping with twelfth century ideas about reincarnation and the six paths of transmigration (rokudō) through sentient existence from heaven to hell, with one path being that of life as an animal."³⁷

As the anthropologist Mimi Yiengpruksawan suggests Buddhism could have influenced the choice of anthropomorphic animals as main characters of the scenes. Like the Buddhist representations of *jatakas*, they mimic human situations of the society of the Heian period. Frogs and rabbits competing in an archery tournament (Fig.4) while the



Fig. 4 蛙と兎の賭弓 (*kaeru to usagi no noriyumi*- Archery tournament of rabbits and frogs) details of *Chōjū giga*, 12th century (late Heian).



Fig.5 水遊び (*mizu asobi* – bathing, playing in the water), details of *Chōjū giga*, 12th century (late Heian).

³⁶ Yiengpruksawan, “Monkey Magic: How the 'Animals' Scroll Makes Mischief with Art Historians”, 7

³⁷ Yiengpruksawan, “Monkey Magic: How the 'Animals' Scroll Makes Mischief with Art Historians”, 80

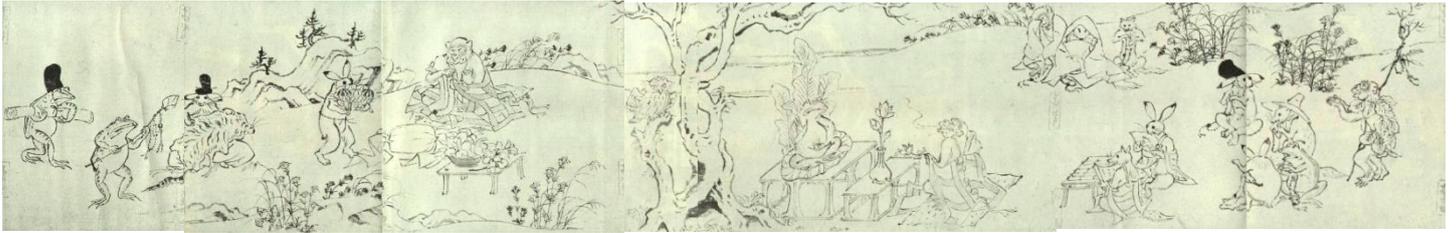


Fig. 6 猿僧正の法会 (*saru sōjō no hōe*- Buddhist ceremony of the great monkey monk) details of *Chōjū giga*, 12th century (late Heian).

foxes act as score keepers, rabbits and frogs dancing, wrestling, taking a bath (Fig.5) and even a monkey “monk” that is praying in front of a frog Buddha (Fig.6).

Simple, but effective, brush strokes are so skillfully used that, even without the presence of a text, the reader could understand what is happening in the scenes.

This anthropomorphic, comical, sort of “cute”, characterization of animals is something that in the future will be a key feature of a lot of *yuru kyara*’s designs.

Representations of anthropomorphized beings continued in the following centuries and, the next one taken in consideration, belongs to the Muromachi period (1338–1573). A time of changes that ended with the final steps towards the unification of Japan. In fact, during this period, social and political disorders, like the Ōnin War³⁸ (1467-1477), shook the country. Resulted in fractions, constant warfare among the many feudal lords (*daimyō*) until, by the end of the period, among them emerged the ones who will take Japan to its final reunification.³⁹

Another example of anthropomorphism from this troubled era is the *Tsukumogami emaki*⁴⁰. This scroll belongs to a genre of tales composed by the 14th and 16th century, known as *otogizōshi* 御伽草子.⁴¹

Tsukumogami 付喪神 or “tool specters” are objects that, after a span of one hundred years, receive souls and develop independent spirits, prone to trick people. They are resentful after having been abandoned by their human masters, whom they have loyally

³⁸ Civil war that broke out in Kyōto, caused by economic distress and the dispute over the shogunal succession. After the Heian period the power and influence of aristocrats and the emperor crumpled. They became only a hollow authority, and, in their place, a military government was established: the *bakufu*. The social class of warriors characterized the society and influenced it. At the head of this government system was the *Shōgun*, the military ruler. By the end of the period three *daimyo* stand out and will be reminded in history as the reunifiers of Japan: Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582), Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598) e Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616).

³⁹ For a more complete overview of the Muromachi period consult the Encyclopædia Britannica website: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Japan/The-Muromachi-or-Ashikaga-period-1338-1573>.

⁴⁰ See glossary.

⁴¹ The stories don’t have a single definition, the noun indicates short stories born for the purpose of entertainment and moral or religious edification.

served. In the stories they become vengeful and murderous spirits.⁴²

They also became useful examples of redemption for the previously mentioned Shingon sect of Esoteric Buddhism; to prove that even those evil spirits could repent of their wickedness.⁴³ This story of religious redemption and mysterious transformations has been told in the *Tsukumogami* scroll.

In occasion of the *susuharai* すす払い “cleaning the soot”⁴⁴, objects have been thrown out in the streets of the city. They get angry, since they have served for centuries the palace, and turn into *yōkai* 妖怪⁴⁵. They plan to take revenge on humans by doing mischievous things to them. But, in the end, they change their minds and start their training to achieve Buddhahood.⁴⁶ With the first transmutation, (Fig.7) on the objects appear little faces or animal-like paws.



Fig.7 *Tsukumogami emaki* 付喪神絵巻, copy of the Edo period (1603-1868), the original is by Tosa Mitsunobu (1434–1525), *emakimono*, National Diet Library

Then, (Fig.8) they become various types of *yōkai*, and some of them are in the form of anthropomorphized animals; even with similar poses as the one painted in the *Chojū giga*. In Fig.9 appears an animal with a flaming tail, really similar to the fox in the archery game of Fig.4.



Fig.8, *Tsukumogami emaki* 付喪神絵巻, copy of the Edo period (1603-1868), the original is by Tosa Mitsunobu (1434–1525), *emakimono*, National Diet Library

⁴² Noriko T.Reider, “Animating Objects: Tsukumogami ki and the Medieval Illustration of Shingon Truth”, *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (2009):232.

⁴³ T.Reider, “Animating Objects: Tsukumogami ki and the Medieval Illustration of Shingon Truth”:232.

⁴⁴ Ancient Japanese tradition of cleaning the house, palaces, also shrines and temples as a ritual to get rid of bad spirits. To “make space” for the good ones so that they could ensure fortune.

⁴⁵ See glossary.

⁴⁶ *Sashie to arasuji de tanoshimu otogizōshi dai gowa tsukumogami* 挿絵とあらすじで楽しむお伽草子 第5話 付喪神(つくもがみ) “Enjoy otogizōshi with illustrations and synopsis episode 5:

Tsukumogami”, Kyōto University Rare Materials Digital Archive, accessed December 2,2022.

https://rmda.kulib.kyoto-u.ac.jp/item/rb00013599/explanation/otogiz_05



Fig.9 *Tsukumogami emaki* 付喪神絵巻, copy of the Edo period (1603-1868), the original is by Tosa Mitsunobu (1434–1525), *emakimono*, National Diet Library

Every *yōkai* distinguishes itself from the others, has a particular behavior and background story. They have specific features, a mixture of elements that come from both the real and unreal world. Animals, real objects, spirits, demons from the traditional folklore and some undefined entities. “Simultaneously grotesque and charming, the *yōkai* can be seen as direct ancestors of the cute characters that populate modern Japan.”⁴⁷

1.4 Animal Prints

Another example that should be taken in consideration while discovering some of the possible *kyara*’s connections in the history of Japan, is *Ukiyoe* 浮世絵⁴⁸.

The birth of this new genre was influenced by the changes in the society of the Edo period (1603-1868). A period remembered for the enclosure of Japan (*sakoku* 鎖国), long peace, economic growth and political stability, and the birth of a new social class: *chōnin* 町人.⁴⁹ These “townsmen” were mainly merchants, considered as one of the lowest social classes, since they didn’t produce anything by themselves; they were only trading goods made by the “working” part of society. Nevertheless, they were the holders of most of the wealth at that time. *Chōnin* were looking for amusements, new ways to entertain themselves (and spend their money) and found them in the “pleasure” of some government-licensed quarters in Edo⁵⁰, today’s Tōkyō.

This cultural transformation, the new interests of the emerging class, lead a change also in the art of this period. *Ukiyoe* represented the present, the social life of that era,

⁴⁷ Matthew Alt and Yoda Hiroko, *Hello, Please! Very Helpful: Super Kawaii Characters from Japan*, 12.

⁴⁸ See glossary.

⁴⁹ See glossary.

⁵⁰ The government established the pleasure districts to fulfill *chōnin*’s request for leisure and amusements. The principal one was Yoshiwara in Edo. Isolated from the rest of the city, they were a sort of “alternative” world, with brothels, theatres, and teahouses always ready to welcome their news clients.

capturing also the daily life of common people with their habits and interests. Represented in an incredible variety of genres like, for example, *bijinga* 美人画⁵¹, *yakushae* 役者絵⁵², or views of the country landscapes and travel routes of the period.⁵³

At that time, *ukiyo-e* was an advertising and “commercial” product, there were more copies of a single print, printed to be sold and distributed; they had the same value as the contemporary magazines, posters of celebrities or pamphlets.⁵⁴

Among these new art productions are hidden some unique and interesting representations. Some prints that follow the past tradition of portraying anthropomorphized animals and *yōkai*, a subconscious reminder that they are subjects cherished by Japanese people, impossible to eradicate from their imaginary and life.

By the end of the Edo period, the intriguing figure of Kawanabe Kyōsai (1831-1889) stood out in the field of *ukiyo-e* production. He was highly individualistic, very prolific, prone to experiment with his rich imagination. An eccentric, talented figure, capable of creating some of the most outstanding *ukiyo-e* of that time. In his artistic path he met one of the genius of *ukiyo-e*: the passionate and free-spirited Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797-1861).⁵⁵

The encounter left its mark in Kyōsai’s art style, Kuniyoshi passed down to him the desire to catch motion, spirit, and force while painting⁵⁶. Kyōsai had an inclination for art since his childhood. So, at the age of six, he entered the master’s school, but spent there only two years; since his father was worried that Kuniyoshi’s rebel attitude could negatively influence his son.⁵⁷ A useless worry since his son kept his attitude and, maybe, that was one of the reasons why he kept on cultivating his incredible talent, realizing some amazing works in his career.

⁵¹ See glossary.

⁵² See glossary.

⁵³ A genre of *ukiyo-e* focused on landscapes. The artists captured some of the most iconic views of the country or tourists’ attractions. For example, Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858) portrayed a series of scenes from the Tōkaidō 東海道 “the eastern sea route”, in his collection of *The Fifty-three Stations of the Tōkaidō*. This historic route connected Ōsaka, Kyōto, and Edo, and it was known for its picturesque views.

⁵⁴ Manuela Capriati, “L’UKIYO-E COME ARTE «DI USO E CONSUMO»,” *Il Giappone*, vol.41, 2001: 45-46. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20753069>.

⁵⁵ *Neko, ga ikotsu... kibatsuna ukiyo-e de daininki! Utagawa Kuniyoshi no yūmeina sakuhin to shōgai o shōkai* 猫、がいこつ... 奇抜な浮世絵で大人気! 歌川国芳の有名な作品と生涯を紹介, Warakuweb, published September 3, 2019, <https://intojapanwaraku.com/jpart/2239/>

⁵⁶ Christopher Harding, “Kawanabe Kyōsai: the demon with a brush,” Royal Academy of Arts, published March 2, 2022, <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/kyosai-ra-magazine>

⁵⁷ Manuela Capriati, “KAWANABE KYŌSAI: Il Genio Comico Dell’era Meiji,” *Il Giappone*, vol. 42, 2002: 83-5. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20753084>.

1.4.1 Kuniyoshi's characters

Kuniyoshi utilized a specific symbolism in his prints, a well-hidden satire, gladly appreciated by the public.⁵⁸

With many of his prints Kuniyoshi wanted to tickle the watchers' sense of humor. Many of his *ukiyo-e* belong to the *asobie* 遊び絵⁵⁹ kind of prints. His *asobie* production branched out in a remarkable quantity of genres, always maintaining its final purpose: entertainment.⁶⁰

Concerning anthropomorphic representations, Kuniyoshi followed the tradition and created some unique *gijinga* 擬人化⁶¹*asobie*. His “characters” reinterpreted ancient legends of Japan, historical events, heroes, or simple scenes from daily life.⁶²

At first, it was a choice made to bypass the censorship imposed by the new reforms⁶³ that prohibited the display of actors and courtesans in the prints. He circumvented the ban with the help of the animal world.⁶⁴

In his series *Uo no kokoro* 魚の心 “Fish hearts”, (Fig.10 and Fig.11) since he couldn't portray *kabuki* actors as subjects, he decided to capture their expressions and let marine animals wear them.

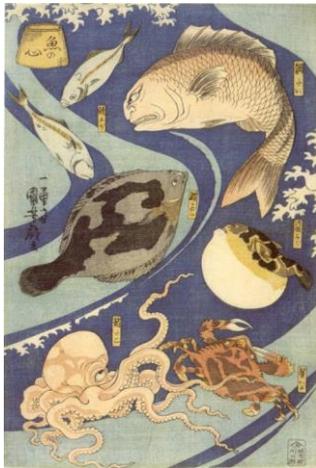


Fig.10, 魚の心 (*Uo no kokoro*- Fish hearts), Utagawa Kuniyoshi, ōban (26x 38 cm), 1842



Fig.11, 魚の心 (*Uo no kokoro*- Fish hearts), Utagawa Kuniyoshi, ōban (26x 38 cm), 1842

⁵⁸ Capriati, “L’UKIYO-E COME ARTE «DI USO E CONSUMO»,”57-58.

⁵⁹ See glossary.

⁶⁰ Capriati, “L’UKIYO-E COME ARTE «DI USO E CONSUMO»,”63.

⁶¹ See glossary.

⁶² Capriati, “L’UKIYO-E COME ARTE «DI USO E CONSUMO»,”72-73.

⁶³ The Tenpō reforms (1841-43). By several harsh measures and frugality, the government tried to restore the economic, social and financial condition of that time. The reforms were unsuccessful but affected many people, especially the ones who were working with entertainment and luxury goods.

⁶⁴ Warakuweb “猫、がいこつ…奇抜な浮世絵で大人気!歌川国芳の有名な作品と生涯を紹介。”

Kuniyoshi's camouflaging continued also with cats: in *Neko no suzumi* (Fig.12), the boatman is helping a cat-courtesan to get in the boat while a client is waiting for her on board. In *Oborozuki neko no sakari* (Fig.13) he depicted outright a red-light district scene: cat-courtesans are waiting inside the wooden building and observing the lively cat-life in the street outside. These drawings are more than just comical scenes.



Fig.12 猫のすずみ (*Neko no suzumi* - Cats enjoying the cool of evening), Utagawa Kuniyoshi, *uchiwae*, late Edo period



Fig.13 おぼろ月猫の盛 (*Oborozuki neko no sakari*- Pale Moon, Cats in season), Utagawa Kuniyoshi, *uchiwae*, late Edo Period

The characters are designed with care. Kuniyoshi paid attention to details, he was careful in the process of transfer “humanity” to the anthropomorphic protagonists of his prints. Evidence of his talent can be found in almost any of his works.

Kuniyoshi experimented with these types of characters and continued to represent them in several works. He chose anthropomorphic subjects not only because they were perfect actors for satire, but it could be that he continued to depict them because Japanese people really appreciated them.

In the following two *uchiwae* 団扇絵⁶⁵, Kuniyoshi gave life to cosmetics utensils and made them stroll out in the city on a summer evening.

In *Dōgai keshō no tawamure* (Fig.14) the human objects (like the mirror-lady in the middle) are enjoying the view of fireworks (drawn as hairpins) on a riverbank; while, on the background, a comb has become a big black bridge.

⁶⁵ See glossary.

In the following *Dōgai keshō no tawamure uchiwae* (Fig.15) other make up tools-characters are chatting together on the shore of Ōmori⁶⁶, admiring the landscape full of boats (drawn as combs and brushes) on the water. They are so skillfully drawn that there is no boundary between what is human and the objects, both parts melted together and gave life to a brand-new character.



Fig.14 花火 (Hanabi – Fireworks), 道外化粧のたわむれ (*Dōgai keshō no tawamure*- Brushes with Make-up off the Beaten Path), Utagawa Kuniyoshi, *uchiwae*, 1843-1846



Fig.15 大森 (Ōmori), 道外化粧のたわむれ (*Dōgai keshō no tawamure*- Brushes with Make-up off the Beaten Path), Utagawa Kuniyoshi, *uchiwae*, 1843-1846

Another exquisite example of Kuniyoshi’s anthropomorphic creations is the series *Kingyō zukushi*. Goldfishes, frogs and turtles are anthropomorphized protagonists of some funny and cute sketches. This series of adorable creatures is made of nine *ukiyo*e prints that portray the life of the middle-class people of that time. *Tamaya tamaya* (Fig.16) depicts the scene of a soap bubble seller goldfish, some other goldfishes, a tadpole and two turtles, are gathering to see the underwater bubbles. *Bon bon* shows the tradition of Obon⁶⁷, with goldfishes, and a little frog, celebrating the event like the people of Edo period. They are holding their fishes-like hands together, while walking and singing the traditional songs.

Sake no zashiki (Fig.18) is the scene of a drinking party or maybe a *geisha*’s performance: a *geisha*⁶⁸ goldfish is playing the *shamisen*⁶⁹ while other two are dancing and a customer is enjoying a cup of sake. Behind him there is a frog that seems shocked by all that bustle.

⁶⁶ Coastal area on the south of Edo (modern Tōkyō). Its name means big forest 大森 since, in the past, it was not an urban settlement but a huge, wooded area.

⁶⁷ See glossary.

⁶⁸ See glossary.

⁶⁹ See glossary.



Fig.16 玉や玉や (Tamaya tamaya- Bubble vendor), 金魚づくし (Kinyō zukushi- All kind of goldfishes), Utagawa Kuniyoshi, 1839-1842



Fig.17 ぼんぼん (Bonbon- The Bonbon song), 金魚づくし (Kinyō zukushi- All kind of goldfishes), Utagawa Kuniyoshi, 1839-1842



Fig.18 酒のざしき (Sake no zashiki- A drinking party), 金魚づくし (Kinyō zukushi- All kind of goldfishes), Utagawa Kuniyoshi, 1839-1842

Kuniyoshi characters survived the passing of time and, even nowadays, release completely their freshness. Also preserving their charm and appealing energy. In fact, the contemporary toy company Kaiyodo realized two collections inspired by Kuniyoshi's *ukiyo-e* characters: one composed by the six protagonists of *Sake no zashiki* (Fig.19) and the other made by his anthropomorphic cats (Fig.20).

The fact that they, still nowadays, are an appealing good that can be sold as cute miniatures, is the incontrovertible evidence that, already in the Edo period, there might be a concealed consciousness of what makes a character a true one.



Fig.19 *Sake no zashiki*- Set of goldfish miniatures, Mini Q Miniatures, Kaiyodo company

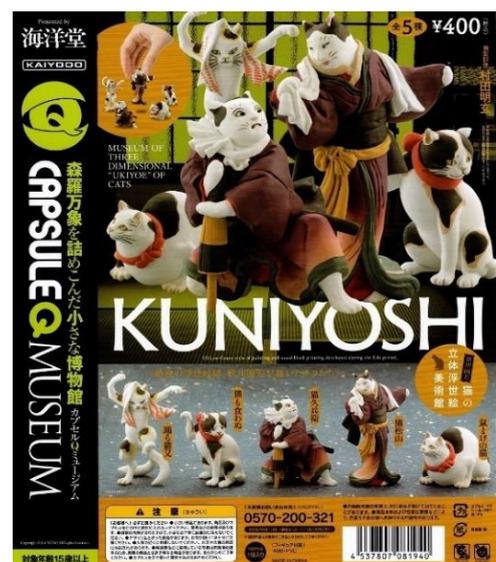


Fig.20 Utagawa Kuniyoshi's 3D cats, Capsule Q Museum, Kaiyodo company

1.4.2 Kyōsai's characters



Fig.21 Kawanabe Kyosai Gaki Bonkei, Mini Q miniatures, Kaiyodo company

The above-mentioned Kaiyodo company produced another series of *ukiyo-e* inspired miniatures, (Fig.21) they are the ones created by Kawanabe Kyōsai. It could be a coincidence or not since both artists created some of the most outstanding *ukiyo-e* of that time. They shared the same interest in supernatural characters, nature and animals, comical and satirical scenes.

Kyōsai's characters are wild and energetic. He has a talent in characterizing animals, painting their expressions, giving them a superb scenic presence. A personal ability that might have been improved thanks to his previous academic studies and his passion for drawing.⁷⁰ His preparatory drawing *Chōjū giga nekomata to tanuki* (Fig.22) shows a group of animals (a raccoon dog, a demon cat, two moles and a weasel) while they are probably doing some rite or excited dance. As the name suggests, there is a high chance that Kyōsai, while drawing it, has been inspired by the first *giga* scrolls of Heian period. Not only for the title, but also for the animals' design: their curved poses and excited forepaws resemble the ones of ancient times. (Fig. 23 and Fig.24)

The dancing animals have a strong personality, able to catch the watcher's attention and take him into their crazy dance.



Fig.22 鳥獸戯画 猫又と狸 (*Chōjū giga nekomata to tanuki*- Frolicking Animals, Cat and Raccoon), Kawanabe Kyōsai, preparatory drawing, Meiji period



Fig.23 蛙と兔の相撲 (*kaeru to usagi no sumō*- *sumō* of rabbit and frog), detail of *Chōjū giga*, 12th century (late Heian)



Fig.24 猿蛙兔の刀打ち (*saru kaeru usagi no katanauchi*- The stroke of sword of monkey, frog and rabbit), detail of *Chōjū giga*, 12th century (late Heian)

⁷⁰ After studying for two years at Kuniyoshi's school he attended the Kanō school, where he studied the traditional Chinese and Japanese painting, copying traditional subjects like Buddhist saint and Japanese legendary figures. When he completed his studies at the Kanō school he decided to start an independent career, developing, little by little, its own style.

Kyōsai created for himself his art name (his real name was Shūzaburō), combining the character 狂(kyō), meaning “comic” or “parodic”; with 齋 (sai), meaning “room” or “studio”.⁷¹ A name that describes his wittiness towards the world.

In 1881 he published *Kyōsai Manga*, a collection of forty comical prints of classical subjects like Chinese demons, deities and legendary figures.

In one of the pages (Fig.22) is portrayed the parody of a traditional scene where the immortal Kinko-sennin rides a dragon that is flying over Mount Fuji.⁷² In Kyōsai painting the dragon became a giggly-gigantic flying carp, and the human figure is substituted with an anthropomorphic cat and his *shamisen*.



Fig.25 Carp and Cat on Mount Fuji, Kawanabe Kyōsai, *Kyōsai Manga*, 1881

Kyōsai had an incredible talent in creating anthropomorphic animal characters. Among all of them he had a special place for frogs. He started to sketch them at three-years-old and never stopped through all his life.⁷³

He sketched in front of this little amphibious, analyzing movements, poses, capturing their essence so that it stayed in his mind even when he was drawing without references. They could really be called the Kyōsai most representative *kyara* since, in drawing them, he unconsciously gathered all his wide imagination, skills and sense of humor.

The frogs on paper are more human than ever. Dancing and playing *shamisen* (Fig.26), going to school (Fig.27) or even at war (Fig.28). Even watchers from nowadays can't help but smile when looking at these drawings.

⁷¹ Harding. “Kawanabe Kyōsai: the demon with a brush.”

⁷² Capriati, “KAWANABE KYŌSAI: Il Genio Comico Dell’era Meiji,”86,89.

⁷³ Capriati, “KAWANABE KYŌSAI: Il Genio Comico Dell’era Meiji,”91.



Fig.26 Sketches of frogs dressed in lotus leaves dancing to drum and samisen, Kawanabe Kyōsai, ink and colors on paper, 1879



Fig.27 Frog School, Kawanabe Kyōsai, unmounted album leaf: ink and light colour on paper, 19.4 x 29.8 cm, Israel Goldman Collection, London, early 1870s.



Fig.28 Sketch, Kawanabe Kyōsai, ink on paper, 45.2 x 34.5 cm, 19th century

In his last years, Kyōsai witnessed important changes in the story of Japan. In 1853, with the arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry in the Edo Bay, the country had to open its borders to the rest of the world and, after a few years, the beginning of Meiji period (1868-1912). The restoration of the emperor as head of Japan, the rush to modernization, new technologies, lifestyle and influences (mostly European) invaded Japan. This new “westernization” wasn’t appreciated by Kyōsai, who didn’t approve some of the new changes, and depicted them with strong satirical images.⁷⁴

As previously mentioned, supernatural creatures were another marked preference in Kyōsai’s works.

⁷⁴ Capriati, “KAWANABE KYŌSAI: Il Genio Comico Dell’era Meiji,”94.

One splendid example of these spooky characters is the *Bake-Bake Gakkō* (Fig.29) *ukiyo-e*.

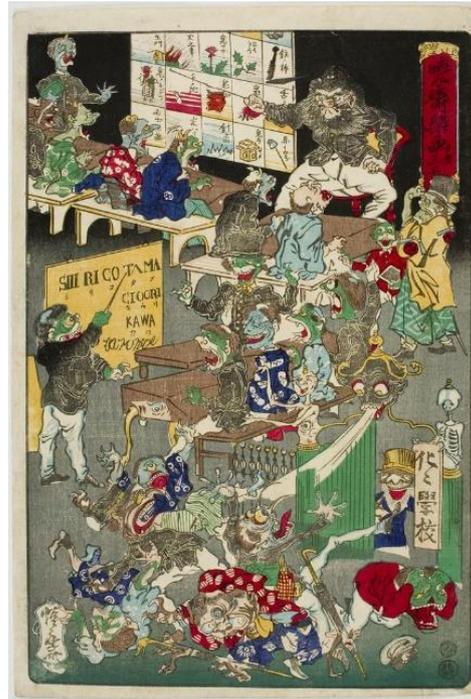


Fig. 29 化々學校 (*Bakebake gakkō*- School for Spooks), No. 3 from the series 暁斎楽画第三号, (*Kyōsai rakuga daisangō*- Drawings for Pleasure by Kyōsai), Kawanabe Kyōsai, 1874

With the help of folkloristic *yōkai* and some other supernatural creatures, he criticized the educational reform of 1872, that made school attendance compulsory in Japan (as in the contemporary West). Many people of that time saw it as problematic change since it would take away children labour from the fields.

Shōki, a mythological demon hunter figure, has been forced “by the new system” to become the westernized teacher of a class full of chaotic demons.⁷⁵ With this funny “class of spooks” Kyōsai mocked the new government changes in a very “Japanese” way: by using characters.

Both Kuniyoshi and Kyōsai show that anthropomorphic representations have become ineradicable from Japanese society. Chosen for their satirical effect, to convey messages or because they are something that people like and, in which, they feel represented. Inside a character are unintentionally projected the likings, beliefs, ways of thinking and reality perception of its creator, or the culture that surrounds them.

⁷⁵ Philip Kennedy, “A Crazy Sake-Fuelled Trip to Kawanabe Kyōsai’s School for Spooks,” *Illustration Chronicles*, published May 12, 2016. <https://illustrationchronicles.com/A-Crazy-Sake-Fuelled-Trip-to-Kawanabe-Kyosai-s-School-for-Spooks>

Chapter 2- *Kyara* in Japan

2.1 What is a *kyara*?

Defining *kyara* isn't simple. Many scholars have theorized various definition about the concept of character and *kyara* in Japan. This research will consider the following definitions of *kyara* and characters.

With the term character, the manga critic Itō Gō makes an essential division between キャラクター *kyarakutā* (“character”) and キャラ *kyara*.

Kyara isn't just a simple drawing or image. It is a figure composed by simple lines, with a proper name, something that almost has a personality, that is perceived as it has its own “presence”:

多くの場合、比較的に簡単な線画を基本とした図像で描かれ、固有名で名指されることによって(あるいは、それを期待させることによって)、「人格・のようなもの」としての存在感を感じさせるもの。⁷⁶

While a character is based on the presence of a *kyara*, it can be read as the representation of a “body” with a personality, something that, through the text, (“behind” it, 背後, *haigō*), makes feel like there is some kind of “life”:

「キャラ」の存在感を基盤として、「人格」を持った「身体」の表象として読むことができ、テキストの背後にその「人生」や「生活」を想像させるものと定義できる。⁷⁷

Then, Itō noticed that *kyara* distinguish themselves from others because of their independence. They can exist even detached from their story of origin, therefore these interdependent characters can “loan” themselves to multiple context and stories.

The most representative example of a character who proved this interdependence is Astro Boy.⁷⁸ Who, despite coming from the world of manga and anime, showed that a character

⁷⁶ Itō Gō, *Tezuka izu deddo: hirakareta manga hyōgenron e* “Tezuka is dead: towards the manga representation theory”, NTT publishing, 2005, 95.

伊藤剛、『テヅカ・イズ・デッド: ひらかれたマンガ表現論へ』、NTT出版、2005、95。

⁷⁷ Itō Gō, *Tezuka izu deddo...*, 96

⁷⁸ A focus on Astro Boy will be given on the following 2.3 section: “Astro Boy: the first steps towards *kyara*”.

could gain a “communicative” strength. The *kyara* can speak through different medias, from TV shows and manga to more “physical” themed objects. The independent aspect of these characters has been noticed even by the cultural critic Azuma Hiroki.

He noticed that even characters with some basic elements and not a strong background story behind them, like the ones of *Digi Charat*⁷⁹, could become a strong *kyara* in Japan.

The protagonist of *Digi Charat*, Dejiko, lacks narrative background⁸⁰, before turning into the protagonist of a TV show she was originally created to be the mascot of a dealer of anime and gaming related products. It is remarkable that the stories were born after the creation of the character, the narrative background came only after, as a “surplus item”.⁸¹

The character itself becomes a driving force, and it is also underlined by Marc Steinberg, expert in animation, media industry studies and digital media. Noticing that characters have a “gravitational pull” which brings their surrounding media and things to align with their image.⁸² This gravitational pull will be exemplified with Astro Boy’s case in the following section (2.3) of this chapter.

Then, this research wants to show that these independent *kyara*, sometimes created only for a marketing purpose, have an actual resonance in Japanese society. They could be born without any narrative “substance”, but still being able to impact people’s life with their “communicative” ability.

⁷⁹ Series of manga and anime created by Koge-Donbo in 1998. It is the story of a cat girl named Dejiko, who was adopted as the mascot of a video game shop.

⁸⁰ Azuma Hiroki, “The Animalization of Otaku Culture” trans. Yuriko Furuhata and Marc Steinberg, *Mechademia*, Vol. 2, Networks of Desire (2007), 182. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41503736>

⁸¹ Azuma Hiroki, *OTAKU: Japan's Database Animals*, trans. Jonathan E. Abel and Shion Kono (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 39-41.

⁸² Marc Steinberg, *Anime’s Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 44.

2.2 Cuteness and Hello Kitty

In Japan live a quite enormous quantity of *kyara*.

A great number of them, mostly the ones who interact everyday with people, share a common feature: cuteness.

These characters use it as a tool to ensure “that everyone pays attention to what they have to say”.⁸³ A powerful resource, in the process of drawing people’s attention and, lot of companies, use it as a marketing strategy to soften their image and boost the appeal of their business. In fact, cuteness produces different emotional reactions, triggering something instinctive in human mind.

In the early 1940s, the zoologist Konrad Lorenz (1903-1989)⁸⁴ theorized what he called as *Baby Schema* (*Kindchenschema*). He believed that, although the difference in cultures and personal backgrounds, the human mind recognizes “cuteness” in some specific features, typical of infants.⁸⁵ (Fig. 30)

The baby schema can activate in humans, and animals too, the capacity to recognize that something is cute.

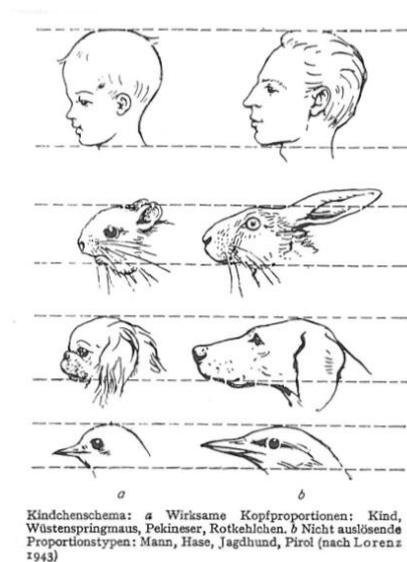


Fig.30 *Kindchenschema* characteristics, a comparison between baby features (a) and adult ones (b), Lorenz, 1943

Lorenz pointed out that “cute stimuli activate the innate releasing-mechanism in people, which describes how a cute object activates the parental instinct”.⁸⁶ In fact, *Kindchenschema* activates the perception of cuteness and desire in caregiving. That could explain why babies appear cute to adults and why animals tend to take care of younglings even if they are not the same species. Living beings (and characters), with these features are perceived cute, tend to be cherished, more easily approached by other individuals.

These features “of cuteness” have been summarized by Professor Gary Genosko as follows:

⁸³ Alt and Yoda, *HELLO PLEASE! Very Helpful Super Kawaii Characters from Japan*, 11.

⁸⁴ Austrian zoologist, founder of modern ethology (the study of animal behaviour). In 1973 was awarded of the Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine.

⁸⁵ Gary Genosko, “Natures and Cultures of Cuteness”, *InVisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture*, October 20, 2005, <https://ivc.lib.rochester.edu/natures-and-cultures-of-cuteness/>

⁸⁶ Iulia Kis, “Kindchenschema: The science of cute”, *Imperial Bioscience Review*, February 12, 2021. <https://imperialbiosciencereview.com/2021/02/12/kindchenschema/>

1. Head large and thick in proportion to the body;
2. Protruding forehead large in proportion to the size of the rest of the face;
3. Large eyes below the middle line of the total head;
4. Short, stubby limbs with pudgy feet and hands;
5. Rounded, fat body shape;
6. Soft, elastic body surface;
7. Round, chubby cheeks;
8. Clumsiness.⁸⁷

Read out of context, these characteristics could immediately be associated with a lot of *yuru kyara* designs⁸⁸, or reflect the features of some of the most loved characters of all time, like Mickey Mouse. Taking into consideration the evolution of his design over the years, it seems that even Disney has employed some of these features in redesigning Mickey. He underwent a sort of “progressive juvenilization”, with larger eyes, he became more chubby and “soft” than his grandad of 1928.⁸⁹



Fig..31 Evolution of Mickey Mouse Over 90 Years - Original Preliminary Drawing - Tony Fernandez, ©Disney

Disney, unconsciously or not, discovered the incredible potential of cuteness and its application is visible in many of their characters’ design through the years. From animals like Bambi (1943), who has a big head with a thin figure, to Elsa and Anna

⁸⁷ Genosko, “Natures and Cultures of Cuteness”.

⁸⁸ More detailed examples of *yuru kyara* will be presented in chapter three.

⁸⁹ Genosko, “Natures and Cultures of Cuteness”.

(Frozen ,2013) who, compared to older Disney princesses, have larger eyes and bigger heads.

Japan, as previously mentioned, is filled with thousands of cute characters. They can be found in the most unimaginable places: on street signs, in supermarkets, on toilet paper, buses, trains and even credit cards.

In Japan what is considered cute is *kawaii* 可愛い, but it is more than an adjective. It has become an aesthetic, part of the culture. The word itself suggests the feeling of being attracted to little or weak things, feeling a desire to cherish with love, this is the emotion of *kawaii*. There is also a subtle nuance to it, and it is related to the word *kawaisō* 可愛そう: written with the same *kanji* (Chinese characters) of *kawaii*, it refers to pitiful or pitiable things.

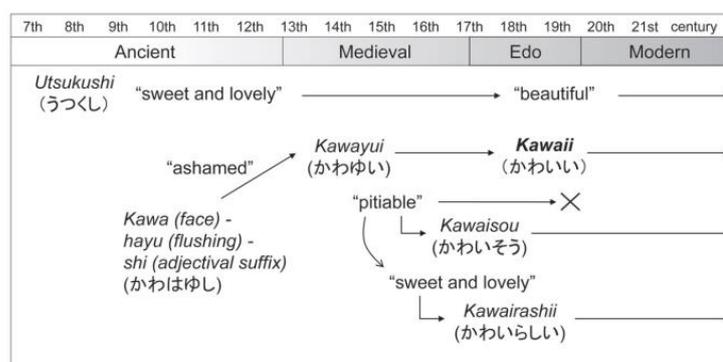


Fig.32 Genealogy of the word kawaii and related words, by Nittono Hiroshi

In Fig.32 Professor Nittono Hiroshi represented the evolution of the word *kawaii* over the centuries. It was born in Edo period, as a variation of the term *kawayui*.

Kawayui derives from *kawahayushii* 顔映し, which is composed by "face" 顔 (classical reading *kawa*, *kao* in modern Japanese) and *hayushi* 映し (classical reading *hayushi*, *hayui* modern Japanese) which means "ashamed".⁹⁰ From twelfth to sixteenth century, *kawayui* was used in the sense of pitiable, something that no one could bear to look at; then, in the late Edo era, pity left and her place was taken by feelings of love and affection. *Kawayui* or *kawaii* started to be used as an attributive adjective that describes lovely little things. In the contemporary meaning of the word still remains a little trace of the sense

⁹⁰ Hiroshi Nittono, "The two-layer model of kawaii: A behavioural science framework for understanding kawaii and cuteness", *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture*, volume 2, issue 1, (April 2016): 81. https://doi.org/10.1386/eapc.2.1.79_1

of pathos that powerless and helpless things awaken in people’s mind.⁹¹ The pathetic and pitiful sense are conceived in a more endearing way.

In his article Nittono highlights that *kawaii* is more than a simple feature or stimulus.⁹² It is an emotion, which is indirectly generated and stimulated by the perception of various factors. *Baby schema* is only one of the numerous attributes that can trigger *kawaii* feelings. Moreover, since it is an emotion, *kawaii* can be evoked also by a “touching cover story” not only by a cute design or feature.⁹³ As an emotion it has three aspects of manifestation: subjective, behavioural and physiological. Then, buying a *kawaii* object is more than simple consumption; is the desire to “exist together with the object, rather than consume or conquer it.”⁹⁴

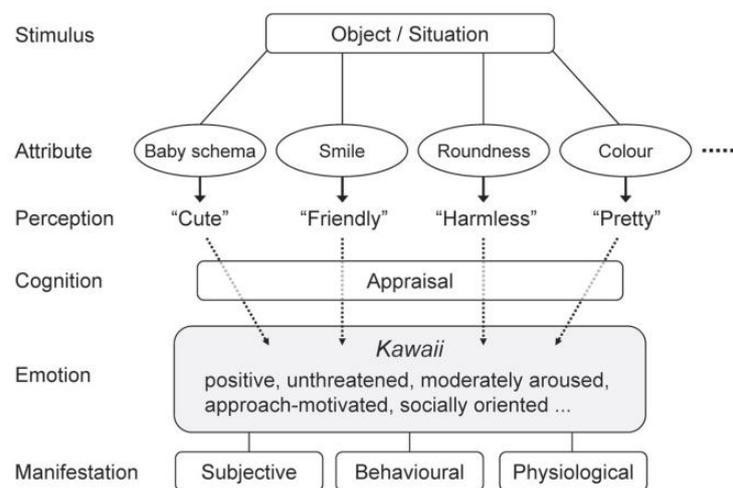


Fig.33 Concept of *kawaii* as an emotion, by Nittono Hiroshi

It was in the 1970s that *kawaii* “exploded” in Japan, companies started to produce character-printed stationery, teenagers personalized their handwriting, developing a childlike style, *marumoji* 丸文字, a rounded, curvy and cute style, that allowed them to express better their individuality through writing.⁹⁵ In the wake of this new emerging

⁹¹ Kumiko Sato, “From Hello Kitty to Cod Roe Kewpie: A Postwar Cultural History of Cuteness in Japan,” *Education About Asia*, vol 14, no 2 (Fall 2009): 38.

<https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/ea/archives/from-hello-kitty-to-cod-ro-kewpie-a-postwar-cultural-history-of-cuteness-in-japan/>

⁹² Nittono, “The two-layer model of *kawaii*: A behavioural science framework for understanding *kawaii* and cuteness”: 88.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Nittono, “The two-layer model of *kawaii*: A behavioural science framework for understanding *kawaii* and cuteness”: 91.

⁹⁵ Emma Taggart and Margherita Cole, “What Is *Kawaii*? Discover What Led to Japan’s Culture of Cuteness”, *My Modern Met*, published January 1, 2022, <https://mymodernmet.com/kawaii-art-japanese->

“*kawaii* wave”, the Sanrio company found its success and created the *kyara* that most successfully embodies *kawaii*: Hello Kitty ハローキティ *Harō Kiti*.

However, it is important to underline that, before Hello Kitty, the character who had *kawaii* features in Japan was Astro Boy (1951). He will be analysed more deeply in the following section, but it is important to keep in mind that the *kyara* phenomenon started to see the light of day with him.

In 1962 Sanrio came up with the idea of realising rubber sandals with cute designs on them; choosing to focus on cute products resulted in a wise choice. The company experienced the effect that cute items have on customers, sales increased, and Sanrio decided to invest in this new marketing strategy by hiring professional cartoonists to create more and more designs.⁹⁶

Among them, the designer Yuko Shimizu⁹⁷ came up with the idea of designing a vinyl coin purse with the picture of a cat sitting between a milk bottle and a fish in a bowl (Fig.34); the product was commercialized in 1975 and was highly appreciated by customers. Sanrio started to release also new characters’ designs, but the little cat continued to remain the “diamond tip” of the company. When the vinyl purse came out, she didn’t have a name, after her success grew more and more, she was named Hello Kitty.⁹⁸



Fig.34 The first Hello Kitty themed vinyl purse, designed by Yuko Shimizu, 1975

Not only she had a name, but Sanrio also thought of a short “ID card” for her: family (dad, mum and a twin sister); her origins (she is from London); her likings (she likes her mother’s homemade apple pie) and even her dreams (being a pianist or poet).

culture/

⁹⁶ Jonathon Greenall, “From Japan to New Horizons, the Complete History of Sanrio”, CBR.com, published April 5, 2021, <https://www.cbr.com/from-japan-to-new-horizons-the-complete-history-of-sanrio/>

⁹⁷ Yuko Shimizu was the creator of Hello Kitty, after a year she left the company and the role of Kitty’s designer passed to Setsuko Yonekubo and, since 1980, the role has been taken by Yuko Yamaguchi.

⁹⁸ “[ハローキティ] SINCE 1974”, Long Seller, NTT COMWARE corporation, published on August 2016, https://www.nttcom.co.jp/comware_plus/img/long_seller_201608.pdf

In 1980 her popularity vacillated and her new designer, Yuko Yamaguchi, came in rescue with some refreshing changes. People were complaining about the coldness of Kitty's black lines or the fact that she never changed her outfits.⁹⁹ The wishes were granted, Hello Kitty changed her outfits with many new clothes, plushies without "black lines" were manufactured and Sanrio adapted the character to new trends of Japanese society like, for example, *purikura*¹⁰⁰.

The founder, Tsuji Shintarō, understood that characters could be used to make business:

He realized the fleeting nature of the character-goods business, so worked quickly to cash in on his success. He shifted resources within Sanrio to capitalize on his hit, expanding the product line in Japan and taking Kitty overseas, decades before Super Mario and Pokemon became worldwide phenomena.¹⁰¹

The "crisis" of the 1980s shows that dealing with a character is not so simple. There is always the need to supervise costumers' opinions and changes in society.

In the mid-1990s Hello Kitty sales were dipping drastically, and she was "saved" thanks to the pop singer Tomomi Kahara; who said on impulse that she loved Kitty on a well-known television show.¹⁰² With no planned sponsorship Hello Kitty sales in outlets nearly doubled and the company took advantage of her "renaissance" by unleashing new designs and products.

Through the years she also became protagonist of her own cartoon show, comics, themed Park¹⁰³, but her real charm lied all in her design. Tsuji said "Kitty-chan's success was never born by accident, but by design."¹⁰⁴

Her ability to adapt to different situations, to respond positively to new changes made her appealing not only to kids or young generations, but also to adults; she is an icon that has never lost her sheen.

A very important feature of Kitty is the fact that, despite her background identikit, she is

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ See glossary.

¹⁰¹ Ken Belson and Brian Bremner, *Hello Kitty: The Remarkable Story of Sanrio and the Billion Dollar Feline Phenomenon*, (Singapore: Wiley, 2004):65

¹⁰² Belson and Bremner, *Hello Kitty: The Remarkable Story of Sanrio and the Billion Dollar Feline Phenomenon*: 66-67

¹⁰³ Sanrio Puroland, opened in 1990, is an indoor themed park closed to Tōkyō, where anyone can meet all the Sanrio characters mascots in many attractions and shows.

¹⁰⁴ Belson and Bremner, *Hello Kitty: The Remarkable Story of Sanrio and the Billion Dollar Feline Phenomenon*:72

stuck in a never aging state, she does not evolve or mature, locked in a “detached” reality, where she is nothing but a *kawaii*, lovable, character. A designing “rule” applied also to the rest of Sanrio’s characters.

They have simple drawings, a short back story, only the essential elements (Fig.35) that, however, strike the right chords with people.

Moreover, Sanrio’s motto “small gift, big smile” resumes the ideology of the company, which believes that a gift is a way to express feelings; so, in the same way, purchasing an item with a cute character, is a way to share emotions or happiness with others.¹⁰⁵

Sanrio’s purpose of bringing a smile to people though the purchase of their goods, confirms the aforementioned Nittono’s thought of *kawaii* as an emotion.

Therefore, since *kawaii* works as one of the keys able to open human interaction with *kyara*, it seems reasonable to think of it as a key feature in designing characters, especially the ones who need to interact with people.



Fig.35 Some of Sanrio's characters, Sanrio official website 2022

¹⁰⁵ “About Sanrio”, Sanrio company official website, Accessed December 3, 2022, <https://www.sanrio.com/pages/about-sanrio>

2.3 Roots of *kyara*: Astro Boy

When talking about characters in Japan the first ones that immediately come to mind are the ones of *manga* and *anime* production. This section focuses on their “forefather”, the *anime* character who became an icon in Japan: *Tetsuwan Atomu* 鉄腕アトム, also known as Astro Boy.



Fig.36 Astro Boy, color remake of the original TV series, 1980-81

Created by the imagination of the talented Tezuka Osamu (1928-1989), the “God of manga”. Tezuka produced an incredible quantity of works, over 700 volumes and roughly 60 animations.¹⁰⁶ His art had an incredible impact not only in the field of animated films and manga¹⁰⁷ but, also, on people’s hearts. The stories and characters are still cherished by Japanese people, who in 1994 dedicated a museum to Tezuka in Takarazuka (Hyōgo prefecture), his hometown.

Astro Boy appeared for the first time in the *Captain Atom* series (1951) then became a solo project; a serialized manga (the *Mighty Atomu*) of 23 volumes, published between 1952 and 1968. His success grew even bigger after Tezuka decided to put in on screen, in 1963, and realized the first commercial animation and Japanese TV animation series in history.¹⁰⁸

Astro Boy is a one-of-a-kind character. A robot boy who has more humanity than human

¹⁰⁶ Matthew Herson, “Spotlight: Osamu Tezuka — The God Of Manga”, Tokyo Weekender, January 27, 2022, <https://www.tokyoweekender.com/2022/01/spotlight-osamu-tezuka-manga/>

¹⁰⁷ He contributed to modernize manga, managing to affirm this type of production as a cultural art. He thought that manga could also be a means to tell stories, communicate, thrill, touch people’s heart, just than simply make them laugh. He made that by using a different variety of framings, attention on the characters’ expression and cinematic action. He applied the same rules to its anime production as well, leaving important changes in this field as well.

¹⁰⁸ “Mighty Atom:Story”, Tezuka Osamu Official, accessed December 5, 2022 <https://tezukaosamu.net/en/manga/291.html>

themselves. Doctor Tenma, the father, after the death of his child in a car accident, decides to build a robot who could replace his loss. That is how Atomu is born.

Unfortunately, Doctor Tenma repudiates him since he notices that he doesn't grow like a real child. Astro Boy is sold to a circus and then, professor Ochanomizu (a fervent believer in robots' rights) saves him and take good care of the little robot, bringing him to his house.

Astro Boy lives in a paradox, the duality between his human heart and his super-robot essence. He is a robot that never grows, a child's soul stuck in a robot body. Experiencing desertion by his father, living in a world where robots are despised by humans, make Atomu a character needy of affection.

He is impossible to hate, despite all the suffering he fights for justice, to save earth and humans. A story who talks about discrimination and also the relationship between humans and technology: Can science and humanity really coexist?¹⁰⁹

Astro Boy success lays in himself. The perfect mixture of brilliant storytelling techniques (important themes, psychological introspection); *kawaii* design (big eyes, the cute fusion between boyish and girlish characteristics, chubby limbs) and new cinematographic techniques (dynamism, motion, change in framings, etc.).

With him Tezuka transmitted a sense of optimism, he gave a reassuring presence, a friend who reached all Japanese people who had just experimented the horrors of war. Astro's story is not just about the incredible adventures of a *kawaii* robots who fights for justice, it is the story of a new hope for the future. At the end of the chapter *The Greatest Robot on Earth*, Astro states: "I still believe robots will all become friends someday and never, ever fight each other again..."¹¹⁰

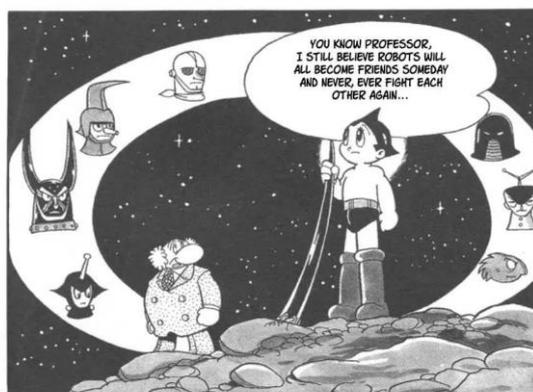


Fig.37 Detail from the Astro Boy manga, volume 13, chapter The Greatest Robot on Earth, 1964-1965

¹⁰⁹ "Character:Atom", Tezuka Osamu Official , accessed 5 December,2022, <https://tezukaosamu.net/en/character/25.html>

¹¹⁰ Jacob Parker-Dalton, "Rediscovering Astro Boy at 70: Why Tezuka's Icon Still Holds up Today", OTAQUEST, published May 24, 2021, <https://www.otaquest.com/rediscovering-astro-boy-at-70/>

2.3.1 Astro Boy: from character to *kyara*

At some point of his “career” Astro Boy figure underwent a transformation, he wasn’t just only a character from an anime or manga but became also a *kyara*.

In the eleventh episode of the first TV series of 1963¹¹¹ appears something “out” of Astro’s cartoon world: a box of Meiji Seika’s Marble Chocolates.

The candies were Meiji’s main product at that time, the first grain chocolate of Japan, composed of a paper cylinder which contained chocolate candies covered with sugar of different colors. Meiji was the one, and only, sponsor of the *Astro Boy* TV series¹¹² and decided to use the character also as part of their marketing strategy.

In the same year the company released¹¹³ an advertisement on the magazine¹¹³ where the manga was being serialized. (Fig.38) The connection between Meiji and the character is clear: Atomu rides a package of candies that is flying like a rocket.¹¹⁴ An advertisement both for the company (on the left is written “Marble Chocolates”) and for the TV show itself (on the right is written the TV show schedule, an episode every Tuesday afternoon, from 6.15 p.m. to 6.45 p.m.).



Fig.38 Meiji–Astro Boy advertisement in *Shōnen* magazine, February 1963.

The collaboration was sealed with the release of the Astro Boy-Meiji sticker campaign in July 1963. The success was so great that Meiji extended it for other two months. Astro Boy stickers became “the most desirable of premiums” of that time, leading Meiji to be the number one chocolate maker company of Japan.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Steinberg, *Anime’s Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan*, 37.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Weekly Shōnen Jump* 週刊少年ジャンプ *Shūkan Shōnen Janpu*. One of the most long-running manga weekly magazines of Japan. Specialized in the publishing of *shōnen* manga. A genre of manga more “guy-oriented”, with stories of adventures, action and sports-themed like the famous *Dragon Ball*, *Naruto* and *One Piece*.

¹¹⁴ Steinberg, *Anime’s Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan*, 57.

¹¹⁵ Steinberg, *Anime’s Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan*, 58.

The bridge that was built between the two parts was so strong that almost led to a total fusion between the character and the candy company's products. Meiji's marble chocolate was more and more associated with Astro Boy, even though he didn't become an advertising character. He kept his independence, capable of surviving even outside his original comic and cartoon "environment", adapting to new contexts, suitable for any type of product; just like the contemporary *kyara*.

In fact, in 1964 Meiji released a series of products that were totally inspired by Atomu. Some had his name, like the *Tetsuwan Atomu Caramel*, a special package with the character's image on the box and a sticker or magnet on the inside. Other were shaped into Atomu's image.¹¹⁶

This new use of characters launched for sure the concept of character merchandising in Japan, but it has been more than an innovative discovery. It opened the path to the future proliferation of *kyara* in Japan.

Characters who could be used just because people like them, who have the right characteristics to stand out and left a mark in people's lives.

In fact, *kyara* are independent, not tied to a specific media or production, adapting, changing, so that they can be used in an infinite number of ways.



Fig.39 Advertisement for Marble Chocolates from the back cover of Shōnen magazine, April 1964 issue

¹¹⁶ Steinberg, *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan*, 63-64.

2.4 Childhood friend: Anpanman

Another representative example of the *kyara* phenomenon in the world of illustrations and cartoons is Anpanman.

In Japan it has become almost an institution, children somehow know who Anpanman is even if they have never seen the TV shows or read the books.¹¹⁷

He was created in 1973, from the imagination of the illustrator Takashi Yanase (1919-2013). The story evolved from the original children's superhero picture series book to television cartoon (since 1988) and full-length movies.

Anpanman is a true superhero: he helps people in need by breaking off pieces of his head. Pieces of his head, since he is made of *anpan* bread.¹¹⁸ To gain again strength, and a new head, he goes back to the master baker that created him. He is Uncle Jam, a kind old baker who lives in the Bread Factory.

Anpanman was created while Uncle Jam was baking some *anpan* and a shooting star landed in the oven. Anpanman is a humble superhero; he isn't perfect and accepts his flaws. So that is "superpower" is his kindness and self-sacrificing spirit.

The story revolves around the adventures of this hero, his friends and their battle to save the world from the attacks of Baikiman "Bacteria Man" and his sidekick Dokin-chan.

The original target of the story were children aged around five years old but the characters from Anpanman world have become part of the life of every Japanese citizen.

Anpanman, for his features and personality, is one of the most "Japanese" *kyara*. As a matter of fact, if you don't come from Japan, or have any knowledge of Japanese popular culture, you won't be able to immediately catch the relationship between Anpanman and Japanese culture. From the deepest message of self-sacrificing for others¹¹⁹ to the *kyara* themselves.

They are typical Japanese foods, some even unknown outside Japan. In a world full of

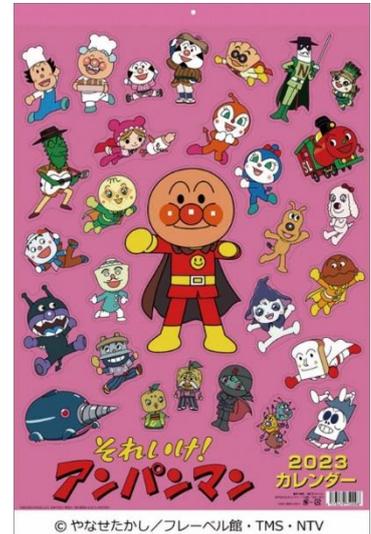


Fig.40 Anpanman *kyara* from the TV series *soreike! Anpanman*, 2023 calendar

¹¹⁷ Andrew Mckirdy, "Anpanman: Is the children's superhero the best thing since sliced bread?", The Japan Times, published October 15, 2018, <https://features.japantimes.co.jp/anpanman/> (Accessed

¹¹⁸ A type of Japanese sweet bun invented in the Meiji period (late 19th century), made of soft bread stuffed with red bean past filling.

¹¹⁹ Japanese society is a collectivist society. In order to live harmoniously individuals should not put their needs above the needs of those around them.

food, where anything could turn into a new character, anthropomorphism occupies the main seat. The Anpanman world showed for the first time to what extent the number of *kyara* can be produced: in 2009, the franchise was listed in the Guinness world record for the most characters in an *anime* series, at that time the number reached 1,768 character and nowadays it has risen to more than 2,300.¹²⁰

Even nowadays, the series is part of the childhood of almost every Japanese.

In 2018, the Japanese Toy Company Bandai conducted a survey on popular characters among Japanese children (from 0 to 12 years old) and Anpanman was in the first place.¹²¹.

Anpanman *kyara* are *kawaii*, with rounded shapes and smiling faces, easier to approach for little children. They familiarize with these *kyara* since a young age, watching and reading their stories, seeing them on buses, trains, buying plushies and items themed with them. So, when they reach adulthood, they feel nostalgic, still attached to them.



Fig.41 アンパンマンに会いたい! *Anpanman ni aitai!* I want to meet Anpanman! Yokohama Anpanman Children's Museum

¹²⁰ Andrew Mckirdy, "Anpanman: Is the children's superhero the best thing since sliced bread?", The Japan Times, published October 15, 2018, <https://features.japantimes.co.jp/anpanman/> (Accessed

¹²¹ Results of the survey available at: <https://www.bandai.co.jp/kodomo/pdf/question244.pdf> (Japanese only)

2.5 Working *kyara*

Kyara have something that distinguish them from all the other characters of Japan.

It is their “everydayness”: thanks to their *kawaii* features they can camouflage easily into the visual background of everyday life. Since, by now, *kawaii* has become a natural component of Japanese culture.

They belong to the “proletariat of the Japanese character world”.¹²² In fact, they can be defined as working characters since they have “jobs” to do in the everyday life of Japan. Hence, what could be a *kyara*? These working characters could be anything, animals, humans, objects, quirky beings; *kawaii* or just out of the ordinary.

Designed professionally, sometimes created by local artists or normal citizens through contests, they adapt to any situation. Especially the ones where stress, tension, or frustration could be generated.¹²³

Kawaii is only one of their attributes since, their role and essence, is more than just being cute. Their “life” is based on communication, creating a bond with people. Firstly, they catch the eye with unique design, stimulating interest and curiosity in the observer’s mind, who ask himself the reason why a *kawaii kyara* just came out of nowhere in a totally unexpected way.

They could be a reassuring help, stress relievers, an escape to reality. Above all, companions in the many circumstances of life. Some are linked to advertisement (e.g. on food at supermarkets), others are more “social committed” (e.g. prohibition signs), other help with instructions (e.g. on medicines); some cover the important role of being the representatives of authorities, important causes, towns and prefectures.

To better understand the picturesque fauna of *kyara*, it is necessary to present some concrete examples, following the classification that Alt and Yoda utilized in their book *Hello Please! Very Helpful Super Kawaii Characters from Japan*.

¹²² Alt and Yoda, *Hello Please! Very Helpful Super Kawaii Characters from Japan*, 10.

¹²³ Alt and Yoda, *Hello Please! Very Helpful Super Kawaii Characters from Japan*, 14.

2.5.1 Instructional *kyara*

Pictures have a tremendous power, instructional *kyara* confirm the saying “a picture is worth a thousand word”. They can become “teachers”, giving advice or clarifying complex topics.

Imagine explaining or introducing for the first-time nutrients to a child or someone not familiar with nutritional health matters, wouldn't it be nice that the nutrients themselves spare your energy doing the work for yourself?

This was the idea of the Nihon Tosho Center¹²⁴, that, in collaboration with the Kagawa Nutrition University, realized a book “easy to understand”, where nutrients are personified as *kyara* who perfectly represent them. Unique characters explain, in a schematic way, the functions of nutrients, in which aliments they can be found and how to assume them in a balanced way.

To simplify the comprehension, *kyara* are designed with features typical of the nutrient that they are portraying. The main function of protein is to strengthen muscles, so it appears as a macho character. Vitamin C, which helps in the protection of cells, and contributes to maintain a good skin, also with the production of collagen, is a *kawaii kyara* with glowing skin and a lemon on its head. Lipid is a fatty and glowing *kyara*, while carbohydrate (in specific sugar) is a little energetic flame.



Fig.42 All the *kyara* vitamins from the *Nutrient Character Encyclopedia*, Nihon Tosho Center, 2014

¹²⁴ 日本図書センター, company located in Tōkyō, specialized in realizing books for children, learning books for school and academic materials for researchers.

This book belongs to the *Health Character Encyclopedia* series¹²⁵: nine books that concern human body, food and diseases. All structured like this one on nutrients, with simple explanations and brand new *kyara* as protagonists. Moreover, this is not the only *kyara* series in their library. There is another one of six books, the *Science Character Encyclopedia*, with a book dedicated to forty-four astronomical characters (Fig.43) and another one to meteorological phenomenon (Fig.44).



Fig.43 Chikyū kun, the kyara of heart, from *Astronomical Character Encyclopedia, Science Character Encyclopedia Series*, Nihon Tosho Center, 2019



Fig.44 Taiyō sama, the kyara sun, from *Meteorological Character Encyclopedia, Science Character Encyclopedia Series*, Nihon Tosho Center, 2019

Other instructional *kyara* help simplifying important information that regard serious questions like the, unfortunately, common earthquakes that occur in Japan. If tremors of a seismic intensity of 4, or higher, are expected to occur in a specific area, the “earthquake early warning” system for smartphones, automatically, sends a notification to all the smartphones in that area. In the occasion of the “Disaster Prevention Day” in Japan (the 1st of September), the KDDI corporation, who is one of the telecommunications operators in the country, explained on her website how this system works. Together with the explanation, some *kyara* are depicting the scene of the warning system “in action”. The future earthquake is announced by the presence of a big catfish, probably a cute Namazu¹²⁶, that is going to move. Meanwhile, on the surface, the Japan Meteorological

¹²⁵ The entire series is available on the official website of Nihon Tosho Center: <https://www.nihontosho.co.jp/search/s16871.html>.

¹²⁶ In Japanese mythology Namazu ナマズ, is a gigantic catfish that lies under Japan, his sudden movements generate terrible earthquakes.

Agency is transmitting to KDDI the news that an earthquake is coming. Immediately the base, with a megaphone, shouts the warning to the anthropomorphic mobiles that receive the message of notification all at once. (Fig.45)



Fig.45 The Earthquake Early Warning system explained by *kyara*, KDDI Corporation official website

The use of instructional *kyara* might be influenced, in some ways, by an aspect of the Japanese culture. As Alt and Yoda underline, Japan is a country that “highly values indirect communication.”¹²⁷

A *kyara* that acts as intermediate is happily welcomed, since it will clear potentially complicated situations. Characters act as a filter, presenting serious topics in a funny or entertaining way, so that they can be understood by children, adults and elderly people.

2.5.2 Warning *kyara*

For their didactic function warning *kyara* seem similar to instructional characters, but their final purpose is warning the viewer immediately about some extremely important situation. They could warn you to pay attention when entering on the metro, remind you that underage drinking is dangerous for health, set the phones on silent mode on public transportation, etc.

They use a form of instant visual communication “anticyptography”, the science of conveying information in a format so easy to interpret that it can be understood just with

¹²⁷ Alt and Yoda, *HELLO PLEASE! Very Helpful Super Kawaii Characters from Japan*,70.

pictures.¹²⁸

Taking advantage of basic visual communication, they can be universally understood by anyone, even from people who have any knowledge of Japanese language.

2.5.3 Advertising *kyara*

As the name suggests advertising *kyara* are the ones helping companies to sell their products or services. Japan is a fertile land for characters. They inspire affection, sometimes even obsession, in people; a reaction that for advertisers is a great opportunity to take. Designing characters that could encourage customers to make a purchase or chose a type of service instead of another. This type of visual communication is very common in Japan: as seen with instructional and warning *kyara*, instead of using a lot of words to describe or explain a concept, it is better to represent it by using a character.

Then, also *yuru kyara* (who will be presented in the next chapter), the mascots of Japan, could be considered as advertising character? Even if on many occasions they sponsor a type of product or service, the answer is not totally affirmative. For sure they represent a powerful marketing tool for companies who want to stand out and stimulate costumers' interest.

But an advertising *kyara* only *raison d'être* is to charm costumers and exhort them to choose a company's good or service. While *yuru kyara* are firstly conceived for communication and, behind their creation, there is a specific significance and message. Moreover, choosing more independent characters like Astro Boy or Hello Kitty as sponsors, can't always be a wise choice. Since there could be the risk that the character itself ends up obscuring the product. On the other hand, an advertising character is specifically created to be functional to the product and influence customers' choices.

There are also cases where, for their popularity, advertising *kyara* have turn into unofficial mascots characters, a sort of "hybrid" character.

An outstanding example of how much influence and impact *kyara* have on Japanese society is the case of the Kiwi Brothers characters.

Zespri International is one of the biggest marketers of kiwifruit, they produce and export the fruits to countries around the world, among them there is also Japan.

¹²⁸ Alt and Yoda, *HELLO PLEASE! Very Helpful Super Kawaii Characters from Japan*,99.

The head of marketing, Inomata Kanako¹²⁹, came up with the brilliant idea of creating two *kyara* for the company. When she joined Zespri, in 2004, she noticed that it was necessary for the company to understand more the costumers. So, after a consumer survey and analysis within the company, she shifted to a communication strategy: conveying the charm of kiwifruit in a character. More than 400 *kyara* were taken in consideration and the chosen ones were the two Kiwi Brothers. With the design they fit the standards of *kawaii* culture and answer perfectly to two of the main points of the costumers' survey result: a character loved by both adults and children; a character that could transmit the deliciousness of the fruit.

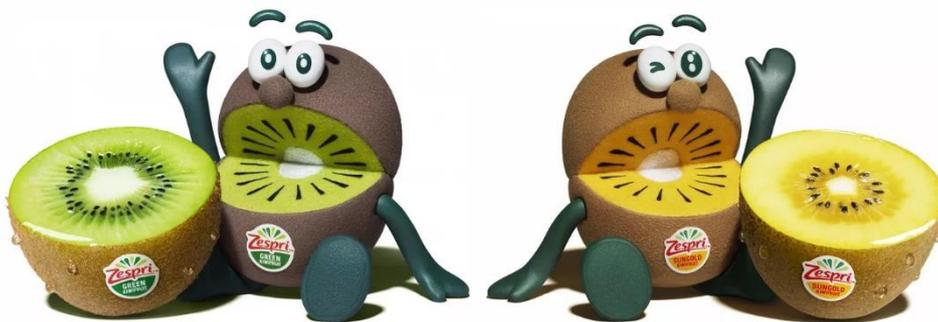


Fig.46 Zespri Company's Kiwi Brothers

The launch of the first tv commercials (produced by Dentsu, one of the largest advertising companies in Japan), in 2016, was a big hit. The cute duo, composed by Gurīn グリーン (“Green”) and Gōrudo ゴールド (“Gold”)¹³⁰, has also crossed the Japanese borders and reached countries all over the world. The TV campaign won the prestigious Good Design Award in 2016, destined to praise the socially relevant campaigns that respond to key issues in Japanese society.¹³¹ The commercials are a fun way to let consumers know about the benefits of kiwifruit (especially Zespri’s ones) and raise awareness on the benefits of eating fruits.

The two *kyara* are accompanied by other cute and amusing fruits-characters (an apple, orange and banana), together, they help the Kiwi Brothers to explain the importance of conducting a healthy lifestyle. In 2022 they have done it with a commercial that shows

¹²⁹ U40の匠 *Agerishasuna kiui burazāzu o unda no wa niji no haha datta* (A mother of two gave life to the agelicious kiwi brothers) アゲリシヤスなキウイブラザーズを生んだのは2児の母だった, *Nihon Keizai Shinbun*, published September 12, 2019.
<https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXMZO49630860Q9A910C1I10000/>

¹³⁰ In 2020 they added a new kiwifruit brother: レッド *reddo* (“red”), a seasonal type of kiwi available only from late April to late May.

¹³¹ Matthew Jones, “Brotherly love propels Zespri sales in Japan”, *Asiafruit*, published October 12, 2016, <https://www.fruitnet.com/asiafruit/brotherly-love-propels-zespri-sales-in-japan/170180.article>

the two brothers “in action”: like superheroes they save the other fruits who are struggling with unhealthy habits. They are the power, since kiwifruit has a lot of nutrients, they can bring healthiness to everyone. As the two brothers say: “Healthy is better when is aggelicious”¹³². The term doesn’t have a proper meaning but could be explained with the fact that, when you eat a delicious thing, it uplifts your mood. The word, アゲリシャス *agerishasu*, is a fusion of アゲアゲ *ageage* (“feeling euphoric”) and デリシャス *derishasu* (“delicious”). It was born in the commercials of 2019¹³³, where the *kyara* were dancing to a new version of the song 恋のマイアヒ *koi no maiahi*, the Japanese version of the popular Moldavian song of the 2000s *Dragonstea Din Tei*. A jingle easy to remember, so appreciated that it went viral on Youtube. Japanese people uploaded tons of video with the Kiwi brothers, or even themselves, singing and dancing to the song. In conclusion, the two *kyara* who were realized as a new promotional campaign transformed into the mascots of the company. In April 2022, they greeted in person the New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Ardern, on her first trip in the country after two years of lockdown. She met the Kiwi Brothers, took pictures with them and assisted to their swaying dance performance on traditional music. The naturalness of how all of this happened confirms again that *kyara* are a true manifestation of Japanese culture, and communication.



Figure 47 Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and Trade Minister Damien O'Connor pose with Kiwifruit brothers

¹³² Minute 0:32 of the TV commercial 「ヘルシーなのにアゲリシャス」, TV Commercial 2022, “Healthy, yet aggelicious”, on Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rTCFWFfwneM&t=50s> (Accessed February 11,2023)

¹³³ Youtube, 「みんなでアゲリシャス」, TV Commercial 2019 #2, “Everybody aggelicious”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-THrhQZ4iE8> (Accessed February 11,2023)

Chapter 3- *Yuru kyara*: more than a mascot

They are described as “wobbly mascots”¹³⁴: “wobbly” for they unstable movements, and “mascots” since they have been created to promote a city, region, event, organization or business.

The term was coined at the beginning of 2000s by the artist, character scholar and popular culture critic Jun Miura:

Characters designed for PR of local governing bodies, events, and local goods, especially when in *kigurumi* form. They have the Japanese trait of *fanshī* and at first glance one can understand the strong message they communicate about a local speciality or characteristic. There are also characters that need explanation for one to know what on earth they are. While bearing originality, when they are made into *kigurumi* they often have a sense of instability that makes them all the more lovable, and one’s heart feels healed [*iyasarete*] just by looking at them.¹³⁵

As he describes them, there is no doubt that they are mascots: designed to be *kigurumi*, (cartoon-character costume) “ambassadors”. Miura gave also three main characteristics to identify a proper *yuru kyara*: the character must deliver a strong message of love for his hometown or local region; his movements and demeanor must be unique and unstable; the character must be lovable and loose or wobbly (*yurui*).¹³⁶

However, these *kyara* aren’t just some *kawaii* characters used as a brand marketing strategy. Even though , there is no doubt that creating a mascot is an effective choice for an organization, or company, to promote herself; *yuru kyara* could be considered more than that: they are an expression of Japanese society.

In fact, is impossible to talk of them without bringing up many aspects of Japan.

¹³⁴ Debra J. Occhi, “Wobbly Aesthetics, Performance, and Message: Comparing Japanese Kyara with Their Anthropomorphic Forebears”, *Asian Ethnology* 71, no. 1 (2012): 113.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41551385>.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ *Miura Jun intabyū* “*saikin, ore jishin ga yuru kyara ni natteru?* (Interview with Jun Miura “Recently, have I become a *yuru kyara*?”) みうらじゅんインタビュー 「最近、俺自身がゆるキャラになっている?」, Oricon News, published November 27, 2009, <https://www.oricon.co.jp/news/71089/full/>

As seen in chapter one, anthropomorphic representations have been part of Japan since ancient times. Anthropomorphism is at the basis of *Yuru kyara*. They could be animals, objects, *yōkai* or bizarre creatures, all sharing the feature of being an anthropomorphic representation. The fondness for this type of characters is also linked to the religious belief in which all things, even objects and animals, could be the bearers of a sacred energy (*kami*) or have a soul (the six realms of existence). Nevertheless, it doesn't mean that these *kyara* are worshipped or created to be cult objects. Hence, the fact that people are more inclined to embrace and appreciate these wobbly mascots, could prove that, through the centuries, religious beliefs have left a mark on Japanese popular culture. Moreover, as Miura said in his definition, they also have a psychological relevance; since being with *yuru kyara* relaxes the spirit, heals the heart. They can become a sort of escape from reality, figures that bring lightheartedness and, on some occasions, function as stress relievers.

This results in an extraordinary artistic freedom, capable of creating an unbelievable array of unique characters.

3.1 The first *yuru kyara* is a “policeman”

Pīpo kun ピーポくん (or PEOPO) is considered by Miura the forefather of contemporary *yuru kyara*.¹³⁷ Created in 1987 as the official mascot of the Tōkyō Metropolitan Police Department (TMPD). His name is a fusion between the English words ピーブル *pīporu* (“people”) and ポリス *porisu* (“police”).

He is neither human nor animal, a *kawaii* creature, all orange, with big ears and an antenna on his head. Every feature has been designed to represent one of Pīpo's qualities: big ears to listen citizens carefully, big eyes to watch society closely and an antenna to quickly catch the changes happening around.¹³⁸



Fig. 48 Pīpo-kun, the Metropolitan Police Department's mascot character, calling for road traffic safety for children [Jiji Press]

¹³⁷ Oricon News, *Miura Jun intabyū* “*saikin, ore jishin ga yuru kyara ni natteru?* (Interview with Jun Miura “Recently, have I become a *yuru kyara*?”) みうらじゅんインタビュー 「最近、俺自身がゆるキャラになっている?」.

¹³⁸ *Pīpo kun no purofīru* ピーポくんのプロフィール (Pīpo kun's profile), Metropolitan Police Department, updated April 28, 2016, https://www.keishicho.metro.tokyo.lg.jp/about_mpd/shokai/pipo/profile.html

It is remarkable that one of the first *yuru kyara* is the one that represents the TMPD. From an “outsider” point of view, this choice could be considered surprisingly bizarre, even a little degrading for a public figure like police.

For Japan is not like that. Pīpo kun doesn’t mock the organization. Quite the contrary, he has been created in order to strengthen the bond between the organization and citizens, so that people could perceive it as a friend and trust it more.¹³⁹

In 2017 TMPD released on her official Youtube channel a series of educational cartoons¹⁴⁰ with Pīpo kun. He helps his family (he has grandparents, parents, brother and sister) and other citizens, to follow the correct rules of society: how to prepare for an earthquake, the rules of the road and bullying prevention. One of these shorts is also Pīpo kun’s official themed song. The *kyara* is fun way to introduce police to children and teach them how to behave correctly.

Pīpo kun isn’t the only police *kyara* in the country: all the Japanese prefectural police have created their own *kyara* to represent them. (Fig.49)

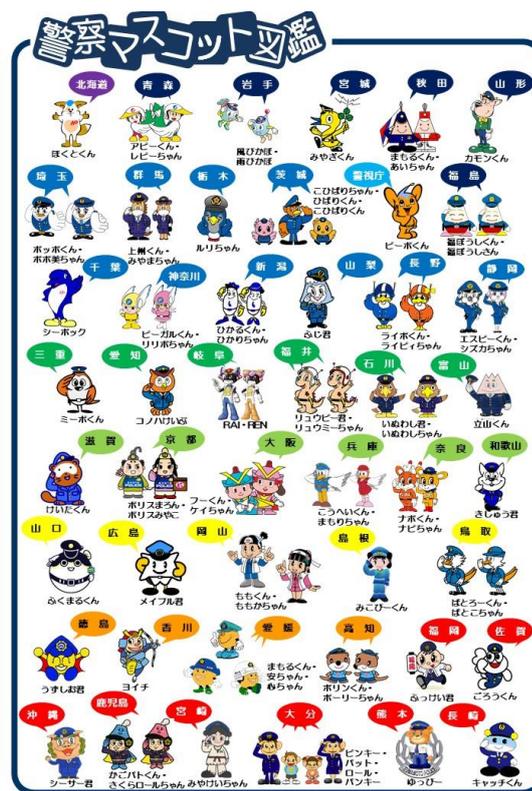


Fig.49 The 47 *Kyara* of Japanese prefectural police, National Police Agency

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ Pīpo kun series on Tōkyō Metropolitan Police Department official channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_O6W8W06S0&list=PLrDPGUoBgx1o68hg7wB-lxqIRMs3JkgJb (Accessed Februar 11,2023)

Like Hello Kitty, he is represented as an anthropomorphic animal but, as a matter of fact, his true nature isn't restricted to anything else but being a character; like he said: "Kumamon is simply Kumamon". These kinds of characters are typical among *yuru kyara*. They look like an animal but, at the same time, they might be some other kind of mysterious or peculiar figure.

The mascot is an enthusiastic and naughty boy, full of curiosity, who desires to bring happiness to others whenever he goes.¹⁴³

Like it happens with other famous *kyara* like him, a special team is responsible for Kumamon promotion, they organize his "meeting schedule" from the local prefecture-based activities to visits across the other regions of Japan. Moreover, they maintain the important digital side of communication through social media, managing his Twitter, Instagram and YouTube account. In fact, to maintain and strengthen the connection with people, it is important to follow the trends, especially the ones who regard the most used and trending means of communication .

In 2010, while Kumamon was in Ōsaka (Kansai prefecture, located in the west-central area of the main Island of Honshū), distributing his business cards with information about "homeland", he suddenly "disappeared". Right after, on Twitter, was launched a search for Kumamon in the Kansai region: whenever they spotted him, people had to take pictures of him ,or shoot videos , and upload them on social media. A strategy that worked since Kumamon became a topic of discussion on the web.¹⁴⁴

Moreover, to improve the promotional campaign, Kumamoto allowed all the companies in the region to use Kumamon's image for free. The choice had two effects: deepen the link between the mascot and local products, and spread Kumamon image all over the prefecture (and Japan).



Fig.50 Kumamon in his office at Kumamon square in Kumamoto city

%81%BE%E3%81%9B%E3%82%93%E3%80%82&text=%E3%81%8F%E3%81%BE%E3%83%A2%E3%83%B3%E3%81%AE%E8%BA%AB%E9%95%B7%E3%81%A8%E4%BD%93%E9%87%8D%E3%81%AF%EF%BC%9F , (Accessed February 11,2023)

¹⁴³ *Kumamon jikoshōkai* くまモン自己紹介 "Kumamon presentation", Kumamon Official, last update December 28, 2020, <https://kumamon-official.jp/kiji0031657/index.html>

¹⁴⁴ Ali Soltani, Johannes Pieters, Janette Young and Zhaohong Sun, "Exploring city branding strategies and their impacts on local tourism success, the case study of Kumamoto Prefecture, Japan", *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 23:2, (2018): 164, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10941665.2017.1410195>

From November 2011 to October 2013, the branch of Japan Bank in Kumamoto surveyed the companies who had legal permission to use Kumamon's image. The bank reported that sales of these products reached 1.50 billion dollars, and the economic spillover effect was of 1.48 billion dollars. In addition, the value of tourism-related products sales was estimated to have increased from \$3.6 to 6 million in the same period.¹⁴⁵

Created to be a marketing tool, Kumamon *kyara* evolved into a figure that is synonym of healing and happiness. On the 14th and 16th of April 2016, two devastating earthquakes shook Kumamoto, causing significant damage and disruption to the region. After a month, on children's day (the 5th of May), when all activities were still blocked, Kumamon made his first appearance in public. He visited an evacuation center in Nishihara village, people welcomed him with screams of joy, showing sincere love and affection. He conveyed messages of gratitude to the Self-Defense Forces and brought a moment of happiness and lightheartedness (with his energetic dance) to all the people there, with no distinction of age.¹⁴⁶



Fig.51 Kumamon's visit after the 2016 earthquake in Nishihara village (Kumamoto prefecture)

In 2011 Kumamon was elected winner of the *Yuru kyara Grand Prix* ゆるキャラグランプリ, a big show dedicated only to *yuru kyara*, with the final election of the most loved *kyara* of all. Unfortunately, the event was cut out due to the COVID 19 pandemic, but the main reason was the loss of the main purpose of the contest. It was originally intended to be a friendly way for prefectures to promote themselves and recover economically,

¹⁴⁵ Ali Soltani et al., "Exploring city branding strategies and their impacts on local tourism success, the case study of Kumamoto Prefecture, Japan", 165

¹⁴⁶ くまモン、帰ってきたモン! Kumamon, kaettekita mon! Kumamon has returned! Youtube, published May 5, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lCC4BbMKcEA>

but in the last years it has become more and more competitive. The organizers decided to stop with the competition, who has always been a friendly opportunity for people to have fun and meet in person the amusing *kyara*.¹⁴⁷

This doesn't stop *yuru kyara* events from existing, they still participate in infinite occasions of Japanese daily life.

3.3 Adapting to changes

With the COVID-19 pandemic, social interactions with mascots have been reduced since they included moments of close contact with people, shaking hands, hugs, high fives, etc. But, during these years, the *kyara* world adapted to the new changes in daily lifestyle. *Kyara* “volunteered” in the campaign of prevention and awareness, appearing on signs, wearing masks in the streets, on online videos, even on illustrations behind public conferences of politicians.¹⁴⁸ Some new *kyara*, who reflected the new changes in Japanese daily life, popped out.

Like Quaran クアラン (abbreviation for quarantine), created in 2019, he



Fig.53 Koronon in Ikebukuro taking a picture with some fans

guards all the airports and harbors of Japan. As his name suggests, he is the official mascot of quarantine for people who have to travel abroad. He is a yellow rounded creature with wings, glasses, and a shield. Glasses to find infections or illegal food, a shield to protect people in need, and wings to fly anywhere there is the need of his help.¹⁴⁹ In

2020, in the streets of Tōkyō appeared Koronon コロノン (which stands for “no corona virus”), a pink heroine who fights corona giving out free masks in the streets while encouraging people to maintain social distance.

She is a pink cat who instead of the mouth has a big mask, a violet heart-shaped shield



Fig.52 Quaran spotted in Tōkyō by Mondo Mascots



Fig.54 Shinjuku Awawa captured by Mondo Mascots

¹⁴⁷ Finn Burton, “Japan’s Grand Prix of Mascots Takes its Final Lap”, Hyper Japan, published October 27, 2020, <https://hyperjapan.co.uk/kawaii-fashion/japans-grand-prix-of-mascots-takes-its-final-lap/>

¹⁴⁸ Chris Carlier, “Japanese Mascots vs. the Coronavirus”, Mondo Mascots, published August 19, 2020, <http://mondomascots.com/index.php/2020/08/19/japanese-mascots-vs-the-coronavirus/>

¹⁴⁹ Kaila Imada, “Meet Quaran, the official quarantine mascot of Japan”, TimeOut, published March 19, 2020, <https://www.timeout.com/tokyo/news/meet-quaran-the-official-quarantine-mascot-of-japan-031920>

and, on her belly, a big red X that crosses the word COVID-19.¹⁵⁰ With her there is also the older Shinjuku Awawa 新宿あわわ “Shinjuku bubble”, created in 2014 as the representative for Shinjuku Food Sanitation Association’s safe handwashing. A mascot shaped like a giant soap bubble, who reminds everyone to carefully wash their hands. The last one is a *kyara* who comes from the past history of Japan, it has been forgotten for generations and suddenly came back, during the pandemic, more alive than ever. It is Amabie アマビエ.

First traces of this *yōkai* are documented in 1846, on a print published in a local newspaper, is told the story of a government official that was investigating on a mysterious green light coming from a lake in Kumamoto prefecture.¹⁵¹ When he got close to the spot of the light, he encountered a mermaid-like creature. She introduced herself as Amabie and predicted that Japan would have six years of rich harvest, but also a pandemic who would devastate the country. She also told the official that, to avoid the tragedy, people should draw an image of her and share it with as many people as possible.



Fig.55 Newspaper of Mysteries in the Sea of Higo Province, Amabie, Meiji period, Kyōto University Library



Fig 56 Amabie *yuru kyara* at work at Nakagory elementary school

Images of Amabie re-emerged with the pandemic and Japanese people started to share them non-stop on social media. Even if centuries passed the story stayed the same: sharing Amabie as a “talisman” to defeat COVID-19 and don’t lose hope. The *kyara* literally inundated Japanese life, from thousands of drawings, to themed objects like face

¹⁵⁰ Sophie-Claire Hoeller, “Japan has an adorable new anti-coronavirus cat mascot that’s handing out free masks around Tokyo and reminding people to social distance”, Insider, published November 2020, <https://www.insider.com/koronon-anti-coronavirus-cat-japan-mascot-2020-11>

¹⁵¹ Saunders Rebecca, “Amabie: The Japanese monster going viral”, BBC, published April 23, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20200422-amabie-the-japanese-monster-going-viral>

masks, hand sanitizers, lunchboxes, biscuits, charms or even dressing up pets as her. Of course, among them there was also the *yuru kyara*, who went to Nakagori elementary school in Kagoshima city and, together with children, parents and volunteers, drew a gigantic Amabie in the schoolyard.¹⁵²

Like Kumamon, during hard times *yuru kyara* come in rescue, bringing comfort to people. This emotional effect is proved by Amabie, who has been forgotten for centuries, but in a flash was more alive than ever; because it was Japanese people who gave her the “strength” to come back.

3.4 Superstars from the *yuru kyara* summit

Every November, Hanyu city (prefecture of Saitama, in the eastern part of the main Japanese island of Honshū) holds the *yuru kyara summit in Hanyū*, 世界キャラクターさみっと in 羽生 *sekai kyarakutā samitto in Hanyū*.

It is the world’s largest outdoor gathering of *yuru kyara*, in the years the number increased from 300 to 400 mascots.

In 2020 and 2021 it became difficult to hold any event in person, so the summit took place online, with a live streaming direct of 24 hours in 2020.¹⁵³

But last year, on the 19th and 20th November 2022, the organization decided to go back to normality and relaunched the event in person. The summit attracted a total of 52,000 visitors. There is no doubt that people were waiting the return of *yuru kyara*.¹⁵⁴

In the past years it took place in Hanyu Suigo Park, however, this last edition of 2022 was transferred to the AEON mall. Probably a decision taken to avoid overcrowding situations. The *yuru kyara* number was also reduced, and around 150 characters

¹⁵²Kaila Imada, *Kakuchi de hirogaru Amabie challenji, tōshindai no masukotto mo tōjō* 各地で広がるアマビエチャレンジ、等身大のマスコットも登場 “Amabie challenge spreads in various places, life-size mascot appears”, TimeOut, published May 18, 2020, <https://www.timeout.jp/tokyo/ja/%E3%83%8B%E3%83%A5%E3%83%BC%E3%82%B9/%E5%90%84%E5%9C%B0%E3%81%A7%E5%BA%83%E3%81%8C%E3%82%8B%E3%82%A2%E3%83%9E%E3%83%93%E3%82%A8%E3%83%81%E3%83%A3%E3%83%AC%E3%83%B3%E3%82%B8-%E7%AD%89%E8%BA%AB%E5%A4%A7%E3%81%AE%E3%83%9E%E3%82%B9%E3%82%B3%E3%83%83%E3%83%88%E3%82%82%E7%99%BB%E5%A0%B4-051820>

¹⁵³ *Sekai kyarakutā samitto in Hanyū* 世界キャラクターさみっとin羽生 “World Character Summit in Hanyū”, Yuru kyara photo studio, updated January 31, 2023, <https://yurucaharamascot.com/summit#2022>

¹⁵⁴ *Takusan no go raijō arigatōgozaimashita* たくさんのご来場ありがとうございました “Thank you for coming!”, Official website of *yuru kyara* summit in Hanyu, <http://gotouchi-chara.jp/hanyu2022/index.html>, (Accessed February 11,2023)

participated.¹⁵⁵

The location is usually packed with stands selling mascots' merchandise and food from their regions, a perfect chance to have a taste of local delicacies from all over Japan. Even though this event is a way to sponsor local regions, the main protagonists are *kyara*. They wait their turn to perform on stage, in front of thousands of people. Their assistant, or themselves if they can talk, give a presentation about their region, their background story and the message they want to convey to the audience. Then the actual performance starts it could be dancing, playing instruments, singing, acting, or playing games together with others *yuru kyara*. The rest of the time they are free to walk around and interact with people face to face.



Fig. 57 *The yuru kyara summit in Hanyū, November 22, 2016*

¹⁵⁵ Yuru kyara photo studio, “World Character Summit in Hanyū”.

3.4.1 The crazy Funassyi

In 2018 a crowd of 5000 people went to the stage performance of CHARAME TAL (キャラクター) ¹⁵⁶, a metal *kyara* band lead by the character ふなっしー *Funashī* Funassyi.

Like Kumamon, Funassyi has become a cult *kyara* in Japan (and overseas). Its Twitter profile is followed by 1,3 million of followers, it appeared on many tv shows and went overseas. In 2015 the genderless fairy pear went to New York; people took photo with it as if it was a celebrity¹⁵⁷ and, in March of the same year, it attended a press conference at the Foreign Correspondents' Club in Tōkyō.¹⁵⁸

The pear fairy was born as an unofficial mascot of Funabashi (prefecture of Chiba, in the east of Tōkyō), a city famous for the production of delicious pears.

Born without any specific marketing plan to promote the city or prefecture, it stood out among other *kyara* for its characteristics. A hyperactive mascot who likes to jump, scream, and always finishes her sentences with “*nassyi*”, a cross reference to the word *nashi* “pear”.¹⁵⁹ People started to empathize with this character who has an outgoing personality and isn't so perfect like the standard Japanese mascots.

Funassyi, on the press conference of 2015, answered to a question regarding which could have been the reasons behind its success. It said that one could have been: “A typical Japanese traditional sense, where we like the ones that are not the top winners, we root for the seconds.” Moreover, it added that “I was acting on my own, as a solo. I don't have a company backing me up or agency. So, I think that people were looking at me and sort of empathizing when they saw me trying hard to do something and ending up losing. Over time people start to look at this, developing stories, and engage.”¹⁶⁰

In this press conference a journalist asked Funassyi even its opinion about the proposal to revise the constitution's Article 9.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ “Japanese 'pear fairy' Funassyi muscles its way into \$45 billion licensed character industry”, The Straits Times, published March 5, 2015, <https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/japanese-pear-fairy-funassyi-muscles-its-way-into-45-billion-licensed-character-industry>

¹⁵⁸ FUNASSYI, Unofficial Mascot of Funabashi City”, the Foreign Correspondent's Club of Japan, Youtube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7wiiMi2BcU>, (Accessed February 11, 2023)

¹⁵⁹ Jake Adelstein and Nathalie-Kyoko Stucky, “Japan's Peacenik Pear Fairy”, Daily Beast, updated April 14, 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/japans-peacenik-pear-fairy>

¹⁶⁰ “FUNASSYI, Unofficial Mascot of Funabashi City”, the Foreign Correspondent's Club of Japan, Youtube video, minute from 23:20 to 24:48.

¹⁶¹ “FUNASSYI, Unofficial Mascot of Funabashi City”, Youtube video, minute from 27:05 to 28:50.

A Shinzo Abe¹⁶²'s longtime ambition was to modify the “peace clause”, in which Japan renounces to war and the maintenance of every war potential.¹⁶³ According to him the Article is a limitation on Japan’s right to own a fully functional defense force, one with its own offensive military forces.

After listen carefully to the question Funassyi immediately replied “Oh my gosh, I really don’t want to answer to that one!”, but right after he added “I want everything to be peaceful.”

Even if the atmosphere was hilarious, the conference was held in a very professional way and all the journalists enjoyed their time with Funassyi. The fairy pear was really the main star, like a real person it answered to serious question like the one before. From an external point of view the event could seem ridiculous or even absurd but, after getting a little accustomed to it, it becomes amusing, as if it was a comedy show. A way to feel at ease and having fun while talking with a *kyara* that could be experienced only in Japan. At some point the host of the conference asked Funassyi if it has ever considered of becoming a real person. He answered that things are complicated as human beings, and it is better as it continues staying as a pear for a while.¹⁶⁴

Confirming again that *kyara* anthropomorphism is a way that they use to connect with the world of humans, but they are entities on their “own”.



Fig.58 Funassyi and its interpreter at the press conference on March 5, 2015

¹⁶² Japan’s longest serving prime minister. Leader of the Liberal Democratic Party and in office as prime minister for two mandates, from 2006 to 2007, and from 2012 to 2020. On 8th July 2022 he was assassinated while delivering a campaign speech in Nara, two days before the new elections for the upper house of the National Diet.

¹⁶³ The constitution of Japan, Chapter II, Article 9,
https://japan.kantei.go.jp/constitution_and_government_of_japan/constitution_e.html#:~:text=Article%2009.,means%20of%20settling%20international%20disputes (Accessed February 11,2023)

¹⁶⁴ “FUNASSYI, Unofficial Mascot of Funabashi City”, Youtube video, minute from 44:46 to 45:29.

3.4.2 Nyango star, saving farm with drums ?

Funassyi is the lead singer of the CHARAMEAL rock band, together with Nyango Star, on drums, Akkuma, a violet demon bear on guitar, and Kapal, a *kappa*¹⁶⁵ on bass. They are a professional rock group, with live concerts and also cds.

Nyango Star にゃんごすたー, is an apple coming from the farming community of Kuroishi city, prefecture of Aomori (in the northernmost of Honshū island), that has been inhabited by the spirit of a dead cat, Shiro. He was born from the apple tree that grew on the orchard where Shiro was buried. The spirit of the cat inhabited this apple and he tried to go back to his original owner, who didn't recognize him because of his new appearance. This is why he started to play drums: in order to get famous, so that he could return back to be a normal cat.¹⁶⁶

His name is composed by three parts: にゃん *nyan*, in Japanese the sound that cat makes when he cries; the sound ご *go* from the word apple りんご *ringo*, and スター *sutā* star, from the name of the famous drummer of Beatles, Ringo Starr.

He became a phenomenon thanks to impressive heavy metal drum covers on his Youtube channel, which received millions of views and comments from people all over the world. Making him the fastest rising star in the world of *yuru kyara*.

VICE News in 2019 made a special video¹⁶⁷ about the case of this cat-apple *kyara*, who helped the farming community of Kuroishi to maintain its economic vitality. The reporter asked a local lady if she thought that Nyango Star is a good representer of Kuroishi city and she replied that everyone in the city is so proud of him, thinking that he has become really a superstar.

Even the city major, who planned to capitalize the viral success of Nyango to improve the city's economy, acknowledged that the *kyara* helped to raise the recognition of the city and the sales of local agricultural goods. His city is dealing with one of the biggest problems of Japan: the demographic crisis, with falling birth rate and rapid population aging. In rural areas, like the one of Aomori region, the population is shrinking more than two times the national average.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁵ See glossary.

¹⁶⁶ "Nyango Star profile", Nyango Star official website, <http://nyangostar.jp/profile/>, (Accessed February 11,2023)

¹⁶⁷ "Nyango Star: The Heavy Metal Cat Mascot Saving A Japanese Farm (HBO)", VICE News, Youtube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dntu3VDep8w>, (Accessed February 11,2023)

¹⁶⁸ "Nyango Star: The Heavy Metal Cat Mascot Saving A Japanese Farm (HBO)", VICE News, Youtube

In 2016 the major introduced Nyango to the Being Group, a recording company based in Tōkyō, who started to produce themed merchandise like t-shirts, cushions and plush toys. Moreover, he appeared on an apple-flavored yogurt spot on TV¹⁶⁹ and even on a spot for the movie *Bohemian Rhapsody* in Japan.¹⁷⁰

In order to sponsor his region, Nyango's concert are held in the Aomori prefecture; so that people from other Japanese cities could come and, by consuming local goods and services, unconsciously increase tourism in those areas. Nevertheless, at the end of its video the reporter interviewed a young guy, Yuri, who was going to see Nyango in one of his live performances. Yuri gave some intriguing answers to her questions about Nyango: that was the first time he had ever seen a *yuru kyara* performing live music in concerts and, most of all, he said straightforwardly that Nyango didn't make him want to visit Kuroishi.¹⁷¹

A naïve example that shows how people are interested more in the *kyara* itself, rather than his promotional message. *Yuru kyara* are perceived as if they were "real people", with different personalities, part of the "human" world.



Fig. 59 Nyango Star on one of his performances

video, minute 3:05 to 3:18.

¹⁶⁹ *Chōzetsu doramuteku o hirō suru ni nyangosutā ni chūmoku!* "Chōshoku ringo yōguruto" MV 超絶ドラムテクを披露するにゃんごすたーに注目!「朝食りんごヨーグルト」MV "Pay attention to Nyango Star showing off his transcendent drum tech! 'Breakfast Apple Yogurt' MV", Fieldcaster Japan, Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ChNyBt5RFq0>, (Accessed February 11,2023)

¹⁷⁰ "Nyango Star: The Heavy Metal Cat Mascot Saving A Japanese Farm (HBO)", VICE News, Youtube video, minute 4:28-36.

¹⁷¹ "Nyango Star: The Heavy Metal Cat Mascot Saving A Japanese Farm (HBO)", VICE News, Youtube video, minute 6:21-6:57.

Conclusion, limitations, and future research

The aim of this work was to demonstrate that *kyara* are an expression of Japanese culture, a way to communicate, and the country itself has a long history of “character culture”.

In the first chapter have been analyzed the historic roots of the contemporary *kyara*. Characters have been living together with population of the Archipelago since ancient times. Since then the need for *kyara* has never ceased, giving life to thousands and thousands of new representations. They concretely became alive in the field of art. In the medieval paintings of the strolls, even more expressive in the prints of Edo period, and now inhabiting the countless stories of *manga*.

They are creatures born from the imagination of Japanese people; therefore, they inevitably kept some traces of Japanese culture within themselves.

It is intriguing, almost mesmerizing, discovering that *kyara* in Japan have been influenced by two of the main religious beliefs (*Shintō* and Buddhism) of the country. This bond already sets them off as a typical expression of Japan. Their existence could be totally understood only by knowing which was the path that took them to be as they are today.

Understanding that anthropomorphic representations are chosen not only for cuteness or to represent a caricature, but because they are a form of expression that has been nurtured by Japanese culture. For some characters, especially *yuru kyara*, the *kawaii* aesthetics may influence the design since they are useful when it is time to build relationships in the “human world”. In any case, even the *kawaii* feature in them is a choice derived from a cultural influence.

The actual shocking number of *yuru kyara* in Japan shows that there is a continuous demand for characters in the country. *Yuru kyara* have become close friend, sometimes it becomes a consequence, in a society where building new relationships is very hard. Expressing feelings straightforwardly often causes stress or anxiety in people. As seen in chapter three, *yuru kyara* are all the opposite. They express their own thoughts and personality directly, without any filter. Maybe, this could be one of the reasons why people in Japan feel so attached to them. They are figures who have always been with them, since childhood, and accompany them in numberless daily situations. From the *kyara* that work specifically for a business purpose, to the ones who appear in other contexts like, for example, the representatives of institutions.

This work shows how much success and impact these characters have in Japan. It is certain that *kyara* can have a positive effect on society and economy. But it must be taken in consideration that in foreign contexts they could be seen as only ironic, not serious, even childish figures. This research proposes that the ones who misinterpret the actual importance of *kyara* in this country don't really know Japanese culture as well; therefore, they aren't able to embrace the *kyara* "culture" with the same naturalness that people in Japan do every day.

Then, when considering *kyara*, it is important to keep in mind that different sensibilities and cultures could change their perception.

The actual post COVID-19 pandemic situation has been analyzed briefly, but it could become a starting point for future research. Maybe some *kyara* suffered the aftereffects of the interruption of social interactions and events.

Moreover, this research main objective was to show the communicative power of *kyara*, but also to prove their connection with Japanese society. However, another future research could also be focused on how their perception changes between different Japanese people or cultures.

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Fig.52, Quaran spotted in Tōkyō by Mondo Mascots, Twitter @mondomascots, https://twitter.com/mondomascots/status/1213100496258383872?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1213100496258383872%7Ctwgr%5E4ab2bf83fbc21540313545f51b8d208ed95a1e6b%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fmondomascots.com%2F

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Fig.56, Amabie *yuru kyara* at work at Nakagory elementary school, Twitter, @mondomascots, May 9, 2020, <https://twitter.com/mondomascots/status/1259028305228914689>

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Glossary

- *Asobie* 遊び絵: “playful pictures”, when talking about *ukiyo*e it refers to the print more oriented to amuse and entertain in a funny way the watcher.
- *Bijinga* 美人画: “pictures of beautiful women”, one of the regular themes for *ukiyo*e representations. Prints that portray the beauty of important women, geisha, or wife of the merchant class. The genre gave new attention to the representation of the female figure in Japanese art. Every artist had its own way to depict women, from tall and elegant (Torii Kiyonaga ,1752-1815), to more physical and “realistic” ones (Kitagawa Utamaro, 1753-1806).
- *Chōnin* 町人: “townsman”, social class emerged during the Edō period (1603-1868), they consisted mainly of merchants. Despite being at the very bottom of the social ladder they were holding most of the wealth of that period.
- *Chōjū jinbutsu giga* 鳥獣人物戯画: “Scroll of Frolicking Animals and Humans”
- *Dogū* 土偶: “Earthen (clay) figure”, figurines typical of the Jōmon Period (approximately 10.500-300 BCE)
- *Geisha* 芸者: She is more than a simple courtesan that satisfies the needs of a client. She is an artist that has learnt, since young age, the art of entertainment. She knows how to perform various arts like traditional dances (*odori*), singing, playing traditional instruments (like the *shamisen*), and being skilled in the art of conversation. *Geisha* have their own type of elaborated dressing, hairstyles and make up, that varies depending on how much experience they have gained in their training.
- *Genji monogatari* 源氏物語: “The Tale of Genji”, a prose work written in the 11th century by the poetess, novelist and lady-in-waiting Murasaki Shikibu. It is considered not only one of the greatest masterworks of this era, but also of Japanese literature. The story follows the life and romantic adventures of the “Shining Prince” Genji.
- *Gijinga* 擬人画: “personified pictures”, genre of *ukiyo*e that had as subjects

anthropomorphic animals or objects.

- *Kappa* 河童: one of Japan's most famous *yōkai*. A water goblin who lives in ponds and catches the feet of swimmers, dragging them in the depth of water. In the past was more of an evil character meanwhile in recent times it is often seen as a more cute and friendly character.
- *Kojiki* 古事記: “Record of Ancient Matters”, the first written record in Japan, born from oral tradition and compiled in 712 AD. It is a work of historical importance, containing myths and records of the ancient Japan. Moreover, during history, it was reevaluated also a sacred text for *Shintō* religion, as an important source for anthropological, literary and philology studies.
- *Kyara* キャラ: abbreviation for characters (*kyarakutā* キャラクター) but defines a typical category of characters in Japan. They don't belong to a media product (like manga) but live “outside”, in the daily life of Japan. They can announce a service, explain instructions or sponsor a product.
- *Mangaka* 漫画家: author of manga.
- *Obon* お盆: traditional holiday that comes from the Buddhist religion. Celebrated in Japan every year, usually from the 13th to the 15th of August, a three-day festival to honor and pay respect to the dead ancestors' spirits.
- *Purikura* プリクラ: shortened version of the word *purinto kurabu* プリント倶楽部 “print club”, it refers to the Japanese photo booths. They are popular among young people (became almost an attraction for tourist) , after taking your photos you can have fun decorating them with frames, cute stickers or even have your face modified to look cuter.
- *Shamisen* 三味線: three stringed traditional music instrument of Japan. It resembles a lute, have a very long neck and it is played with a plectrum.
- *Tsukumogami emaki* 付喪神絵巻: “Illustrated Scroll of Animated Utensil”, born on the 16th century, is a short tale featuring as its protagonists a band of used utensils who have turned themselves into monsters.
- *Uchiwae* 団扇絵: “Woodblock print on *uchiwa* fan”. Format of *ukiyo-e*, printed on *uchiwa* fan. *Uchiwa* are non-folding fans, accessories introduced in Japan in

the 6th century. They consist of two parts: two sides of paper on the “head”, glued to the structure, that ends with the handle. Used in many aspects of the Japanese world: from daily life to performances. In the Edo period artists decided to decorate these fan with their woodblock prints and created new format of *ukiyo* : *uchiwae*.

- *Ukiyoe* 浮世絵: “Pictures of the floating world”. From the Buddhist term *ukiyo*, in medieval times referred to the conception of “sorrowful world”, the never-ending cycle of rebirth, life, suffering, death and rebirth from which the souls try to escape; then life becomes only a transitory illusion and deep suffering. In the Edo period (1603-1868) the meaning changed, the same noun indicated the pleasure-seeking, hedonistic lifestyle of the ones living in a “floating” world. They are woodblock prints of varied genres: nature, scenes from folktales, historical events, erotic subjects, landscapes of Japan, *kabuki* theatre, female beauties, etc.
- *Wani* 鰐: the word could be translated as both “crocodile” and “shark”. The *wani* is a sea monster, mostly represented as a marine dragon, that lives in the depths of the ocean, and can shapeshift itself into humans.
- *Yakushae* 役者絵: “actor print- print of *kabuki* actors” Actors of the *kabuki* theater were really considered as celebrities. People were interested in buying portraits of them, in the same way that nowadays fan do, by buying posters of their favorites artists to keep home with them. *Kabuki* 歌舞伎 is one of the traditional genres of Japanese theatre, famous for its elaborated costumes, highly stylized performances with singing and dancing. In the Edo period was mostly performed by male actors who impersonated also the female roles.
- *Yamato-e* 大和絵: “Japanese painting”, noun utilised to differentiate paintings with Japanese subjects from the Chinese-style ones (the *kara-e*, 唐絵 “Tang painting”). It also refers to the whole genre of paintings that share the same particular features. *Yamato-e* represented Japanese subjects (famous places, the seasons variations), they were also used to illustrate scrolls, with an attention on details alternated by the presence of the typical “floating clouds” in the scenes.
- *Yōkai* 妖怪: “monstrous being”, Mysterious entities who inhabit both the human

and the supernatural world. They are phenomenon that humans can't explain, part of the Japanese tradition since ancient times.

- *Yuru kyara* ゆるキャラ: “wobbly characters”, the mascots of Japan.

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