

## SWEET SPOTS: THE USE OF CUTENESS IN JAPANESE ADVERTISING

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This article looks at Japanese society through its advertisements. To be more precise, it examines the utilization of a certain social value – cuteness – within advertising contexts. The focus is not so much on the perception of “cute” advertising, i. e., on how an audience in Japan discerns and interprets signifiers of cuteness in ads, but on how advertisers in Japan utilize “cute” images for advertising purposes and to what ends.

Advertisements, if properly analyzed, can provide useful hints as to what a society’s values are. Through the idealized “realities” they display, they are suggestive of what is defined as desirable and positive. Conversely, they also give clues about social restrictions and taboos through matters they avoid showing (such as the colour red in ads for sanitary pads). Looking beyond the advertised commodity and investigating the “social realities” displayed in the ad, we can get a pretty clear idea of what values and ideas are of relevance within a given society. What makes this possible is the fact, that contrary to the image of avant-garde and cutting-edge trendiness which ad makers try to promote for themselves, in their ads they tend to promote the conservative end of society’s value spectrum (WERNICK 1991: 24).

The reason for this is obvious: Even when it targets a limited audience, an ad can achieve maximum acceptance within its target group only by not going against the social value system prevalent in this group. A certain dramatic toying with some of the social standards may be permissible and useful for raising attention, but, on the whole, a conscious violation of audience expectations in advertising (such as Benetton’s controversial poster campaign) is extremely rare. So ads may not provide a perfect mirror image of society’s values, but they can, in the words of VESTERGAARD and SCHRØDER (1985: 10), be “expected to reflect pretty closely the current trends and value systems of a society.” In other words, their essentially conservative display of social reality allows us to assume that if a social matter makes it into advertising, it is acceptable enough not to upset the audience, and if a social value figures prominently within advertising, it is of some consequence within the social environment. This is certainly the case for cuteness as a social value in Japan.

Historically, the use of cuteness for marketing purposes in Japan is almost as old as Western-style marketing itself. The first signifiers of cuteness used for commercial purposes were company logos, some of which are still extant today: in 1905 the dairy factory Morinaga introduced their cherub logo, and in 1922 Q. P. Corporation, at that time still a fish cannery, followed with the adoption of a popular baby doll known as the Kewpie doll as their company logo.<sup>1</sup> The years 1933 to 1937 saw Japan's first truly "cute" ad campaign, the "microcommercial" (*mame kōkoku*)<sup>2</sup> campaign for Glico candies, yet on the whole, advertisements with cute overtones remained the exception. With the influence of American animations and cartoons, the years after the Second World War saw the emergence of new cartoon-style cute emblems such as Fujiya's Peko-chan (NAKADA 1993: 193–96), but the real proliferation of cuteness in Japan's marketing world started only around the mid-seventies, after Sanrio, pioneer in the marketing of cuteness, had demonstrated the sheer endless sales power of cute, through the immense commercial success of its "fancy goods" (KINSELLA 1995: 225–26).

Throughout most of the seventies and the eighties, cuteness was the main formative influence on Japanese youth culture, and almost all commodities became available in a redefined and redesigned cute version. But today, as Sharon KINSELLA (1995: 220) suggests in her account of the *kawaii*-boom, the glory days of boundless childishness are over. Fashion has shed some of its frills and bows, teddy bear-shaped backpacks are encountered less frequently in the streets of Harajuku, and a more insolent tone has entered youth culture: the cute-yet-streetwise image under which today's pop teen queen Amuro Namie is being marketed is light-years away from the saccharine overdose of immaturity, infantility and innocence which were the hallmark of Matsuda Seiko, the reigning queen of ten years ago.

A look into Japanese marketing reveals that, at least here, cuteness is as powerful and vibrant as ever. Ads, commercials, and product designs which cash in on the appeal of cuteness are still abundant, and the range of goods and services that are promoted with the help of a *kawaii* marker still

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Mr. KUBO Hideyuki for the details concerning Q. P. Corporation.

<sup>2</sup> These commercials consisted of small newspaper ads which were placed on the paper's editorial pages in almost random fashion, with nothing but a short childlike catchphrase with the product name in it, accompanied by a similarly childlike and simple illustration. Written in *katakana*, they were understandable for children, but their main target group were the paper's adult readers. With their childlike phrases, their schoolbook print and their simple drawings, the ads were to transport the reader for a moment out of the hard reality of everyday life into a childhood world of innocent happiness over simple pleasures – such as Glico candies. (YAMAMOTO and TSUGANESAWA 1992: 203–208)

seems limitless. But there have been changes. Cuteness, like any other social value, is subject to permanent re-evaluation and redefinition by those who use it, and any change in how cuteness is perceived will lead to a change in how cuteness is signified. So even though some varieties of cuteness' commercial exploitation are still pretty much the same (there has yet to be a laundry softener commercial that doesn't show a happy child), others have undergone substantial change. With society permanently reinventing itself, with the emergence of new (or at least different) fashions, trends, ideals, and social realities, the advertising industry, with its perceived obligation to keep up with the *Zeitgeist*, has no choice but to redefine its presentations of cuteness. Some signifiers of cute have taken on a new form, others simply vanished, new ones have cropped up and obsolete ones reappeared, so that today's cute scene is a far cry indeed from what it was ten years ago.

Even though it is dangerous to generalize in matters as inconstant and fluctuating as advertising trends, some changes in "cute" advertising over the last fifteen years are nevertheless discernible:

- Contradictory as it may sound, the commercial use of cuteness seems to have acquired a more "mature" character. The infantile cuteness in the vein of Suntory Beer's "Tuxedo Sam" (Fig. 1) is seen less in campaigns aimed at adults<sup>3</sup>, and the cute-appeal of the mid-nineties' commercials plays in a more subtle vein, relying more on contextual and situational cuteness (e. g., through silly or clumsy behaviour).
- The use of cuteness in Japanese advertising seems to have taken on a more ironical and tongue-in-cheek quality, and it has even started parodying itself, as in the 1996 "Suntory The Cocktail" spoof of the 1970s' "UFO" commercials.
- But probably the most important development is the redefinition in Japan's "cute" commercials in the presentation of gender stereotypes: today, a growing number of Japanese males are being displayed in situationally cute (= weak) contexts – even Takakura Ken's prototypical masculinity was lovingly plucked apart in a recent computer ad.

The main difficulty in outlining the workings of "cuteness" in advertising is that there is no single conclusive definition of what cuteness actually is. Cuteness is a marketing multitool, it can take on many shapes, it can appear in very different contexts, serving very disparate means. This article is concerned with some of these appropriations of cuteness for advertising pur-

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<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that childish characters have completely disappeared from ads for adults. On the contrary, in some areas such as banking there are rather more cute characters than ten years ago, but on the whole the appropriation of childish symbols for adult advertising seems to have declined.

poses. To give the reader an idea of the wide scope of advertising situations that employ signifiers of cuteness in Japan, it looks at advertisements that are representative of three different aspects of "cuteness" (cute = funny; cute = pure; cute = harmless). Looking at each ad individually, it tries to shed some light on the mechanisms behind these different uses of cuteness, by pointing out what signifiers are being used, how these signifiers are embedded into the advertising context, and in which way they work to achieve the desired effect of manipulating the viewer's opinion. All ads discussed in this paper are from the year 1996, except for the first example, taken from a 1993 ad campaign.

In Japan, the use of cuteness for advertising purposes is not the sole prerogative of professional marketing, and signifiers of cuteness also appear in many non-commercial advertising situations. To highlight some of the particulars of such situations, this paper will also discuss some instances where public institutions or private interest groups utilize cuteness to draw attention to, or to manipulate the contents of, a public statement. Therefore, the term "advertising" and its derivatives, as used in this paper, should be read as a generic term not only for commercial consumer advertising (i. e., the use of public notices by a professional seller to appeal to individual private consumers for the purpose of promoting, and ultimately selling, a commodity), but also for those settings where the promotional interest is to inform, not to sell.

### 1. THE "PEKOE POSE" – SELLING TEA WITH SILLY DANCES

The first case study in this paper is a 1993 advertising campaign by Suntory, one of Japan's market leaders in the production and sales of beverages, including drinks in cans. In the case of Japan, canned drinks means not only soda pops and juices, but also several kinds of coffee and tea. Most of these drinks are purchased for immediate consumption, either in a convenience store or from one of the myriad vending machines. Their popularity, their easy, round-the-clock availability, the lack of difference in the various makers' product range or even their products' taste, and the nation-wide uniformity in can size and price<sup>4</sup> make this a highly competitive market, and the commercial success of a drink depends first and foremost on how it is marketed.

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<sup>4</sup> 110 yen per can as of 1996. Some stores may sell slightly cheaper, some vending machines in locations such as station platforms slightly more expensive. The price is uniform, regardless of can size (330cc, 250cc or 200cc). Attempts to gain customer interest through larger cans for the same price found little customer response.

Accordingly, many soft drinks are very aggressively promoted, and the release of a new product is usually kicked off with a high-gear and expensive advertising campaign on all popular promotion channels – frequently changing commercials on TV and radio, whole-page ads in magazines, outdoor ads in trains and stations, and extra eye-catchers on the vending machines. Apart from a number of soft drink classics, many products disappear from the market within an astonishingly short time, sometimes after just one season, often to be replaced by another which is essentially the same product with slightly modified ingredients and a new name and label.

One of the new releases in 1993 was a canned black tea produced by Suntory. Low in sugar, the tea was targeted primarily at a diet-conscious female audience. For its advertising campaign, Suntory had hired Satō Masahiko, one of Dentsū's most successful young creative directors. Satō decided that to stand out against its competitors and to appeal to the targeted customer group, the tea (to be sold under the name "Pekoe Tea") was to have an aura of luxury, which he intended to achieve by giving the product a distinct British, old-worldish, upper-class touch. The primary signifier of this Britishness was the can itself: its light blue pastel colouring, the predominantly English text on its face, the pen-and-ink drawing of a tea twig, the name "Pekoe Tea" in large golden letters, and in particular the little emblem above the name, suggestive of the Royal coat-of-arms on British court purveyors' products – every detail served to make the can reminiscent of those old-fashioned tea tins popular with Japanese tourists in England.<sup>5</sup>

All parts of the accompanying advertising campaign were designed around the same images of well-to-do Britishness which the can insinuated. At the center of the campaign were the TV commercials:

Each of the campaign's five TV commercials has a different setting – a staircase, a study, a garden, etc. – but all five are suggestive of the same environment, the home of a wealthy and traditionally minded family in England. The lack in the settings of any item which is distinctly post-war, the actors' conservative style of clothing (mostly tartans and tweeds) and the appearance of a maid in two of the five commercials – everything supports the desired impression of a slightly antiquated genteel opulence (in which the drink cans, at least to a European, seem oddly out of place).

The commercials' plots are humorous little episodes in and around the house, and their main purpose is to set the mood for the core performance, which remains by and large the same throughout all five commercials: the

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<sup>5</sup> The design of the can was later modified and more Japanese writing introduced, as SATŌ found the original "too perfect," which made it hard for the buyer to throw the empty can away (*Nomiowatte mo, suteru no ni chotto hikkakatteshimau yō na kanji ga atta kara*) (SATŌ 1996: 169).

main protagonist, a Caucasian<sup>6</sup> girl in her late teens characterized by her dress and behaviour as a girl from a “good” English family (SATŌ 1996: 167), is doing a short dance skit (alone or with others) while singing the “Pekoe Song” (see below), and ending her little song-and-dance routine with the phrase “Pekoe!” and the “Pekoe Pose” – facing the camera, the left knee raised and both arms uplifted from the elbow (Fig. 2). A close-up of the can with a voiceover extolling the tea’s superior quality, and a final shot of the dancer (or dancers) doing the “Pekoe Pose” conclude the commercials.

Confronted with the commercials, a British audience would probably appreciate both dance and pose only for the farcical effect they would represent.<sup>7</sup> Yet farce is the last thing the director had in mind with the commercial’s song-and-dance routine. What the dance was to show was “dancing in a regularly cute way, without any sexual innuendo” (SATŌ 1996: 167). The dance was to be funny, but not comical, the dancer cute in a childish way, but no Lolita. As will be discussed later, it was unlikely that a Japanese audience would mistake the dance for farce, but sexual allusions had to be avoided. What made this necessary was cuteness’ somewhat paradoxical character in regard to sexuality: sexual contexts in Japan often have strong overtones of cuteness, but most of the cuteness displayed by, and directed at, young people actually serves to negate sexuality (KINSELLA 1995: 243; McVEIGH 1996: 301–2). Any potentially sexual allusion could have jeopardized the dance’s appeal of childish cuteness, so Satō made sure that all elements of seduction (sexual as well as material) are removed: the men were white-haired father figures, the women’s dresses reveal hardly any skin, the display of luxury is low-key.

In this context, the casting of the commercials’ main acting role deserves some attention: To someone not familiar with Japanese gender role definitions it might seem somewhat odd to have a girl in her late teens perform the childish “Pekoe” song-and-dance routine, when a ten-year old clearly would have been more appropriate for the role. But within the context of Japan’s social values, the discrepancy between age and behaviour in cases such as this seems to be either not perceived as such or of no consequence, and both Japanese and non-Japanese social commentators on cuteness and the image of women in Japan (SHIMAMORI 1984; ŌTSUKA 1992; CLAMMER 1995; KINSELLA 1995; McVEIGH 1996) unanimously treat cuteness expressed

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<sup>6</sup> Read as a reference to ethnic, not national background.

<sup>7</sup> In early 1997, I questioned twenty British students (12 female, 8 male) without prior Japan experience about their impressions when seeing the commercial. None of them found the commercial appealing, and the ‘Pekoe Pose’ was described in particularly negative terms such as ‘silly’, ‘stupid’, or ‘daft’.

through childlike behaviour as not being a prerogative of the under-twenty age group.

From the advertiser's point of view, having a younger actress do the dance would in fact have weakened the commercials' impact. The use of a protagonist who is close in age to the commercials' main target group – young, diet-conscious women – makes it much easier for these viewers to project themselves into the commercials and put themselves in the place of (or next to) the dancer. SATŌ had judged his audience right, and the requests for songsheets and dancing instructions sent to the advertising company suggest that the commercials' song, dance, and pose were perceived as appealingly cute rather than as inappropriately childish.<sup>8</sup>

The customer appeal of the "Pekoe" commercial runs on two complementary tracks: First, there is the all-pervasive imagery of unobtrusive opulence, suggestive of high-class quality and luxury, in the (from a Japanese point of view) exotic setting of well-to-do Britishness of a bygone era. Then there are the actors in this setting, behaving with a carefree casualness which shows that they are perfectly at home in these surroundings, perfectly happy, perfectly nice. Young women in Japan can, as KINSELLA (1995: 245) sees it, indulge in the consumption of cuteness only during brief moments of private time or in what she calls "tiny private places." The commercials' main character and her girlfriend on the other hand can afford to be openly and unapologetically childish, and the world around them enjoys and applauds their little follies. Dad doesn't get upset when his daughter bursts into his study or ruins his photograph by dancing into the picture. On the contrary, he happily joins in and dances along.<sup>9</sup>

In the world of the "Pekoe" commercials, everything is desirable yet nothing (and no one) seems unapproachable. The genteel opulence of the setting is not awe-inspiring as a more glamorous display of luxury might be. The family that populates this world is the perfect family – warm, understanding, and ready to approve of their daughter's urge to give free rein to the child in herself. Being targeted at an audience who is likely to be re-

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<sup>8</sup> In answer to the numerous requests after the particulars of the 'Pekoe' song-and-dance routine, Satō launched a second, smaller campaign of newspaper ads which carried the melody and text of the 'Pekoe Song' and an illustrated instruction of the dance step, framed with (another nod to nostalgic Britain) a vignette taken from Victorian book illustration (SATŌ 1996: 173).

<sup>9</sup> It could be argued, with O'BARR (1994: 187), that it is the commercial's placement in the world of foreigners, "behind whose strangeness lies lovability" which makes its display of relaxed silliness possible, as "they do things Japanese would never do". Personally, I do not subscribe to this theory. There are numerous commercials on Japanese TV which show Japanese people behaving similarly silly in comparable situations.

ceptive to images of cuteness, the “Pekoe” commercials consciously offer a view of a world that has all the attributes which the women interviewed by MCVEIGH (1996: 294) most often identified with cuteness itself: It is comforting, soothing, relaxing, makes one feel warm inside, adds a feeling of security, and it is simply nice. Here, the targeted cuteness aficionados could finally be themselves, i. e., cute, open, and without any inhibitions.

Removed both in space and time, the world of “Pekoe Tea” offers no point of reference to the real-life situation of its audience. More distant and more irrelevant than any Japanese environment could ever be, it becomes Utopia, an ideal projection screen for its audience’s dreams and desires. But – and this is where Suntory’s sales interest hooks in – it ultimately remains beyond reach. To get in touch with this world, the audience has only two options: fantasizing themselves into this world, or appropriating the few parts of the “Pekoe” world they can actually get hold of – the song, the dance, or easier still, the tea.

So, through the emotionally charged atmosphere of the commercial, through the subtle play at its audience’s desires, “Pekoe Tea” is being elevated beyond a mere drink and gains an almost mythical quality. Unlike the teas shown in other commercials, this tea is not drunk to refresh, to replenish lost energies, or to soothe and relax. This tea is a gift from a happier, nicer, richer world; as you purchase it, it brings a bit of this world’s luxury into your life, as you drink it, it makes you skip and dance – and all that for a mere 110 yen.

Numerous other elements in the commercials serve as further references to childhood play, right down to the tea’s name. Through the pose which accompanies the “Pekoe!”-exclamation at the end of the song, the term “Pekoe” is efficiently taken out of its original context as a marker of tea quality, made part of a child’s game, and, by having its phonemic value of potential cuteness enhanced with the accompanying gesture, is turned into a cute little nonsense phrase. The “Pekoe Song” also contributes to the overall atmosphere of childishness, through both its cheerful melody (originally an eighteenth century European folk tune) and its text, patched together from bits of two English tongue-twisters, a line from a children’s song, and the phrase “Pekoe”:

#### *The Pekoe Song*

Peter paid the piper	Shelly’s selling seashells
To pick some pickled peppers	She sells them by the seashore
So merry we will go	So merry we will go
So merry we will go	So merry we will go
Pekoe!	Pekoe!



As a song for a commercial, the "Pekoe Song" is quite unusual. There is no reference to the product besides the term "Pekoe," and the text does not seem to serve any purpose at all, apart from being English and so in keeping with the rest of the commercial. But the text is efficient as it is, through the suggestive quality of the textual fragments used in it. In fact, in this garbled and distorted form, the tongue-twisters become rather more useful for the commercials' purposes than the originals would be, as the distortion blurs the reference to the originals and makes them less recognizable, while at the same time preserving their most memorable phrases. What makes the text work is the fact that the tongue-twisters used in this ditty are not completely unknown in Japan. Most people within the targeted customer group are likely to have come across them at some point in their high school career, and might still have a faint recollection of some of the phrases and where they had heard them. For the Japanese audience of these commercials, this feeling of vague familiarity relating to one's own school years, supported by the childish song-and-dance in the commercials, helps to establish one more nostalgic reference to childhood games, albeit not to one's own, but to those of the children in the far-off, imaginary land of eternal tea time called England.

The accompanying poster campaign further supports the overall image of old-fashioned quaint Englishness: One poster addresses the viewers' "technical" curiosity with a large-scale blueprint of a tea twig complete with technical terms (in English), and an informational body text (in Japanese) about the peculiarities of the picking process which make pekoe tea superior. The pen-and-ink character of the drawing, reminiscent of an eighteenth century botanist's handbook, brings the poster into line with the campaign's old-world appeal.

The other two posters in the campaign, large-scale photographs that also exude Britishness, work mainly through visual effect (captions etc. covering only ca. 7% of the poster surface). In these posters, SATŌ (1996: 174–45) says, he had wanted to show "ordinary people" doing the "Pekoe Pose" – a London cabby in one poster, and a restaurant waitress in the other. But the characterizations of the two (both Caucasian; he with tie, vest, and driver's cap, she in black, with starched white apron and bonnet) as well as the pictures' settings (the cab in front of the classicist portico of Dartmouth House, the restaurant heavy with carpets, silverware, and solid mahogany) denote them as far from ordinary. What the posters actually show us is an extension of the TV commercials' upper class environment, only now we have moved downstairs, and it is the domestics' turn to dance.

It is interesting to see what happens to the cuteness of the "Pekoe Pose" in the two posters: Taken by themselves, the pictures are simply incomprehensible. Any relationship between the pictures' setting and the advertised

tea on one hand and the gesture of the two protagonists on the other becomes completely lost. The relaxed smiles on the protagonists' faces suggest that they are doing something funny, but through the lack of the TV version's signifiers of cuteness that accompany the "Pekoe Pose," it looks, if anything, silly. It is only through prior knowledge of the TV commercials that the audience becomes able to decipher the pose as a symbol of cuteness. In itself, the "Pekoe Pose" is devoid of any set meaning, as its "cute" value is purely contextual.

In this respect, Satō's creation is by no means exceptional. Cuteness is a far from intrinsic quality, and, with most signifiers of cuteness, their definition as cute lies entirely with the society that defines them as such. This applies even to ideas which to us seem perfectly natural and universal, such as the association of cuteness with childhood – which, in fact, could develop only after the idea of childhood as a distinct stage in life had been established. Yet there are certain signifiers of cuteness that seem to transcend time and space, and whose cute-appeal seems almost universal. Among these, the image of the baby is probably the most widely established. In the tenth century, Sei Shōnagon enthused in her *Makura no Sōshi* about the irresistible appeal of babies, and in today's world, the baby image is probably the most universally recognized emblem for cuteness. Naturally, the advertising industry has long ago recognized the emotional pull of the *Kindchenschema* for its sales potential, and babies and baby images have appeared in almost any advertising situation imaginable – even in instances where the presence of a baby seems, at least at first sight, horribly out of place, as in the examples of the next section which deal with a little baby doll known as Kewpie.

## 2. THE KEWPIE DOLL – CUTENESS AS A MORAL INSTANCE

With its long history in Japan as both a children's toy (since ca. 1914) and a company logo (since 1922), the Kewpie doll is probably one of the best established and most universally recognized symbols of cuteness in Japan. Actually, there is now more than one Kewpie doll. One is the already mentioned official logo of Q. P. Corporation, while the other, a variation on the Kewpie theme, serves the Japan Industrial Bank (*Nihon Kōgyō Ginkō*) as its mascot. The two dolls vary slightly in their looks: The bank's doll comes in various sizes, it is usually clothed (the clothes change with the seasons and with certain occasions), and through its clothes it is discernible as either female or male. It appears, with its hallmark slight bow and downturned arms (often in little groups of "brothers and sisters"), printed on the bank's

information pamphlets or, as a real doll, set onto windowsills and counters throughout the bank.

Still on sale as a toy, the food company's version is also available in different sizes, but both as a toy and as a company logo its look never varies: a single naked and genderless baby doll, standing with closed legs, straight back and uplifted arms in an open-handed gesture of happy surprise. A single red-blond lock adorns its big forehead (the bank's dolls have three locks each), and, with its big black eyes and its winning smile, it is one of the classic epitomes of cuteness.

Intrinsically, there is nothing particularly unusual about the Kewpie dolls and their employment for advertising purposes. Numerous companies in Japan use similarly cute emblems for their customer appeal and for the "human touch" that they add to their enterprise (see below). What sets the Kewpie dolls apart from the manifold other dolls, teddy bears, and cartoon characters in use is the fact that, at some point in time, both dolls seem to have undergone a change from commercial to cultural icons, which has made them reusable for (both commercial and non-commercial) purposes that have nothing to do with their original identities.

One such instance of Kewpie's return – and a highly dramatic one at that – can be seen in a recent advertisement for Tōshiba's plastics recycling technologies (Fig. 3). The ad in question consists of a poster-size photograph of an uneven, slightly wavy expanse of greyish-white granules with a slightly pink hue. In the centre of the poster and facing the viewer is the familiar Kewpie doll, almost submerged in the sea of granules, with only its head and its outstretched right arm visible above the waves. To the right of the doll is a large vertical print caption in black: "Thank you for playing with me. I am going back into the oil." A lengthy Japanese text in small horizontal black print and a small photograph, both technical references to Tōshiba's recycling technology, are superimposed onto the lower left quarter of the picture. The upper left corner of the poster carries the company name in bold black capitals (Western writing), the lower left corner a blue rounded emblem, containing two white horizontal captions in Japanese, of which the larger one reads "technologies that transform plastic waste into oil" (*purasuchikku haizai yuka gijutsu*).

The first, visual impression of the ad is a thoroughly pleasant one: the Kewpie doll, a happy swimmer, all smiles and waving at the viewer. Numerous signifiers of "cute" are at work here – the picture's pink hue, the fleshy warm orange of the doll, the doll as such and, in particular, its smile and big-eyed gaze, arresting the passing viewer's attention. With so much cuteness in the picture, the accompanying caption comes as a sobering anticlimax: we suddenly realize that the doll is not enjoying a bath but rather waving us a last goodbye on its way into oblivion. Yet on second glance, the

seeming conflict between the message of the picture and that of the caption dissolves. After all, the Kewpie doll takes this step consciously and with a smile – and, besides, we are talking about a plastic doll here. But a sense of drama remains.

What gives the ad its drama is the subtle tension underlying Kewpie's two conflicting characters, a tension which gains further from the subconscious uncertainties that prevail in Japan about the inanimate nature of dolls:<sup>10</sup> the ad presents, in one and the same object, a sentient creature alive with soul and emotions (happily waving and conversing with the viewer), and a discarded plastic object on the way to the grinder. The painful clash between the Kewpie doll's happy smile and the cruel fate awaiting it is further accentuated by the caption which suggests that little Kewpie is taking this step into annihilation out of her/his own free will (by now, personalization should be permitted), on her/his mind nothing but thankfulness for the happy hours spent together. Adding to this the strong associative ties which the sea and death hold in Japanese popular culture, the setting of the ad further underpins this overall mood of separation and suicide.

Read like this, the poster gains an almost unbearably intense emotionality, with all the qualities of a Yamada Yōji tearjerker's final shot. Discarded and devoid of a useful purpose, our loyal and untiring playmate Kewpie waves a smiling goodbye while setting out on that long last journey which each doll has to go alone, to become one again with the substance she/he had come from, thus being of service to humankind one final time. Adieu, Kewpie, childhood friend – ever joyful, and altruistic beyond death.

It is interesting to see how the Kewpie-appeal works in this ad. In contrast to the original Kewpie-campaigns of both the bank and the food processing company, the doll's main purpose in this ad is not the emotional appeal of the baby image (what BRIERLEY (1995: 159) calls the "Ah" factor). Rather, the Toshiba ad individualizes the doll and puts it into an intimate relationship with the viewer, as a treasured childhood friend. Thus come to life, Kewpie steps out of the role of cuteness incarnate (or implasticite) and turns, through unselfish behaviour, into a moral instance commending the advertised recycling venture: if Kewpie, the epitome of goodness, is willing

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<sup>10</sup> While it is debatable whether dolls in Japan are generally seen as animate or not, the fact remains that they are often treated as if they were, e. g., during disposal. After having lost their little owners' interest and affection, dolls are seldom put out with the regular garbage like other toys. Many end up instead at the local Shintō shrine, where the priest will ritually burn them together with other discarded spiritual items, thus assuring that the doll's spirit will not be angered by being unceremoniously dumped and come back to cause havoc among its former hosts.

to undertake a step as dramatic as offering her/his own life for the sake of recycling, then its benefit for mankind must be a great one indeed.

But Toshiba's advertisement is not the only case where the Kewpie doll is being appropriated for a purpose which has no ties whatsoever with the products or companies that the doll originally stood for. Set in a completely different context, the next example runs along similar lines to the Toshiba ad, although in this case the appropriation takes Kewpie beyond the world of commercial advertising, into the realm of politics.

In the 18 November 1996 edition of the American news magazine *Time*, a photograph shows a group of Japanese women protesting against the continued presence of US military bases on Okinawa (Fig. 4). Prominent in the middle of the photograph, a protester holds up a large cut-out of Kewpie – the bank's version, that is. The doll is identifiable as a girl, dressed neatly in a blue chequered dress with frills, a pink apron, pink socks, and red shoes (the Toshiba ad is ambiguous about Kewpie's gender). But to make it clear that Kewpie isn't there to play, the doll also wears a red armband with the name of the protesters' organization, carries on her apron the caption "We don't need the US bases," and says (cartoon-style, in a balloon), "Peace is good."

This is the overt message of Kewpie. It is not coded as in the Toshiba ad, and the slogans that Kewpie is made to carry are by far more forceful and straightforward than the ad's caption. Yet here, too, a second, deeper layer of meaning is discernible in the utilization of the doll. Apart from the slogans it carries, the doll's presence is in itself a statement, albeit one which is easy to miss if one is not familiar with the situation in Okinawa in 1996. To the outsider, Kewpie in the protest march is first and foremost an oddity and an eye-catcher (efficient enough to capture the attention of a *Time Magazine* photographer), a theatrical alienation effect in the classical Brechtian understanding – after all, what *is* a baby doll in frills doing at a protest march against the US military? To insiders, though, the link is obvious: Kewpie serves as an allusion to the incident which initiated the protests in Okinawa, the rape of a 12-year old Japanese girl by three American servicemen.

Again, Kewpie serves her purpose well: as a stand-in for the rape victim, the doll effectively polarizes and further emotionalizes the already charged atmosphere around the rape case. She adds her aura of naive guilelessness and childhood innocence to the victim's side, and correspondingly enhances the notions of malice and depravity which surround the three perpetrators of the crime. But, simultaneously, through the slogans which she carries, Kewpie takes on a further identity, namely that of a protester against the military establishment. The effect is a similar polarization. Kewpie's presence helps to reinforce the extant dichotomy, reducing both parties to archetypes of either good or bad, analogous to the parties in the rape case.

On one side are Kewpie and the simple peace-loving people of Japan, on the other, the foreign military, bent on violating and abusing the land for whatever sinister purposes they choose. As in the Toshiba ad, Kewpie becomes the ultimate moral instance, and her message is plain: If even she, the paragon of childhood innocence and goodness, feels so threatened that she sees no other option but to stand up, don the protesters' armband, and join their ranks with her conviction written on her chest, then the situation must be bad indeed.

What the above two cases amply show is how far from its origins the Kewpie doll has moved over the years. Having been introduced to the Japanese public and having gained widespread popularity as a children's toy before becoming a food processing company's trademark, the promotional value of the omnipresent doll for its mother company must at times have been immense. But with Kewpie's long-lasting popularity as a toy, the audience seems to have begun to perceive the doll first and foremost as such – a toy, not a cute company logo. Alongside this redefinition of the doll's character came a change in its suggestive value. The former representative of a somewhat general idea of baby cuteness now serves as a carrier of more personal images (childhood, innocent play) and correspondingly evokes a different emotive response in the viewer (feelings of familiarity, nostalgia), which the Toshiba ad, for one, quite openly cashes in on.

This is not to say that the public has grown unaware of the doll's function as a company logo, but that the doll's split personality – trademark as well as toy – enables advertisers to reemploy the Kewpie doll in new contexts. They can rely on their audience's ability to discern correctly which of the doll's identities is called for, to make the appropriate mental associations, and to react with the desired emotive responses. In fact, the disassociation of Kewpie from its original promotional purpose has gone so far that even a political group can appropriate the doll and declare Kewpie a member of their organization (thus laying claim to all the qualities that Kewpie stands for), without any obvious conflict between their political goals and Kewpie's initial commercial function. What the Kewpie of the 1990s has come to symbolize is nostalgia, not mayonnaise; innocence, not banking.

### 3. BANKS AND TOONS – CARTOON CHARACTERS AS ADVERTISING TOOLS FOR FINANCIAL BUSINESSES

The Kewpie doll might have transcended banking, but the banking industry did not let go of the likes of Kewpie. On the contrary, the 1980s saw an abundance of cartoon-style animals and other signifiers of cuteness enter the world of finance in Japan. Until then, financial businesses in Japan had fo-

cused their PR efforts on the same staid, reliable, and mature image as their counterparts in other countries, but in the eighties, several institutions started to redefine themselves in a new and more playful vein. Few companies, though, were prepared to go as far as Okayama Trust and Savings Bank (Okayama Shinyō Ginkō) which, after a complete image overhaul, reopened as Tomato Bank<sup>11</sup>, and most did not stretch their ingenuity far beyond the introduction of a cartoon character as their official mascot. With some adopted from popular American cartoons such as "Felix the Cat" or "Peanuts," and others created particularly for advertising purposes like Sumitomo Bank's "Kuma no Bankū" (Fig. 5) (SATŌ 1996: 216–20), these characters began to adorn pamphlets, bankbooks and credit cards, enliven TV and magazine ads, and even make their ways into customers' homes, as dolls or as prints on give-aways such as cups, cushions, etc. The positive customer response to this marketing ploy served to popularize it further, and more financial institutions followed suit; in 1995, Sharon KINSELLA counted 23 banks, fourteen stockbrokers and seven insurance companies who employed the likes of Tom and Jerry for promotional purposes (KINSELLA 1995: 226).

For SUZUKI Akira, sales promotion director for Dentsū, the main responsibility for this sudden proliferation of cartoon characters lies with the banks' efforts to counter the negative effects of the growing rate of automation in the banking industry. In his opinion, the spread of automated teller machines and the corresponding decrease in face-to-face interaction between customers and bank staff has created an atmosphere of anonymity and sterility which is prone to alienate customers. By surrounding the customer with cartoon characters, he says, the banks hope to make up for these shortcomings and to carry some of the cartoons' emotional appeal into the personalized banking transactions (SUZUKI 1996: 62–63).

But, on closer look, Suzuki's explanation is far from sufficient, and it seems to be relevant more in regard to the pictures of bank clerks on the screens of teller machines<sup>12</sup> than to the characters which serve the banks as mascots. Also, it fails to explain the cartoons' popularity with institutions

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<sup>11</sup> The daring decision of the formerly rather staid Okayama Shinyō Ginkō paid off when the bank, with its new name and its new image (bright red tomato prints on bankbooks and in offices), became "Japan's fastest growing regional financial institution" (*Tokyo Journal* 4/1990: 16), which made it one of the 1980s' top examples of successful PR work in Japanese banking.

<sup>12</sup> As part of the attempt to substitute the human element, the screens of many ATMs show little cartoon bank clerks that accompany the machines' instructions with smiles, bows, and hand gestures. As the machine itself cannot supply the ritual that accompanies 'live' bank transactions, a voice recording and the animated image of the clerk deliver the prescribed gestures and spoken formulae for the machine.

that are less affected by loss of face-to-face interaction, such as stockbrokers and insurance companies. For a better understanding of the motivations behind the image reshuffle of Japan's financial institutions, it is important to see them as part of a greater market reorientation in Japan, with similar developments in many other business sectors, and to realize that the financial institutions in Japan have introduced this more playful tone into their businesses with a particular customer group in mind.

The image makeover of Japan's financial institutions came in the wake of the realization that young professionals, and in particular unmarried working women in their twenties (as embodied in the stereotype of the OL or "office lady") had access to, and control over, considerable financial resources (KINSELLA 1995: 245), and that conventional marketing campaigns held little attraction for this customer group.<sup>13</sup> Once this dormant market had been recognized for its huge business potential, banks were fast to utilize the almost irresistible appeal which cute cartoon characters held for the members of this target group. As was said before, financial institutions in Japan now exploit the customer appeal of these characters in every conceivable way, although some institutions, mindful of clients who might not succumb to the appeal of cuteness, continue to offer a choice between cute or non-cute bankbooks and credit cards. Others have embraced their new playful image more wholeheartedly and have completely done away with the former plain versions.

The ongoing popularity which cartoon characters enjoy in the marketing sections of Japan's financial businesses suggests that their power as advertising tools has not suffered much over the years. Undoubtedly, their cute aura is one of the key components in their success, but a closer look into the mechanisms behind their customer appeal reveals that there is more to it than just cuteness. What becomes visible in the analysis is an intricate and multilayered complex of meanings and their manipulations, revolving around three points of reference – the symbol itself and what it stands for, the company and what it intends the symbol for, and finally the customers and what they actually use the symbol for.

In the case of cartoons and banks, an important prerequisite for this triangular relationship is that the cartoon characters are displayed not only on PR materials such as posters, but also on items such as bankbooks or credit cards. Placing the character onto items which the customer can actually acquire, the financial institution virtually puts the object of desire, the cartoon character, into the customer's hands. Through the acquisition of the bank-

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<sup>13</sup> A more detailed discussion of the Japanese customer market's reorientation towards a young female audience can be found in SKOV and MOERAN (1995: 31–47).



book, the credit card or a promotional present, the customer can gain genuine emotional satisfaction, by being able to take possession of the cartoon, with all the symbolic values it comes to incorporate (cuteness being just one among many).

But regardless of what other values it might come to incorporate, the most obvious customer appeal of the cartoon-adorned item is still that of being just plain cute. Decorated with a cartoon character, the card, bankbook, or promotional present becomes more than just an object, it becomes emotionally charged. Through the acquisition of this object, clients can appropriate its cute quality and utilize it for their own means, either in private, appreciating its "warm, cheer-me-up atmosphere" (KINSELLA 1995: 228), or in public, to reaffirm their status among peers, through the ownership of such a cute item.<sup>14</sup>

Hand in hand with this goes the object's (by now certainly outdated) value as a fashion good: as part of the *kawaii*-trend of the eighties, cute credit cards etc. had, at least for a while, the status of the thing to own. To signify trendiness for fashion-conscious teens and twens it was almost a must to have a card with a cute character, regardless of one's own personal stance towards cuteness.

Then there is the appeal which the mascot has for people who have developed a peculiar liking for a particular character (or group of characters), from among the multitude of cartoons on the market, and for whom goods decorated with this character gain the status of collector's items. For these customers, the objective of acquiring this particular character is to own it for its own sake; the character's cuteness becomes a matter of secondary importance. This holds true in particular for characters who, like Mickey Mouse, enjoy an almost cultic status which far transcends their role as signifiers of cuteness.

But by utilizing cartoon characters in their PR campaigns, Japan's financial businesses do more than just try to profit from their customers' susceptibility for cuteness, their fashion consciousness, or their collector's enthusiasm. The cartoons' presence manipulates the image of the institution as such and brings an emotional element into the otherwise purely commercial relationship between the financial institution and its customers. A recent example of such staged sentimental bonding between advertiser and target audience is a 1996 TV commercial of Sumitomo Bank, advertising the bank's credit card and offering the chance to win a trip to either Universal Studios in Hollywood or to Huis ten Bosch, a theme park in Southern Japan.

While a male voiceover extols the advantages the bank's credit card offers and the chance to win the Columbia Studios tour, the fictive winner, a

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<sup>14</sup> For an inquiry into the consumption of cuteness, see KINSELLA 1995.

woman of around twenty, is enjoying her tour around the studios together with Woody Woodpecker, the bank's mascot. Actually, the girl is not really shown taking the trip, this is only suggested by clips of Universal Studios and Huis ten Bosch attractions, which alternate with shots of the girl and Woody. The commercials show a close-up of King Kong's face, another one of the White Shark's frightful mouth, then a shot of the woman expressing fright, and Woody hiding in fear; a picture of Huis ten Bosch, and the girl and Woody shout "Wonderful!" (*ureshii*) together; a picture of a hot spring bath, then Woody and the girl in cotton robes, ready to relax.

As in the cases discussed before, there is more than one layer of meaning to this commercial. Its obvious message is an alluring promise of a trip to California or Kyūshū. The highlights of the trips are shown, and their attractiveness is further underlined by the girl and her displays of the appropriate emotions – fright, excitement, pleasure. She is there to emphasize, but not through eroticism or glamour. Neither famous nor outstandingly good-looking, her anonymity and her average looks make her Everywoman. She is a projection plane, an invitation to the target audience to imagine themselves in her place ("This could be you!"). And alongside her is Woody Woodpecker, whose presence carries a message of its own. He is not shown, as one would expect, as the bank's representative whose task it is to give the prize to the lucky winner. Rather, he is a fellow traveller, there to enjoy the trip alongside the fictive winner, a beneficiary of the bank's generous present just like her.

So what the commercial promises is more than a holiday at Universal Studios or Huis ten Bosch, it is a holiday with Woody. It invites the target audience to put themselves in the model's place. Regardless of what the real trip will be like, in the commercial Woody is part of the prize. He is there to share the pleasures of this exciting trip with the lucky winner, to share her emotions and her happiness – in short, to become her friend and soulmate. The ultimate offer of this commercial is not an overseas trip but friendship.

This, of course, is the cartoon's appeal taken to an extreme, and not many banks go this far in their ad campaigns. But the more low-key approaches of other financial institutions still have a strong element of sentimentalization, helping them to redefine their relationship with their customers:

- Through the characters' omnipresence in the bank and on almost all of their promotional materials and informational pamphlets, the customer is induced to mentally associate the character with the institution.
- Whereas the mascots of other companies, such as Q. P. Company's Kewpie doll, are displayed in a static, unchanging mode, the cartoons in the banks are shown in countless different poses and actions. Cut-outs of the character in the bank make eye contact with the customer, pic-

tures in promotional pamphlets directly address the customer, and TV commercials give the character motion and voice. The bank lets the character come alive and, through its (one-sided) interactions with the customer, act as a stand-in for the bank itself, as an animated bank representative.

- As the character comes to represent the bank, its qualities come to represent the bank's qualities. Snoopy's "warmth" (*atatakami*; SUZUKI 1996: 63) reflects back on the institution itself. The emotional affinities which the customer might have had for the character before its appropriation by the financial institution are transferred onto the institution itself.
- The customer's emotional attachment to the character is further reinforced by giving the customer the chance to experience physical contact with the character – or at least its pictorial representation. Printed on a complimentary coffee mug etc., the character (and with it the institution itself) moves beyond the institution's premises and enters the customer's private life.
- By thus reinforcing the emotional bond between the customer and the character, while simultaneously establishing the character as its representative, the financial institution ultimately creates a similar emotional bond between the customer and itself.

Naturally, it is difficult to judge how much of this emotional bonding is actually achieved. After all, it is up to the customers to judge how far they want to let themselves be taken in by the cartoons' cuteness. But, as was said in the beginning of this section, the ongoing popularity of cartoons in the PR departments of Japan's financial industry seems to suggest that, through the appeal of these cute characters, they do indeed achieve what their equivalents in Britain hope to gain with humour and self-irony in their ad campaigns, "to disarm the perceptions of banking and insurance as dry, materialist, and untrustworthy" (BRIERLEY 1995: 159). The warmth and emotional element of the cartoon characters introduce a soft touch, not only to automated tellers, but to the serious and confusingly complex business of banking – a human touch which makes the imposing institution "bank" a little less sinister, a little less intimidating.

#### 4. CUTE "WANTED" POSTERS – THE DEFUSED DANGER

A similar psychology can be found at work in the many information pamphlets and posters issued by public authorities, concerning matters such as fire prevention or the recommended behaviour during natural disasters. Many of these pamphlets enliven their serious advice with cartoon-style il-

illustrations, where characters reminiscent of those in children's comic magazines enact the advice of the text. Of course, it can be argued that the main purpose of these illustrations is to make such vital and potentially life-saving measures easier to comprehend for pre-school children, but this does not explain why cartoons of this sort serve to illustrate even those matters which are very unlikely to concern pre-schoolers, such as the warning not to smoke in bed or never to leave the deep-fry oil for *tempura* unattended on the fire.

What distinguishes these information brochures from pamphlets of Japan's financial businesses is the purpose which the cartoon-style illustrations serve: Here, their cuteness is not to give a warmer touch to the agency that put them there, but to soften the impact of the potential danger contained in the brochure's subject matter. This is not to say that the cartoon pictures in these brochures are to play down the seriousness of their subject matter. On the contrary, they usually appear in a very matter-of-fact context. The language of the brochure is brisk and informative, and the accompanying drawings appropriately illustrate the potential dangers, or the correct behaviour during a disaster. But the cartoon-style of the drawings subverts this serious tone to some extent. The threat of real-life catastrophe is removed into a cartoon fantasyworld, and a psychological distance is created between the apocalyptic message of the pictures (people escaping a collapsing building, a sleeper setting the bed on fire) and the real-life situation of the viewer. The disaster becomes a little less disastrous, the potential danger a little less scary.

A very drastic example of such defusing of a potentially unsettling message was the 1996 poster campaign of Kanagawa Prefecture Police Headquarters in connection with the search for the seven most wanted members of the Aum Shinrikyō religious group (Fig. 6). The mainstay of the campaign were posters which showed photographs of the seven fugitives' faces superimposed on the bodies of black cartoon devils, complete with little wings and forked tails (no horns, though), one holding a skull, another a scythe-like instrument. The cartoon atmosphere of the display was further supported by the disproportionately big heads of the seven, by the little red ribbon which the single female member among the seven wore around her tail, and by two little red devils floating above them, one with a scythe and a skull, the other accompanied by the caption "heeheeheehee."

Through its "devilish" context, the message of the picture becomes both alarming and belittling. The highly publicized mug shots of the seven and the public knowledge of their suspected involvement in the sect's criminal activities are in themselves sufficient to arouse suspicion and fear in any passers-by. Through the depiction as devils (legally questionable, as they are still only suspects) and the allusions contained in this image, the im-

pression of utter badness and evil is further reinforced. Denied their real physique and adorned instead with black bodies and tails, they indeed become subhuman. Yet at the same time the comic magazine style of the picture undermines this impression of danger and threat. Like the earthquake and fire precaution pamphlets mentioned before, this poster removes the latent threat of the seven into another dimension, into a comic strip world that is not quite here and now. And while turning them into something not quite human, the black odd bodies also serve to ridicule the seven. Here are seven dangerous creatures, up to no good, as the skull and the scythe reveal, but caricatured like this, who could take them serious? They may be devilish, but they are cartoons, ridiculous cartoons. The threat of the seven is being defused, and the poster achieves its goal, to warn, but not to unsettle.

But the power of cuteness is not only able to make the potentially dangerous appear less so, it also permits its user to overstep the limitations of social convention and to speak or write about that which is treated as taboo. This is seen, for example, in a 1996 print advertisement for a health drink (said to be beneficial for the intestinal tract), which had as its focal point a large and provocative caption asking "What colour was your poo this morning?" (*Unchi, kesa, nani-iro datta?*). According to the ad's body text, this was intended as a conscious attempt to break a taboo and speak about the unspeakable. But to make the breach of etiquette less serious and shocking, the message of the ad was sweetened by a dose of cuteness, a cartoon-style drawing of a small oblong object with a little tip on one end and a happy face on the other – a little smiling turd.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Cuteness and its appreciation are not peculiar to Japan alone. What makes the case of Japan so remarkable is the sheer amount of cuteness encountered there, and, in particular – with regard to the topic of this paper – the amount of cuteness utilized in advertising contexts. Cuteness, as this article showed, is an extremely versatile advertising tool, and the vagueness of its definition allows virtually anything and anyone to become cute. The result has been that the appreciation, utilization, and display of signifiers of cuteness, which twenty years ago was an almost exclusive prerequisite of young females, has nowadays transcended age and gender and become an almost universally applicable social value. At the same time, "cute" is a very powerful emotive device, and, depending on its context, it can serve a wide range of purposes, which in this paper alone included functions as varied as the suggestion of freedom, the creation of moral authority, the ad-

dition of a human touch to an inhuman environment, and the defusing of the potentially dangerous.

As for the question of what cuteness means to the audience which these advertisements address, and what factors are ultimately responsible for the proliferation of cute signifiers in Japan, the problem becomes even more diffuse. It comes as no surprise that KINSELLA and MCVEIGH, who both discuss the topic of "cuteness" within a paradigm of gender and power relations, arrive at explanations which are diametrically opposed. For MCVEIGH, cute behaviour is first of all a means of interaction between the powerless and the powerful which offers both sides something to gain:

Being cute toward those above is often a way of obtaining favors and attention, while displaying cuteness towards one's subordinates is a method of appearing non-threatening, thereby gaining their confidence, and, perhaps more cynically, control over them (MCVEIGH 1996: 298).

In either case, the effect is the same – the status quo is being reinforced. So, according to MCVEIGH, what cute behaviour ultimately does is "to symbolize, reinforce, and communicate norms that privilege males over females, and [it] is the ideal sentiment for strengthening lines of authority" (1996: 298). KINSELLA, on the other hand, detects the main driving force behind Japan's cute-boom in the exact opposite corner. She sees the excessive display of cute behaviour among Japanese young women in the seventies and eighties mainly as an expression, not of subordination, but of self-assertiveness, a conscious endorsement of gender stereotypes "almost as a means of taunting and ridiculing male condemnation and making clear their stubborn refusal to stop playing, go home, and accept less from life" (KINSELLA 1995: 250). To her, the cute style of Japan's youth is "anti-social" and indicative of an attitude which "blithely ignores or outrightly contradicts values central to the organisation of Japanese society and the maintenance of the work ethic" (KINSELLA 1995: 251). At the end of the day, the wide span of meanings which the term *kawaii*, or cute, endorses offers room for both extremes, for both the patronizing attitude behind the droll illustrations in the earthquake safety pamphlet and the cocky, in-your-face childishness of Amuro Namie.

In the end, this investigation has raised more questions than it could answer. Why, for example, do public authorities in Japan deem it necessary to soften serious topics in their information brochures with a dash of cuteness? Are the current changes in cute advertising (mentioned in the introduction) due to a re-evaluation of society's values? Given the permanent inundation of cute signifiers, how much of this cuteness is still being

consciously perceived as such by the audience, and how much of it has ceased to be defined as cute? And how much of Japan's cuteness is being perceived as such only by the outside observer? In this respect, this paper is only a starting point. From advertising, where cuteness has proved an important manipulative instrument, the next step would be to see if cuteness proves similarly efficient in the manipulation of other communicative situations in Japan. All that can be said for sure right now is that there is enough time to investigate this matter, as it will be a long time before Japan's cuteness runs out of steam.



Fig. 1: Tuxedo Sam



Fig. 2: The 'Pekoe Pose'

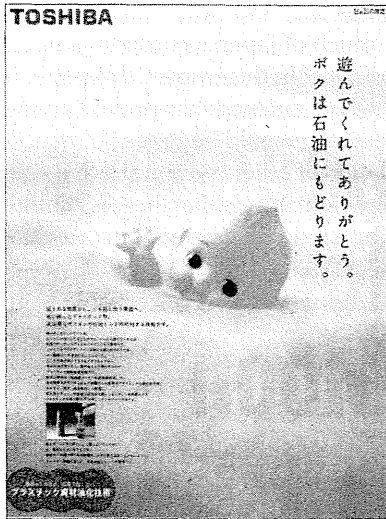


Fig. 3: The Kewpie Doll



Fig. 4: The Kewpie Doll



Fig. 5: 'Kuma no Bankō'





Fig. 6: Wanted-poster of Kanagawa Pref. police offices

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