

# Kawaii! (the utmost cuteness)

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Cuteness has taken on a life of its own in Japan, to the extent that the craze has taken on a name whose name you may have heard before: kawaii. In Japanese, kawaii does not mean 'cute' literally, but it expresses the concept of looking or acting childlike. Kawaii people embody such qualities as innocence, silliness, and awkward ways of movement and dress. Particularly insofar as kawaii fashion, you'll see overlapping layers of different clashing colors.

The principal meanings for kawaii are 'shy' or 'embarrassed'; secondary meanings are 'loveable,' 'vulnerable,' 'darling,' and 'small.' The first version of the word kawaii began appearing in Japanese dictionaries in 1945 as

kawayushi. In dictionaries printed around 1970, kawayushi had changed into kawayui but the meaning remained the same. According to Sharon Kinsella, a Cambridge University researcher who has written on the subject, the cute craze really began around then, when a fad for writing notes and letters in rounded, childish characters began to catch on among teenage Japanese girls. Kids called it burikko-ji, translated as 'kitten-writing' or 'fake-child writing.'

Anyone who pays attention to pop culture is familiar with the childlike aspect of kawaii in Japan's wide array of home-grown cartoon characters, the most recognizable of which is Hello Kitty. Most of the time cute characters

have huge heads, short arms and hands with no fingers, and short legs. They always have some sort of way to blush, and their mouths are small; if they utter a word, it's a short doodling sound like "oh!" "ah!" or "quirp!"

What's the point of kawaii? The phenomenon may seem to some to be quasi-utopian, in which innocence insulates oneself from the real world. But far from isolating those who partake, however, kawaii evokes unconditioned empathic emotional affection, in which holders of kawaii objects project benign feelings onto them. In effect, incorporating kawaii is a way of fostering sociability and expression of friendly feelings for others. 🙌



## Manekineko:

The traditional Japanese cat sculptures with a raised paw—sometimes the left, sometimes both—welcoming passersby from the windows of stores and restaurants. Manekineko come in many colors—red, black, gold, and white being popular. Each color represents the desired aspect of life in which good luck might be necessary, for example health, love, or wealth.



## Hello Kitty:

Japan's ubiquitous cat character was invented by Sanrio Corporation in 1974. Dick Bruna's Dutch bunny character, Miffy, is believed to have inspired her creation. Today, Kitty-related products and licensing generate about half of Sanrio's \$1 billion in sales annually. According to Sanrio via its Web site, "Giving someone a cute Hello Kitty letter set doesn't just say 'let's stay in touch'—it gives them a means to do so."



## Hayao Miyazaki:

The master of sublime Japanese animated movies. among his masterpieces are Totoro (featuring dust bunnies that you wish populated your own house), Princess Mononoke, and the highest-grossing film ever made in Japan: Spirited Away. Miyazaki was born in Tokyo in 1941 and started his career as animator in 1963.