

Irresistible

How Cuteness Wired our Brains
and Conquered the World

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To my mother for constantly reading to me as a child,
and to my grandmother for writing
many of the books she read

CONTENTS

<i>List of figures</i>	vii
Introduction: Hello Kitty Guards the Road	1
1. Ancient Japanese Cuteness	16
2. The Border between Wild and Tame	35
3. Cuteness in the West	55
4. <i>Kawaii</i> in the Hermit Kingdom	75
5. Growth in Reverse: Neoteny and the Neural Crest	97
6. Cute Attains its Modern Meaning	113
7. The Evolutionary Substrate of Cuteness	132
8. <i>Kawaii</i> in Contemporary Japan	147
9. Are We a Self-Domesticated Species?	165
10. The Future of Cuteness	184
<i>Notes</i>	207
<i>Bibliography</i>	245
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	264
<i>Index</i>	266

LIST OF FIGURES

Introduction

- 0.1 Neon-lit Pokémon Eevees march through the evening at the Pikachu Outbreak. Photo by author.
- 0.2 Child schema from *Studies in Human and Animal Behavior: Volume II*, by Konrad Lorenz, trans. Robert Martin, Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press, Copyright © 1971 by Konrad Lorenz. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

1. Ancient Japanese Cuteness

- 1.1 Beckoning cat figures at Gotokuji Temple, Tokyo. Photo by author.
- 1.2 Origami pigeon fortunes and cat votive tablets at a Tokyo shrine. Photo by author.

2. The Border between Wild and Tame

- 2.1 Antique kimono showing a fox wedding. Photo by author.
- 2.2 Close encounter with a domesticated Siberian fox. Photo by author.

3. Cuteness in the West

- 3.1 Raphael's cherubs from the *Sistine Madonna* (1513–14): 'The Angels from the Sistine Madonna', copper engraving, Charles Gottfried Schultz, c. 1890. Photo: CCo A. Wagner / Wikimedia Commons.

4. *Kawaii* in the Hermit Kingdom

- 4.1 Puppy on a fan by Nagasawa Rosetsu. Courtesy of the Homma Museum of Art.
- 4.2 Puppies by Maruyama Ōkyo. Courtesy of the Fuchu City Museum.
- 4.3 Close-up of Ōkyo's puppies. Courtesy of Fuchu City Museum.
- 4.4 The cover of Bunkio Matsuki's *Catalogue of Japanese Artists' Materials*, 1904.
- 4.5 The white-rabbit logo of Bunkio Matsuki's Boston shop, from Bunkio Matsuki's *Catalogue of Japanese Artists' Materials*, 1904.
- 4.6 In Junichi Nakahara's 1941 cover illustration for the magazine *The Shōjo's Friend*, a young girl with a dreamy expression wears a traditional *yukata* along with a Western hairstyle and bow.
©Junichi Nakahara/Himawariya
- 4.7 Rune Naito's 1971 character 'Rune Panda.' © R.S.H/RUNE

5. Growth in Reverse: Neoteny and the Neural Crest

- 5.1 'Teddy Girl'. Courtesy of the Izu Teddy Bear Museum.

6. Cute Attains its Modern Meaning

- 6.1 A postcard from 1914 shows a Kewpie agitating for women's suffrage. Courtesy of Alamy.
- 6.2 Kewpie Mayonnaise jar from 1925. Courtesy of Kewpie Corporation.

8. *Kawaii* in Contemporary Japan

- 8.1 Shibuya ward's Hachiko bus. Photo by author.
- 8.2 Grave of the beloved dog Hachiko. Photo by author.
- 8.3 A small girl meets a *yuru kyara* mascot character at the 2018 Yuru Kyara Grand Prix in Osaka. Photo by author.

10. The Future of Cuteness

- 10.1 The author wearing a fursuit at Anthrocon. Photo by author.

INTRODUCTION

HELLO KITTY GUARDS THE ROAD



Tokyo, my home for several decades, is continually evolving, the new replacing the old at a frantic pace. My neighbourhood used to have a fishmonger, a greengrocer and a rice miller. There was a liquor shop run by two elderly women so nearsighted that one of them would read out the price of a can of beer while the other entered it into the cash till, her eyes only inches away from the keys. All of these are now long gone.

The demise of small shops is not unusual, of course, but in Japan the same is true of architecture. Many old buildings that would be preserved elsewhere don't stand a chance here. Harajuku, a nearby neighbourhood, has long been the centre of youth culture. Built a year after the Great Tokyo Earthquake in 1924, its train station looked like a European chalet, half-timbered with a triangular roof, an ornate clock, stained glass

and a weathercock-topped cupola. By some miracle it survived the fire-bombing of the Second World War, only to be torn down and replaced with a soulless glass box in 2020.

The charmingly rundown Aoyama Apartments stood a bit further down from Harajuku Station along the pleasant, tree-lined boulevard known as Japan's Champs-Élysées. Built in 1926 as public housing, they provided pioneering architecture for modern living in the Japanese style, a good example of how Japan absorbed Western design and repackaged it to suit its own tastes. But the flats were too small for couples or families in booming post-war Japan. By the 1990s few owners still lived there. Instead they had taken advantage of the prime location and rented out their flats to shops and galleries, which plied their wares as the old building gracefully decayed around them. I remember entering this 1920s apartment building to find all the front doors propped open, with each flat displaying a carefully curated selection of fashionable clothes, art or curios. But this, too, didn't last. The apartments were torn down in 2003 to make room for Omotesando Hills, a splashy development full of shops selling expensive watches and high-end fashion. At one end of this monstrosity lies a small, reconstructed façade of the original building, a homage to the vanished past that only makes it worse.

The atmosphere of Harajuku is created by people as much as buildings, and this has also changed. Long before the term 'safe space' had entered the public consciousness, Harajuku was a place where young people who didn't fit into the mainstream could express themselves. Its location next to Meiji Shrine, an austere edifice in the middle of a forest, invites a certain decorum, and the merchants' association of Harajuku has long banned any sort of adult entertainment, from nightclubs and bars to pachinko parlours. The area shuts down around eight o'clock.

Youth culture has moved online these days, but before the

Internet, Japanese youth brought their obsessions onto the Harajuku streets. Throughout the 1990s dozens of aspiring rock bands set up on the street every Sunday to perform, carefully adjusting their sound so as not to overwhelm the band next to them. When I strolled by the small groups of devoted fans surrounding each band, I heard Elvis Presley songs coming from cranked-up boomboxes surrounded by crews of young men dancing rockabilly-style, all dressed in white shirts, leather jackets and jeans, with 1950s greased-back hairstyles. Harajuku was both new and different, old and familiar.

As well as aspiring rock bands, Harajuku became the epicentre of Japan's 'fashion tribes', groups of like-minded young people who dressed not to conform but to express themselves. They met on weekends by the train station to hang out with their friends. The most noticeable were young women who wore dresses with long skirts that puffed out with ruffles and lace. Frilly corsets narrowed their waists and they wore elaborately styled wigs in different colours – blonde, red, even blue – festooned with ribbons. I often saw them gathered on a bridge over the train tracks and taking photos of each other near the chalet-like station building while dressed as a crazy mix of French rococo and British Victorian. They looked like living dolls. They called themselves 'Lolitas'.

I found this name baffling. It obviously came from Vladimir Nabokov's novel, but why would they choose to call themselves this? To find out, I turned to Yukiko Toda, a fashion designer for a Lolita brand. 'Nobody knows why they started using that term,' she admitted, 'but Lolita fashion has nothing to do with attracting the attention of men. It's for the girls themselves. They dress up for each other because it's cute.'

The word she used was '*kawaii*', and while 'cute' is the best English translation, its meaning is more wide-ranging.¹ Lolita fashion was a subcultural movement, but *kawaii* in general was part of girls' and women's culture in Japan. It also appeared in

the manga comic books popular with everyone, even adults, and was a feature of Japanese animation. I knew a bit about *kawaii*, but it didn't really hold my interest at first. There was so much else going on. But then something changed.

As a long-term resident of Japan, I've learned that a surprise often awaits around every corner. Ten years ago that meant a sudden change in road-construction barriers, a common sight in every city. I'd never thought much about them until the day I walked out of my apartment to find the road blocked not by a row of prosaic red-and-white stripes signalling danger, but by a long line of large, plastic Hello Kitty characters, each holding a rainbow. This iconic cat, drawn simply with a large head, a red hair ribbon and no visible mouth, made her debut adorning a coin purse in 1975. Her parent company, Sanrio, was soon producing a dizzying array of Hello Kitty products that became globally popular.

Hello Kitty is now one of the most profitable licensed characters in the world, and she shows up in many unlikely places. A Taiwanese airline painted an enormous Hello Kitty on its planes, and Lady Gaga wore a dress made entirely out of Hello Kitty toys in a 2009 photoshoot. For this reason, seeing the celebrated cat appear on road-construction barriers wasn't a complete surprise. However, I soon realised that this was more than just an advertising campaign; 'cutified' construction barriers were popping up everywhere in Tokyo, sporting unbranded frogs, monkeys, ducks, rabbits and dolphins. It was a bizarre transformation of mundane city streets and, at first, I couldn't figure out what was going on.

This sudden culture shock, years after I'd landed in Tokyo, made me newly aware of the world around me. It was like a switch flipped in my brain; suddenly I noticed that *kawaii* is *everywhere* in Japan. The manhole covers right outside my front door are adorned with colourful portraits of manga characters. Railway safety posters telling passengers to stand clear

of the platform are illustrated by a small figure with a huge head and big eyes. Animal cafés, where customers can receive a shot of cuteness along with their morning espresso, offer cuddles with cats, rabbits, miniature pigs and even hedgehogs. And it's impossible to walk for more than a minute through a shopping street in Japan without overhearing the word *kawaii*, often exclaimed in a chorus among groups of young women. In fact, *kawaii* might be the most popular word in the Japanese language.²

Once I started noticing the extent to which cuteness had permeated Japanese culture, I wanted to understand it. When did its relentless spread begin, and why did it happen here? The main problem, though, was where to start. As an academic, my first impulse was to hit the books, but I was surprised to find how little scholarship existed on the phenomenon. There were studies of *kawaii* in specific areas of cultural life, like manga comics, fashion and pop music, but very few scholars had sought to trace the spread of *kawaii* in the culture at large.

The theories that did exist were, for lack of a better term, weird. The artist Takashi Murakami, who has been called the Japanese Andy Warhol, said that Japan became cute after the Second World War as a way of appearing harmless and inoffensive to its conqueror, the United States. In the process, he claimed, Japan had become like a forever-emasculated little boy.³ On the other hand, in the late 1980s and early 1990s Eiji Ōtuska and a few other influential male critics wrote that excessive consumerism and rampant consumption had made Japanese people so enamoured with cute that everyone had turned into a little girl. Ōtuska and others characterised the country's population as narcissistic, passive, irresponsible, weak and childish – traits that sexist cultural norms represent as inherently feminine and girlish.⁴

I soon found that there was even less scholarship on cuteness in other countries than there was about *kawaii* in Japan.

This also seemed strange, because cuteness is on the rise outside Japan as well. These days it seems as if everyone is sharing online cute animal memes and responding with strings of emoji. And the boom didn't begin with the Internet. Just like in the land of *kawaii*, cuteness has become a major presence in popular culture without anyone taking much notice. Take *Star Wars*, for instance, an outsized presence in popular culture since 1977. Its tales of battles in outer space are not generally regarded as cute, yet the franchise includes furry Wookiees, diminutive droids, Ewoks, Porgs and the massively popular Baby Yoda. There had been some backlash; I remember a friend in junior high school proudly sporting an 'I kill Ewoks' pin badge. But, in general, cuteness spread through popular culture exactly as it did in Japan – quietly, without many people noticing how much of their lives had been taken over. So are Murakami and Ōtuska right? Have we all become little boys and girls?

I think Murakami and Ōtuska's theories are too focused on masculinity. They both seem freaked out that men as well as women are interested in cuteness, but what's the harm in that? Then I came across another theory about Japanese cuteness that really surprised me. The cultural critic Inuhiko Yomota has claimed that far from being a post-war phenomenon, *kawaii* has had a long history in Japanese culture. He traced it back to works of art that are up to a thousand years old and asserted that medieval Europe had nothing like it.⁵ Was *kawaii* somehow built into Japanese DNA? The idea sounded ridiculous, but I hadn't expected such questions to arise from a topic that most people think is so easy to explain.

Did people who lived a millennium ago feel cuteness in the same way we do today, even though so much else has changed? Ideas of what is beautiful, for example, differ widely across time and space. A thousand years ago, when Yomota claimed that *kawaii* began, Japanese women shaved their eyebrows and blackened their teeth to look beautiful. They're not doing that

today, yet I still think he's right in saying that the things they found cute back then give us the same feeling now. But why is that?

Pikachu Outbreak!

The port city of Yokohama was where the United States first 'invaded' Japan, when a squadron of steamships commanded by Commodore Matthew Perry arrived in 1854 to force Japan to end its policy of national isolation and open its markets to foreign trade. Today it is a bustling city that hosts an annual celebration of cuteness called the Pikachu Outbreak. For a whole week every August, parades of up to 2,000 life-sized costumed Pichachus and other characters from the Pokémon video games march in front of tens of thousands of spectators from all over the world. I decided I had to go and see it for myself. Surely this would be the perfect place to find out why *kawaii* is so incredibly popular.

The Pokémon craze began in 1996. Like most adults at the time, I was only vaguely aware of it – in my case, through the passion of my young nieces and nephews. A video game that involves catching cute little monsters and making them fight, Pokémon was inspired by the tradition among Japanese children of going out into local parks to catch horned stag beetles. When the wildly popular video game *Pokémon Go* appeared in 2016, I was bemused at the sight of hordes of people silently wandering the streets in packs while staring at their smartphones. But it wasn't strange for them. Many of Pokémon's nineties fan base never grew out of their favourite game. A succession of multimedia, cross-platform productions has kept them engaged for two decades, and Pokémon is often cited as the highest-grossing media franchise of all time.

As the Pokémon march began in Yokohama, I turned to others in the crowd and started asking questions. But no

matter who I talked to or where they were from – whether Japan or another East Asian country, Europe, the US or Australia – every conversation followed the same path. I'd ask them what they liked about the parades, and they'd talk about how cute they thought Pikachu was. But when I'd ask what made Pikachu cute, the conversation would come to a stuttering halt. Everyone was firmly convinced that Pokémons were cute, yet no one seemed to be able to explain *why*.

There seems to be something about cuteness that resists interpretation. Everyone knows it when they feel it, but even the people who design the stuff can't explain why a tiny change makes one iteration of a design cuter than another. Hello Kitty, the legendary character from the 1970s that has made billions of dollars for its parent company Sanrio, was designed by Yuko Shimizu. She made several initial drawings, but only knew she was onto something when her assistant pointed to one in particular and screamed, '*Kawaii!*'⁶

I needed help figuring out exactly what made Pokémon cute, and luckily I had brought an expert along. Yukiko Toda is an artist and fashion designer who has been expressing *kawaii* in her work for more than a decade. Together, we watched the parades and paid close attention every time the crowd rose up in a collective cry of '*Kawaii!*' After a while, we started to notice some patterns. First, the Pokémons were surprisingly small. At six feet tall, I towered over them. Their eyes were placed low enough to make their foreheads bulge, and their cheeks were highlighted with red circles – characteristics that Yukiko immediately identified as *kawaii*. She also pointed out that their open mouths, which I had thought were simply smiling, had a more ambiguous expression. 'They look like a baby bird opening its mouth to be fed,' she said. 'But it's a blank look [*muhyōjō*] – you can't tell what they're feeling or thinking.' Hello Kitty, with no mouth at all, has that same affectless expression that nonetheless is somehow appealing.



Fig. 0.1: Neon-lit Pokémon Pikachus march through the evening at the Pikachu Outbreak.

This apparently charming combination of features raised immediate cries of ‘*Kawaii!*’ as soon as the Pokémon appeared. Plus, their furry bodies were invitingly soft: whenever an individual Pokémon posed for photos, children and even some adults would run up and hug it unrestrainedly.

The adults’ behaviour surprised me, because hugging is not a common greeting among Japanese adults. But Yukiko explained that furry life-sized mascots of all sorts are a standard feature of public events in Japan, and running up to hug them is a behaviour that everyone has indulged in since childhood. Since it’s not common in Japan to hug friends or even family, it must be nice to give full rein to the impulse to hug a giant ball of fur once in a while.

As the parade began, we noticed that along with their huge heads, the Pokémon had small bodies with stubby arms, and

legs so short they were barely able to shuffle along. This created a distinctive wobbly gait as they rocked from side to side. The parade would stop periodically so that the Pokémon could perform simple choreographed dances in which they waved their arms and wriggled their behinds at the onlookers. Their severely limited eyesight meant they were constantly bumping into each other, despite the best efforts of the whistle-blowing handlers who walked alongside them. These accidental collisions always caused a crescendo of ‘*Kawaii!*’ exclamations from the besotted crowd.

By paying attention to the behaviour of the Pokémon fans, we began to figure out what was triggering those spontaneous cries. The Pikachus all had big heads and eyes, small arms and legs, bulging cheeks and foreheads, wobbly movements and open-mouthed expressions that made people smile.

Kawaii seemed to be the realm of the cheerful amateur rather than the polished professional, and it fed upon itself – seeing the open-mouthed Pokémon waving at them, people smiled and waved back. Watching this, I was perplexed at first. It was clear that the people inside those furry suits couldn’t see well enough to distinguish individual watchers, so who exactly were they waving at? There was really only one way to find out, so in spite of feeling a little embarrassed, I started waving back, too – and soon found myself smiling at these folks in their fuzzy yellow suits.

Yukiko and I were not the first people to notice that cute things share a set of common characteristics. Back in 1943 the Austrian biologist Konrad Lorenz observed that certain animals, especially baby ones, incite the same impulse to provide care and protection that people feel towards young children. He drew up a set of traits that he called the ‘child schema’ (*Kindchenschema*) which included: a large head relative to body size; predominance of the brain capsule; large and low-lying eyes; round, bulging cheeks; short and thick

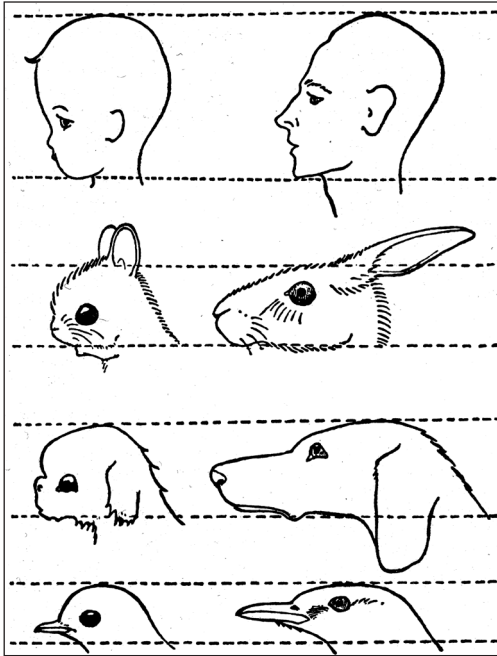


Fig. 0.2: Konrad Lorenz's child schema.

extremities; a soft body surface with a springy elastic consistency; and clumsy, wobbly movements.⁷ Lorenz believed that his schema operated as an instinctual response that stimulated the nurturing and protective behaviour in adults that children need to survive.

If our brains are hard-wired to feel a rush of cuteness upon encountering the child schema, then perhaps I was more of a puppet than the bright-yellow Pikachu that were dancing in front of me. Lorenz believed that our response to cute objects is compulsive to the point of being 'virtually irrepressible' and operates automatically, like a clockwork mechanism.⁸ But I thought his theory sounded too extreme. After all, for every person who cries '*kawaii!*' there's likely to be another shrugging

their shoulders. We may all have the same capacity to respond to cuteness, but not everyone is into it.

Plus, I'm sceptical about the idea that seeing something cute always gives rise to the impulse to nurture or protect it. Although the basic elements of Lorenz's child schema were borne out by my observations at the Pikachu Outbreak, there still seemed to be something missing from his theory. A conga line of Pikachus didn't make me feel like taking care of them or protecting them. Instead the sight simply made me want to join in with the fun. What did this response have to do with making sure humans evolved to take care of babies?

'Cute Studies' and cute science

Back when I was an undergraduate, I wanted to study children's literature. It has since become a field that encompasses not only literary studies, but also child development, psychology and the history of childhood. At the time, however, most scholars thought it was too trivial to warrant serious research. It was hard to know what to do. When I visited one of my favourite professors to discuss the idea, he said, 'It's as if you're facing two ponds: one is full of crystal-clear water to the very bottom, and the other is full of silt and pond scum with zero visibility. You seem to take a look at both, before diving straight into the muddy pond.' At nineteen I took this as a compliment, though now I wonder if it was meant as one. At any rate, it seems he was right. Decades later, when faced with the realisation that little about cuteness was clear, I took a deep breath and decided to dive right in.

I was starting to wonder if cuteness deserved more than the odd article or book. Was there enough there to justify an entirely new field of study? After all, it had worked for children's literature. If I got it right, I could be the founder of a whole new field. Well, either that or I could be ignored completely.

I considered Linda Williams, who created the field of Porn Studies when she realised that this multibillion-dollar industry was virtually unstudied. Just like pornography, cuteness makes billions in revenue without anyone paying much attention, and it's also viewed as too inconsequential to warrant scholarly attention. And at least it's not as controversial.

Williams announced the arrival of Porn Studies by editing a volume of scholarly essays with the same name. I decided to begin a bit more modestly; I reached out to other scholars interested in cuteness by editing a special issue of an academic journal that I would call *Cute Studies*. I planned to write an editorial declaring this new field open for business. But would anyone want to join it?

I put out an open call for papers on various academic websites, then waited to see what would show up. And while I wasn't exactly flooded with submissions, I did receive some fascinating articles, on topics including young women who wear Lolita fashion, how Singaporean influencers use cuteness to gain an audience, and an analysis of the *kawaii* lunchboxes that Japanese mothers make for their children. But one of them was a real game-changer. It was from Hiroshi Nittono, now director of the Cognitive Psychophysiology Laboratory at Osaka University.

Like me, Hiroshi had noticed that *kawaii* in Japan extends beyond the traits listed in Lorenz's child schema. However, virtually all the empirical research in his field focused on Lorenz's infantile traits. Because of the outsized presence of *kawaii* in Japan, Hiroshi felt that analysing how people there feel about it could broaden Lorenz's schema in ways that could be useful to anyone interested in the nature of cuteness.

Hiroshi distributed questionnaires to hundreds of university students and office workers willing to take part in a survey and analysed their responses. He found that things such as sweets, flowers and smiles, which are not part of the child

schema, could also trigger the feeling of *kawaii*. In fact ‘smile’ received the highest *kawaii* rating from study participants, exceeding even that for ‘baby’. This was an indication that Lorenz’s child schema wasn’t telling the whole story.⁹

The university students and office workers who filled in Hiroshi’s questionnaire also referred to *kawaii* things as ‘*yuru*’. This is a hard word to translate. It can mean wobbly – an attribute that appears in the child schema – but it also means amateurish or imperfect. I had seen this for myself at the Pikachu Outbreak when people smiled and shouted ‘*Kawaii!*’ at Pikachus who mistimed their synchronised steps and fell on their fluffy backsides.

If cuteness is all about an irresistible instinct to nurture, then the watching crowd surely should have involuntarily leapt forward to help the fallen Pikachu. But that didn’t happen and, when you think about it, a child in need of real help – suffering and in pain – is not cute, either. Scientists like Hiroshi concluded that the feeling of *kawaii* encourages affiliation, which is social bonding in a broader sense than just nurturing. This is why feeling that something is cute makes us want to get closer to it, even if we have no particular desire to protect or nurture it.¹⁰ The suggestion that cuteness is a releaser of social engagement would explain why I found myself wanting to wave at and hug the marching Pikachus.

Unlocking cuteness

Thanks to Hiroshi, I realised that science is key to understanding cuteness. It might not sound like much of a revelation, but academics like me who study the humanities – literature, art and culture – usually avoid hard science like the plague. Those social scientists who are comfortable with maths (anthropologists and sociologists, for instance) tend to stick to their own field. Academics are super-nerds – ‘*otaku*’, as they say in Japan

– who generally find their comfort zone and stay there, talking mainly to each other. But I realised that this process of specialisation meant that we would never be able to account for the explosive global growth of cuteness that is occurring all around us. If *Cute Studies* was going to have an impact, it would need to accept all the various ways of studying cuteness and create a dialogue among them.

This wasn't going to be easy; different ways of studying cuteness not only come to different conclusions, but they begin with different definitions. What even is cute in the first place? Scientists hypothesise that we've always had a deep genetic pull towards adorable children and animals. But which came first: the chicken or the egg? If cuter children received more care and attention tens of thousands of years ago, what made us appreciate those qualities in the first place?

Could cuteness somehow have come first? Maybe we're the primate equivalent of dogs or cats, bred to be adorable; but no one was in charge of breeding humans, so how could that be so? Could we have unconsciously *chosen* to be cute, as if something baked into our DNA made us prefer slightly cuter attributes over countless generations? That would mean the egg came before the chicken. My head started to spin at the thought.

To make matters worse, if Inuhiko Yomota was right and cuteness was a quality that had appeared only in Japanese artworks a thousand years ago, the emergence of the cute aesthetic can be tied to a single time and place. How could I account for this specificity if cuteness has been with us all along as a species-wide emotion? I'd been asking myself why it appeared earlier in Japan than anywhere else, but now I found myself flipping that question round. Why did it take *so long* to appear, and why only in Japan?

ANCIENT JAPANESE CUTENESS



*All small things, no matter what they are,
all small things are most adorable.*

The Pillow Book by Sei Shōnagon

A classic work of Japanese literature, *The Pillow Book* was written more than a thousand years ago by a courtier named Sei Shōnagon (965–1017). It covers many topics – love, court gossip, poetry, the beauty of nature and the rhythm of the seasons – all filtered through the eye of an irrepressibly intelligent woman who is, above all, fun. The book has influenced Japanese women all the way up to modern times.¹

The Pillow Book also contains one of the earliest articulations of an aesthetic that eventually became today's *kawaii* culture. When I ask Japanese people to name the earliest example of

kawaii they can think of, the answer is often the ‘list of adorable things’ (*Utsukushiki mono*) from *The Pillow Book*. Almost everyone knows this passage – it’s frequently included in the Japanese school curriculum.

The Pillow Book includes the first attempt in prose to catalogue the small, brief encounters with children, animals and objects that pierce the heart with cuteness. Although the emotion of cuteness may have been part of everyone’s experience because it is part of our biology, the list shows how cuteness was central to women’s culture. More importantly, it demonstrates that in the hands of a talented writer this simple feeling can be elevated into an expression of great art.

When Sei Shōnagon entered the court of Empress Teishi in the year 993, she was in her late twenties – older than usual for a new court attendant. The empress herself was about ten years younger, but she was an intelligent and accomplished woman who prized learning and wit among her attendants.² The pair became firm friends.

The cloistered lives of the women who served the empress hardly suggest feminist values. Forbidden to show their faces to men, they knelt behind screens or curtains to converse with gentlemen callers. Only when they were sure no men were present could they venture onto the palace’s veranda or walk in the gardens. On the rare occasions they left the palace grounds, court women rode in carriages, peering at the outside world through reed lattice windows.³ Such was life for upper-class women in the Heian era, a period of Japanese history that ran from 794 to 1185.

Yet women were important in this world. They possessed the rights of inheritance, including of property and succession.⁴ Thus, although they were barred from the overt exercise of power, women at the Heian court still dealt with men on equal terms in other areas, like love and art.⁵ But the reason their literary works still have an impact today concerns the artistic

values they expressed so beautifully in their poems, diaries and novels.⁶ Women gained influence in the literary arts in part because men, in the process of setting the standards of civilisation and learning, left themselves adrift when it came to poetry and literature.

Like many other Asian countries, Japan had long looked to China as the source of all that was civilised, importing everything from government to law, art to architecture. Even the writing system was a Chinese import. Poetry, however, posed a problem. Chinese poetic conventions conformed to unfamiliar structures and sounds, and dictated that references be made to particularly Chinese things, from historical events to famous mountains. Early Japanese poets trying to compose poetry in Chinese didn't fare particularly well. 'As might easily be imagined,' writes the literary scholar Donald Keene, 'most of this poetry is exceedingly poor.'⁷

Women of the Heian era were not taught to write Chinese characters; although a few upper-class women like Sei did manage to learn some, they had to hide their knowledge from men. Sei could allude to her knowledge of classical Chinese literature, but she couldn't recite it in public.⁸ However, by her time there was a workaround – a phonetic Japanese alphabet called *kana*. Since men were expected to write poetry in Chinese, poetry and prose written in the native language became known as writing in a 'woman's hand' (*onna-de*).

Men did sometimes write using *kana*. It was helpful, for instance, when they wanted a love-poem to be understood by a female recipient. In addition, men who wrote in literary genres considered to be the province of women, such as diaries, often pretended to be female.⁹ Writing in their native language enabled both men and women the freedom to express their innermost feelings, and these intimate accounts became associated with women's literary production.

Today, people might send a carefully chosen emoji to a

lover after a romantic encounter; in Sei's time, they would send a love-poem penned in elegant calligraphy on paper carefully chosen for its colour and quality, folded like origami and accompanied by a matching spray of flowers. In Japan's Heian era, such matters of taste were vital. An inelegant poetic reference, slightly slipshod calligraphy, paper of the wrong texture, watered-down ink: any such misstep would kill a budding romance as surely as an insensitive string of emoji would today.¹⁰ This ability to exercise judgement in matters of taste enabled Heian women to create new areas of aesthetic enjoyment; in Sei's case, this included an exploration of the pleasures offered by the cuteness of small children, animals and objects.

The world's first list of cute things

The Pillow Book probably began as a notebook in which Sei recorded poetic inspirations or trifles to entertain her empress. This would account for the various lists sprinkled throughout, such as 'Things That Make the Heart Beat Faster' and 'Occasions When Time Drags By'. These lists had no literary antecedent in Japan.¹¹ And among them is the earliest expression in Japanese literature of items and occasions that prompt the feeling of cuteness.

When Sei was writing, the word *kawaii* didn't exist, so she used the word *utsukushi*.¹² Today this word means beautiful, but in pre-modern Japan it signalled the feeling of affection that people in a higher social position felt towards those people for whom they were responsible. Today the word *kawaii* is sometimes used in the same way, but modern *kawaii* has a much broader meaning.¹³

As a talented poet, Sei was able to take the limited meaning of this word and expand it in delightful and unexpected directions. She did this by linking all the items on her list to cuteness,

a common feeling that hadn't yet received enough attention to warrant a single word describing all of its manifestations.

The world that Sei Shōnagon inhabited was privileged, but also boring. Women of the court were expected to stay inside, cloistered inside dark palace rooms. There was little to do except gossip about love affairs. Sei's witty conversational skills gained her a position there, and her main task was to entertain the empress. I think her list of cute things was intended to be read aloud, one item at a time, as a way to demonstrate that the everyday, mundane life happening around them was full of delightful encounters with cuteness.

To accomplish this, Sei used an ordinary word and turned it around, like a gemstone, to reveal new facets. Each item on her list reveals another way to appreciate cuteness. Let's take the first line, which is simply 'A child's face drawn on a melon.' Drawing faces on melons was a common pastime in Sei's day, especially for women and children.¹⁴ Yet the word Sei uses in this list, *utsukushi*, normally described a man's affection for his wife and children.¹⁵ From the first line, Sei upends the meaning of this word to show that this same feeling can be triggered in anyone by a simple outline drawing. The fact that this idea of a child's face drawn on a melon still feels cute to us today is no coincidence. Such simplification is a hallmark of modern cute designs, from Charlie Brown to Hello Kitty. We'll return to this aesthetic principle of reduction later.

The next item on the list concerns a common activity with which court women amused themselves. They would capture a baby sparrow and tie a thread around its leg, so they could keep it close and watch as its parents fed it. By calling a baby bird being fed *utsukushi*, Sei again upends the usual definition of the word and shows her audience a connection between baby birds and outline drawings of children's faces that no one had thought of before. These two completely different things evoke the same feeling, which is only partially captured by the word

available at the time. This is what poetic language is all about. It opens up new experiences and makes people see the world around them in a different light.

Here is another example of cute animals from Sei's list: 'Pretty, white chicks who are still not fully fledged and look as if their clothes are too short for them; cheeping loudly, they follow one on their long legs or walk close to the mother hen.' Descriptions of animal families as *utsukushi* removes the patriarchal, hierarchical connotations of this word and bends it in a new direction that enables Sei's audience to appreciate the connection between the natural and human worlds.

Many of the items on her list involve human children. Small children make the list when they walk by in long ceremonial robes, when they proudly show a tiny object they found on the ground to an adult, and when their sleeves are comically long. Older children are cute when they practise reading aloud in their childish voices, or tilt their heads to examine something closely. All these moments encompass the joy of watching children's enthusiasm, their engaging solemnity or their struggle to match adult behaviours. They also reveal the privileged existence of these upper-class women, who didn't need to perform any of the messy parts of child-rearing. 'One picks up a pretty baby and holds him for a while in one's arms,' Sei writes. 'While one is fondling him, he clings to one's neck and then falls asleep.' Presumably crying babies were handed over to the servants and swiftly taken out of sight.

The list also includes many small items, such as 'The objects used during the Display of Dolls'. Playing with dolls and doll's houses was popular among girls from noble families in the Heian period. The Doll Festival (*hina matsuri*), which traces its origins to the Heian era, is celebrated to this day by girls all over Japan, whose dolls wear the same ceremonial court dress as in Sei's time. But the list doesn't mention the dolls themselves; rather, it focuses on the miniature doll's-house furnishings

and tableware that accompany them. This leads into the most famous line of the list, which concerns small things: ‘One picks up a tiny lotus leaf that is floating on a pond and examines it. Not only the lotus leaves, but little hollyhock flowers, and indeed all small things, are most adorable.’

The Pillow Book’s list of adorable things does more than simply give examples of cuteness; it builds a new aesthetic by providing guidelines on what types of objects and interactions may trigger the feeling of cuteness. In this way Sei Shōnagon gives a cultural voice to a biological phenomenon. Her list has stood the test of time not only in its continued popularity, but in the consistency of her observations. Recent research on cuteness shows that it is still associated with small, round and smooth shapes, as well as things that people want to keep close by them, like baby animals.¹⁶ Musicologist David Huron found that high-pitched sounds are considered cute, which might include the cheeping birds and the voice of a child reading aloud that Sei describes.¹⁷ Furthermore, the list’s colour palette, which includes lavender robes, pink flowers, creamy-white duck eggs and sky-blue urns, comprise the same shades that research shows are considered *kawaii* today.¹⁸

Advice for women today

“Getting married and having children” – is this all that makes a woman happy? The manga character who speaks this line has a big head, large eyes and a small body, but she’s far from weak and passive, cheekily sticking out her tongue on the cover illustration. *Having Fun Again Today!* is a manga version of Sei Shōnagon’s life that seeks to help women weather the sexism that is still prevalent in Japanese society.¹⁹ For Japanese women who are struggling to find their own path in life and depart from traditional gender roles, the life and work of Sei Shōnagon are an inspiration. Such adaptations are popular because her

life and work encourage women to face adversity with self-confident aplomb and view life as a voyage of self-discovery. They indicate to modern readers that seeing the funny and cute in everyday life is a viable alternative to traditional gender roles that limit a woman's role to marriage and children.²⁰

Japan was largely peaceful in the Heian era, leaving the upper class little to do but cultivate beauty and taste in all aspects of life.²¹ Although the nobility numbered only a few thousand, their aesthetic values spread across the land.²² This happened in part because the tone set by female writers became the standard and was later adopted by men as well.²³ This is one way in which women's experience, and their method of relating it in both verse and prose, became central to the development of Japanese artistic values that continue to hold sway today. This literary parity – the sense that men and women are on equal ground when they take up pen and paper to write – is one reason why the women writers of the Heian period still inspire modern Japanese women in their continuing struggle for full social equality.

Furthermore, the idea that artistic pursuits could lead to self-improvement became established in this era.²⁴ The modern attitude towards *kawaii* reflects this idea: in Japan, people believe that cultivating the appreciation of cute things has a positive effect on one's own life. In the Heian court, contemplating cuteness was a cure for boredom. Today, Japanese people cite cuteness as a force that can help to combat unhappiness stemming from depression, anxiety or dissatisfaction at work.

The literature produced by women in the Heian court has been read and taught through the ages. Modern Japanese women admire Sei Shōnagon because she forged a career in which her wit and wisdom were valued and applauded. At the same time, her sensibility resonates because it seems fresh and modern, even though her list of cute things expresses an

emotion that humans have probably felt since the beginning of time.

Three artistic values: small, temporary and delightful

The authorial voice that pervades *The Pillow Book* clearly conveys a woman who is witty, clever and, most of all, fun. Japan's traditional culture of *wabi-sabi*, or rustic simplicity and sparse elegance, appears fundamentally separate from its ebullient *kawaii* culture, but the two are closer than they first appear. Sei's list is organised around three guiding principles that reflect deep-rooted aesthetics of Japanese art and artistry and were key to the later development of everything *kawaii*, from colourful, energetic Pokémon to the expressionless and enigmatic Hello Kitty. Let's look at them one by one.

'All *small* things are most adorable,' writes Sei Shōnagon (*italics mine*). In Japan, however, the attraction to the diminutive is not limited to cute objects. The Korean scholar O-Young Lee wrote an entire book about how Japanese culture values small items. He points to the folding fan – an ancient Japanese invention – as an early example of 'an imaginative power' that he believes to be deeply rooted in Japanese culture, one that 'seeks to make things smaller, that idealizes the dwarf over the giant'.²⁵ When fans went from large and flat to small and folding, they attained a new value as something that could be held in the hand and stored inside the sleeve of a kimono.²⁶ Lee believes that the Japanese enjoy small things because they reflect the desire for a more intimate relation to objects.²⁷ The penchant for miniaturisation appears everywhere in Japan, from traditional bonsai and haiku to the modern Walkman and Pokémon – the last of which, after all, is short for 'pocket monsters'. All the items on Sei's list – from children to baby animals, eggs to glass pots – are small and vulnerable.

The cute appearance and antics of young children as well as

animals have a special poignancy because we know they have a *temporary* nature – they will vanish with maturity. Part of our enjoyment of the things that appear on Sei's list is due to this awareness that they are temporary and must be enjoyed to the full before they fade away. This preference for transience is among the earliest Japanese artistic values.²⁸ The literary historian Donald Keene called it 'the most distinctively Japanese aesthetic ideal.'²⁹ Cherry blossoms, for example, bloom for only a few glorious days, yet ornamental cherry trees are planted everywhere in Japan; the custom of holding parties amid the falling blossoms, which began in the Heian era, continues today.

Sei Shōnagon insisted that she wrote for fun, and indeed the adjective that appears most frequently in *The Pillow Book* – 445 times, to be exact – is *okashi*.³⁰ This word is still used, but these days it refers to something funny or absurd. In the Heian era it referred broadly to the *delightful*, that which 'entertains, intrigues, delights, pleases and beguiles'.³¹ It is a central motif of *The Pillow Book* because sharing amusing things was an important aspect of Sei's role at court. She had honed her sense of the frisson of pleasure that an object or moment could produce to the extent that she could delight her audience simply by describing a small child crawling along the ground, or the comically long legs of baby chicks.

The Pillow Book's list of adorable things describes situations that trigger the feeling of cuteness. Some of these stem from the desire to take care of or nurture something, but others are oriented around fun and playful moments. Some scientists believe that these represent two distinct categories of cuteness, and they term the latter 'whimsical cuteness'.³² This makes sense to me – we're just as likely to want to play with something cute as we are to take care of it. It follows that the way a society treats the idea of play may influence the appearance of cuteness in its art and literature.