

Not Just Tasty: Cute Japanese Snacks as a Reflection of
Japan's Rebellion Against Adulthood, Westernization, and Consumerism

“Oh, it's *so* cute!”

My roommate's reaction to the *Koala's March* biscuits I gave to her was typical. The bag, festooned with illustrations of cute and cuddly koalas and pictures of the chocolate-filled biscuit snack within, was colorful and eye catching. Whether a plain chocolate-filled biscuit snack would carry that much appeal is doubtful, but imprinted with simple koala illustrations wearing various expressions and shaped in a vaguely koala-esque form, a basic chocolate filled biscuit snack is exalted into something worthy of endearment. The initial pull isn't so much what it's made of, but that, aw, *it looks like a koala!*

Of course, it takes more than cuteness to make something worthy of being eaten. If the snack were to fail your taste buds, the koala may seem more disappointing than cute. Thankfully, Japanese snacks have a tendency to excel in the taste department, whether it's because of the relatively well-crafted flavors (for basic junk food, at least) or the way the components, many times of basic chocolate and cookie origins, are combined. The flavor and composition may also be considered cute, depending on what definition of cute you're using. Coupled together, cuteness and good flavor can lead to a lifetime devotion to the consumption of Japanese snacks.

I've always been intrigued by the lure of Japanese snacks because in my experience of eating snack foods (and trust me, it's extensive), nothing else has ever compared to their cuteness and innovation. Why do I, along with many other people, become giddy when staring at shelves filled with cute Japanese snacks, unable to utter much else besides, “Cute!” and “I want it!”,

apparently reverting to the mindset of a five-year-old? And why hasn't the entire Japanese population become obese from excess consumption of these easy-to-find treats?

My initial thoughts mainly revolved around the meaning of Japan's penchant for slathering everything in cuteness, but another important aspect of Japanese snacks is their ephemeral quality and constant rebirth. There are many quintessential snacks that you'll find in any store that sells Japanese food, but at the same time these snacks, plus others, change form by taking on a mind-boggling array of different flavors, which many times only exist as "limited edition" in relation to time (a season) or place (a city). While looking at the aspects of cuteness and the need for variety and updating of Japanese snacks, I've found that Japanese snacks provide an unexpected reflection of Japan's culture clash between tradition and modernity. Cute snacks in Japan show a disconnection from traditional Japanese culture by rejecting adulthood and by adapting western culture through the snacks' composition and popularity. I do not mean to imply that the rejection is all bad; rather, with the "rejection" (which sounds harsher than I'd mean for it to) comes a great deal of innovation and constant freshness, characteristics which are also conveyed through Japanese snacks. In this paper, I will discuss the cuteness of snacks as a mode of opposing adulthood, the appeal in westernizing cute snacks, and the need for updating snacks with new flavors and varieties.

The Rise of Cuteness in Japan: A Brief History

The last time I went on a family vacation to Disneyland, I distinctly recall seeing a group of young, female Japanese tourists looking at collectable pins depicting popular Disney characters while in a souvenir shop. While inspecting the pins, in unison, they exclaimed, "Kawaii!"

Kawaii is the basic Japanese word for “cute”. While today Japan inarguably shows an obsession with cuteness, the cute trend only started in the 1970s, initialized by the inception of the cute handwriting craze. Up until this time, Japanese writing style had been vertically with variable-width strokes, while the new cute style was written horizontally with fine, even-width lines, usually rounded and sometimes with cute little cartoon pictures randomly inserted in between characters. This handwriting trend spread across middle and high schools, where it was sometimes banned, seen as a source of disciplinary problems. However, the trend proved far-reaching as it spread during the 1980s into all kinds of popular media, including comics and word-processing software (Kinsella 222). Although it was started by young people, the cute handwriting style ended up being appealing to Japan as a whole.

By researching cute handwriting and surveying students, Yamane Kazuma found that the style was spontaneously invented by teenagers (Kinsella 222). Kinsella explains the greater meaning of this new style by likening it to a new language that young people could use to “speak freely on their own terms for the first time” (224). The style incorporated English words and punctuation, which in a way was a mode of rebellion against traditional Japanese culture (Kinsella 224). Young people used handwriting to establish their own identity and distance themselves from traditional Japanese culture.

As cuteness and consumerism grew in popularity, businesses soon found ways to cash in on the trend by making fancy goods that incorporated cute decorations onto otherwise not-cute items, the most famous example of which would be Sanrio, the company that spawned Hello Kitty. The characters featured on fancy goods are essentially be “small, soft, infantile, mammalian, round, without bodily appendages (e.g. arms), without bodily orifices (e.g. mouths), non-sexual, mute, insecure, helpless, or bewildered” (226). Cute designs appear not only on

fancy goods but also on banking cards, stationery, and for particularly impassioned lovers of cuteness, specially designed homes that resemble fantastical cottages (226).

Cuteness is certainly present in all cultures besides Japan's, but it usually appeals just to children (or at least, it's not as acceptable for adults to show that they like cute things). In Japan, it is not strange for adults to display their fondness for child-like cuteness. White states,

The character items that fill the rooms and schoolbags of middle school children tend toward a pastel, sugar sweetness that seems to be outgrown in the United States by the age of eight. In fact, the Sanrio novelty company found in a market survey that their items sold to Japanese girls between the age of five and the time of marriage would be bought in American only by girls from four to seven years old. (126)

Cuteness is an easier sell in Japan compared to most places because its appeal spans more than just the child age groups. Perhaps it's not just youth that want to rebel but adults also.

Eating Cute Snacks to Rebel Against Adulthood

What is the point of using cute characters on otherwise non-cute objects? Kinsella speculates that the characters "literally add character to [the good's] lifelessness" (227). In this case, she is talking about the realm of fancy goods, such as toiletries, stationery, bags, and lunch boxes. However, cute style and characters also play a large role in Japanese food packaging, mainly for snacks. Whether the cuteness is embodied in the food itself or portrayed on the packaging, a great number of Japanese snacks use cuteness to market their snacks and make them coveted for more than just something to nibble on. Japanese snack addicts outside of Japan can attest to the mind (and taste bud) controlling power of cute Japanese snacks.

Cuteness in relation to characters comes into play as many Japanese snacks feature mascots that may or may not have much to do with the actual product. Glico's cream filled

cylindrical wafer snack *Collon* features a crude, smiling, somewhat featureless blob with wings and Meiji's strawberry flavored *Apollo Chocolate* is graced by a bunny-esque creature whose dual pink and brown colors reflect those of the chocolate's. Lotte's chocolate filled koala shaped cookies *Koala's March* naturally features cartoon koalas on their packaging. Most characters, if they possess mouths at all, are smiling, and many may not represent either gender but just embody an unsexed cute entity. By decorating snack packages with cute, innocuous, mild characters, the food is given an appealing personality that people may want to possess, or perhaps even ingest, in addition to making the snack more memorable than just being a foodstuff.

Snack foods may not always employ cute images to express cuteness but may be cute in their compositions. Most cute snacks are sweet and eating sweets is a characteristic of child-like behavior. *Amai*, the Japanese word for sweet, refers to the flavor and the characteristic of being lovable, as also portrayed in the English meaning (Kinsella 231). Some of the most popular and fashionable foods of the 1980s embodied childish flavors of sweet, milky, and soft, such as ice cream, cakes, and milk drinks. Up until the 1980s, ice cream had been look at as a kid's food, but as it gained popularity, it became acceptable for adults to enjoy also (232). My impression is that adults didn't suddenly discover that they liked ice cream, but had previously felt uncomfortable indulging in something with childish connotations, as it would undermine their maturity. With the spread of cuteness, an act like eating ice cream became more respectable, perhaps giving the impression that one *should* do something childish every now and then.

Kinsella lists essential ingredients of cute fancy goods that may also apply to snacks: "small, pastel, round, soft, loveable, *not* traditional Japanese style but a foreign—in particular European or American—style, dreamy, frilly and fluffy" (226). Most Japanese snacks fulfill the "small" characteristic—you won't find full-sized chocolate bars similar to American snacks or

many “King Size” items. Many snacks are meant to be eaten in a few bites, or are bite sized, and may resemble miniaturized versions of larger foods that wouldn’t be found in candy. A bite-sized snack called *Every Burger* resembles just what the title says: tiny burgers, not much larger than the size of one’s thumb, with chocolate patties and lettuce in between cookie buns, decorated with sesame seed bits. Meiji’s *Kinoko no Yama* resembles mushrooms with a chocolate cap and cookie stem, and the similar *Takenoko no Sato* resembles bamboo shoots with chocolate leaves around a cookie stem. It makes sense to design small snacks so that they’re easier to eat, but miniaturization in the context of making a small version of something large and not just making a snack that is inherently small (such as Skittles and M&Ms) is also appealing as a purveyor of cuteness.

Representations of cuteness in food and the consumption of that food could be a way to express restrained emotions. After surveying Japanese people ages 18 to 30 about what cuteness means to them, Kinsella found that for people who like cuteness, the appeal was in “the recovery of a childlike emotional and mental state” (240). However, she explains that “most of the time this expressive emotional state [of warm feelings and love] was hidden, trapped inside each individual and something not often visible to other people” (240). Sensory representations of cuteness through images and flavor may allow people to tap into feelings they possess but have difficulty conveying after being accustomed to the rigors of adulthood.

In Kinsella’s survey, she also asked people how they felt about adulthood. While some people had positive connotations, most described it as a “bleak period of life”, using words such as controlled, lonely, strict, and harsh (242). Adults may in a sense have more freedom than children, but adulthood lacks spiritual freedom in the face of pressures to conform (242). While in America adulthood may generally signify individual freedom and rights, in Japan it is more

about cooperating well in groups, fulfilling obligations to parents and employers, and overall carrying out social responsibilities (Kinsella 243). Cuteness is an interpretation of the freedom of childhood, a feeling that adulthood inhibits. Faced with the prospects of adulthood, the Japanese cuteness “rebellion” goes against adulthood to emphasize childhood and the lack of responsibilities it carries (Kinsella 243).

Even though cuteness didn't originate from commercial endeavors, it became highly commercial through the plethora of cuteness-incorporated goods Japanese companies churned out. Kinsella believes that the idea of cute is mainly accessible through the continual “consumption” of cute goods because “Cute culture had to be entered and left in a matter of minutes or moments, which lent it to construction by ephemeral products and places of consumption of goods and leisure services” (245). Eating cute snacks is a perfect way to introduce cuteness (perhaps in a bite-sized piece) into one's life for a short period of time without making cuteness one's entire lifestyle. People know that they can't be cute all the time, so eating snacks is an acceptable way for people to retain cuteness, or something that is oppositional to adulthood, whether the eater is actually an adult or is a young person faced with the prospects of adulthood.

Westernizing Cute Snacks to Increase Their Appeal

Japanese culture is exceptionally skilled at adapting influence from western countries. Christopher explains that one of the reasons for this is that Japan has a “childlike fascination” for anything foreign, particularly American (56). However, he also says that another reason for the constant borrowing of outside cultures is that Japan fears its image will look “backwards” in the eyes of foreign countries, implying that Japan wants to be accepted by the west (57). The twist in this desire for equality among western countries is that while Japan doesn't hesitate to adapt

aspects of foreign cultures, they're unlikely to actually welcome *people* from other cultures because according to Christopher, Japanese people "feel superior to the rest of the world" (57). Another aspect of Japan's adaptation of western cultures comes from the post-war desire to become as strong and industrialized as the western nations (Iriye 42). However, while this may have started the "westernization" of Japan, I think the reasons for adapting other cultures have since developed, especially since Japan is in certain ways more developed than some western nations, and are different today.

It's confusing that Japan would adapt other cultures in fear of looking "backwards" while at the same time thinking they're better than everyone else, but Christopher may unintentionally help clear up this idea in an explanation related to technology adaptation that, "as long as Japan retains the ability to make more effective practical use of Western scientific innovation than the West itself does, borrowing technology may remain a perfectly valid strategy for the Japanese" (263). My interpretation of this statement is that many of Japan's innovations come from ideas originated from the west, but because Japan feels superior to other countries, it knows it can improve upon the ideas and make them its own. Japan's "childlike fascination" with western culture may be in the observation of ideas that it may not be able to come up with, and the tendency for adaptation and feeling of superiority may come from knowing that it can improve upon certain aspects of western culture. Beyond Christopher's reference to technology, the idea of adaptation and improvement is illustrated through the market of cute Japanese snacks.

Many Japanese snacks carry European or American influence but are distinctly Japanese because of the innovation applied to them. The aforementioned *Every Burger* came out of the popularity of hamburgers and *Caplico* is influenced by ice cream cones. Hamburgers and ice cream are quintessential American foods, but there are no popular comparable snacks emulating

American food in America. In Japan they *do* have snacks that mimic Japanese food, such as sushi-shaped gummy candy. Another foreign influence is shown in the names of the snacks, many of which have English names, such as *Chelsea*, *Milky*, *Meltykiss*, *Hi-Chew*, and *Koala's March*. A considerable number of snacks have French influence and use French words in their descriptions, such as Kabaya's *Café Stick*, a cookie stick coated with chocolate in flavors like Mont Blanc (chestnut cream cake) or Gateau Chocolat (chocolate cake). *Café Stick* takes entire, fairly complex desserts and distills their flavor essences into stick-form. This isn't necessarily a way to improve on the dessert nor is it meant to serve as a replacement, but it's a more convenient way to enjoy the flavor of the dessert. One line of Pocky snacks utilizes French in the name *Pocky Decorer* (Fancy Pocky), which takes the simple Pocky composition of a biscuit stick dipped in chocolate or cream and refines it by using more complex flavors and applying the cream in a more elaborate design, giving the impression that France has a higher level of sophistication. The European image may help make the product look more appealing to a Japanese audience as a Japanese snack carrying foreign influence, but there's no mistaking it as something that isn't Japanese.

Another aspect of foreign influence on snacks, also related to cuteness, is the tendency for products to carry slogans in fractured English or French (Kinsella 227). A package for *Almond Choco* states somewhat awkwardly and unhelpfully, "A fragrant and delicious crush Almond" to describe the contents of the snack. Many snacks carry a short description in English whose content is meant to act as a decoration to attract Japanese consumers as it is too insufficient to be intended for a western, English speaking market. This foreign influence isn't an example of an improvement, but it shows the wide appeal of something foreign to a Japanese audience.

While looking at Japanese snack packaging, I found that the most traditional Japanese snacks do not have cute packaging. Many Japanese snacks may combine Japanese and western characteristics, but still maintain the appeal of foreignness. For instance, some snacks may have Japanese flavors, such as soybean powder flavored *Pocky*, but their original components are not traditionally Japanese, like the original *Pocky*'s chocolate covered biscuit stick. Another example is *Takenoko no Sato*, which is shaped like a bamboo shoot, a common Asian ingredient, but is composed of a biscuit dipped in chocolate, a flavor that isn't traditionally Japanese. Snacks that focus on a Japanese flavor, like green tea, red bean, dried plum, ginger, or brown sugar, tend to have less cute packaging with more subdued colors and no mascots. These popular marketing techniques used all the time on western-influenced snacks aren't as applicable to products that are "too" Japanese, in that they're traditional. Of course, it makes sense that traditional Japanese snacks wouldn't use English or French on their packaging, but it may be worthwhile to note that they don't, or can't, adapt aspects of Japan's overbearing cuteness trend. By interpreting cuteness as a rebellion against tradition, the lack of cuteness in traditional snacks isn't surprising.

A Market Saturated With Flavors

Although cuteness is one of the driving factors behind the appeal of Japanese snacks, another important one is the variety of flavors. Snacks are constantly being "reborned" with new flavors in relation to the time or place the snack is being sold, leading to a wealth of snacks coveted for their quality of being "limited edition". In general, it's a good marketing technique to constantly release new flavors for short periods of time or in limited locations to keep people aware of the products freshness (besides that if the flavor fails, it won't be on the market long enough to matter), but this practice is noticeably done more often in Japan in relation to other

countries. In America for example, updated flavors of long-established snacks rarely come out, and when they do, they're not very exciting. While there may be a dark chocolate version of the American *Milky Way* as there is a dark chocolate version of *Pocky*, it's unlikely that Mars will ever make strawberry or almond-coated version of *Milky Way* as Meiji has done for *Pocky*. The desire for innovation in snacks doesn't seem as prevalent outside Japan than inside.

After looking at a wide variety of cute, sweet Japanese snacks, I found that the most common flavors are chocolate, vanilla, and strawberry. Other popular flavors include melon, yogurt, milk, chestnut, cheesecake, almond, white chocolate, custard, and banana. Non-Japanese snack companies make certain flavors of their snacks only available in Japan, such as strawberry Kit Kats (other Japanese Kit Kat flavors include white maple syrup, wine, dark chocolate, and coffee) and Peach Mentos. While Americans may find these flavors favorable, there's more demand for a variety of interesting flavors in Japan than the US or other western countries. Coupled with variety, it's important to designate certain flavors as "limited edition" to make them more coveted and seem newer since they can't exist for long periods of time.

In my opinion, the obsession with constantly having new types of snacks, leading to a steady flow of different flavors, parallels Japan's inclination to be "new" and be at the forefront of the latest advanced in just about any field. As Christopher said, they're able to improve upon foreign technology, but they also want to improve their own products and make them more interesting. Besides that Japanese people are open to outside cultures, adapting them as a part of Japanese culture almost obsessively, they demand fresh, new things all the time. Certainly, it's nice to have new products all the time; it's a reflection of innovation, not being stagnant, and provides constant stimulation. However, it may also be related to modern Japan's increased consumerism and unmindful indulgence in comforts and pleasures, characteristics that

overshadow traditional Japanese values of endurance and perseverance (Grossberg 37). These materialistic aspects are also paralleled in the cuteness trend, which has great impact on the snack industry. One requirement of the increased desire for self-gratification through buying snacks is for companies to create more snack varieties in order to fulfill the demand for constant gratification. Over time, it may not be so much that people want this gratification as much as expect it; for Americans, a major draw of Japanese snacks is the wide variety and flavors, but since we don't (yet) expect those characteristics to be strongly reflected in our own country's products, companies don't have to make them. Japan's expectations for consistently creating new, interesting snacks, resulting from a high rate of consumption, surpass those of most other nations.

Japan's Representation Through Cute Snacks

I don't regularly look at Japanese snacks while mulling over how they reflect aspects of Japanese society; I just eat them and think about how they taste. However, there's more underneath the (probably excessive) wrapping besides something sweet, and inarguably more than what has been mentioned in this paper. My general conclusions are that Japanese people use cuteness as one way to face adulthood and rebel against it, that Japanese people find western culture appealing, but also feel that they can improve upon it, and that Japan is obsessed with keeping things new. All these ideas seem related to Japan distancing itself from old traditions, or always being ahead in what's newest.

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