The "characterization" of Japan : from merchandising to identity

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Introduction

The Kingdom of Characters

Japan is known as the "Kingdom of Characters." This moniker comes from the name of a travelling exhibition organized by the Japan Foundation that had toured from 2010 to 2015. This exhibition mainly introduces the manga and anime characters that have emerged in Japan since the postwar and the daily life in such a kingdom as well as the popular trends which may reveal the direction of further development of characters in Japan. Its debut was in China and then in Italy and most of Europe, Asia, Oceania and America, which attracted a lot of local people. The purpose of the exhibition, according to the Japan Foundation, is to make viewers have "a better understanding of the cultural and historical background behind the Japanese love of characters as well as the future of characters in contemporary Japan" ("Foreword" to "JAPAN: Kingdom of Characters", 2010).

The organizer of the exhibition, the Japan Foundation, established in October 1972, was a special legal entity supervised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, whose object is to promote international cultural exchange through organizing a wide range of programs around the world. It has established 24 overseas centres including Beijing, Seoul, London, Paris, Moscow, New York and Sydney in 23 countries. The programs it operates focus on three fields: culture, language and dialogue. The Japanese government also gives the Japan Foundation great supports each year, since as Japan's only cultural agency responsible for international cultural exchange it creates many opportunities to foster friendship and understanding between Japan and the world.

Particularly when the Japanese government has devoted itself to exploiting the potential of the nation's cultural influence through the concept of "Cool Japan" since 2002, the Japan Foundation plays a critical role.[1] This development was first described by Douglas McGray in his 2002 article "Japan's Gross National Cool" that highlights Japan's soft power, which includes pop music, anime, manga, fashion, film, cuisine, and the phenomenon of cuteness. Japan Foundation is an important tool for promoting Japan's "national cool," to foreign audiences.

With increasing attention paid to Japan's softpower, the Ministry of Economy Trade and Industry (METI) establishes a special office for promoting the creative industry and the "Cool Japan" strategy, one of whose key elements is Japanese content represented by Japanese popular culture. According to the statistics published by METI on "The Current Situation and Future Development of Content Industry" in April 2016, the foreign sales of Japanese content has reached 13.8 billion dollars, mainly including manga (24.1 per cent), game (19.3 per cent), character goods sale (7.9 per cent), anime (0.2 per cent) and film (0.1 per cent), which accounts for 2.5 per cent of global demand for content. Among these aspects, one element which goes

[1]For details of the development of "Cool Japan" see Chapter 5.

through the process of development of them and becomes ever more important as well as reflects the contemporary Japanese society is characters.

Characters are omnipresent in contemporary Japan. As the introduction to the above-mentioned travelling exhibition writes, "Used unhesitatingly by both adults and children in private and public spaces, before we realize it, these characters have become a part of our daily landscape" and appeared in many possible places such as "bank passbooks, train commutation passes and local police boxes" (see **Figure 1**). Therefore, "Anyone who has ever travelled to Japan has probably had the awe-inspiring experience of finding manga and anime characters in every corner of the city," as the exhibition director Aihara Hiroyuki notes ("JAPAN: Kingdom of Characters", 2010).

"Not only in areas like Akihabara and Harajuku, which have come to be known in foreign countries as sacred sites for characters, but in supermarkets and souvenir shops in every little town across the country, one finds countless goods emblazoned with images of Hello Kitty and Pocket Monsters," continues Aihara, "Droves of adults march into movies produced by Studio Ghibli and it is not at all unusual to see people immersed in making figures from *Mobile Suit Gundam*."

Indeed, driven by the postwar boom in manga and anime, characters have quickly become part of Japanese daily life via books and screens. It is very normal in Japan to see various genres of manga placed outside the front of bookshops; many people on the train, regardless of age or gender, will have some kind of manga materials, such as pocket books and digital sources, to read; and anime is often broadcast on television, at the cinema, or on big screens in the street. Such an environment opens up many channels for Japanese people to discover manga and anime, and makes them familiar with the characters in them.

Convenience shops, vending machines, restaurants, hotels, museums, café and shopping centres are flooded with huge numbers of character-based goods, but the saturation does not stop there: items that are part of a person's personal belongings—for example, bags, clothes and mobile phones—are also rife with such "characterization." In the introduction to the exhibition, a 2004 survey conducted by the Bandai Character Research Centre in Japan is mentioned.[2] In response to the question "*Nanrakano suki na kyarakutā ga aru*?" (Are there any characters you like?) 90.2 per cent of the respondents (1,210 people including men and women ranging in age from 3 to 69) admitted that there were, and in answer to the question "*Nanrakano kyarakutā shōhin o shoyū shiteiru*?" (Do you own any character goods?) 79 per cent of the respondents said yes. These figures indicate the popularity of characters among people who are likely to have some character goods because of their fondness for them.

How did the current status quo come about? Why has this happened? Does this phenomenon tell us something about Japanese society? These are the main questions that this study aims to answer.

[2]Other details on this survey will be discussed in Chapter 3.

From above descriptions, a fact can be found, that the phenomena of characters in Japan are also the commercial built on various commodities, and consumption has been an effective way to express one's affection for characters. This dissertation undertakes a study of the merchandising and consumption practices that have developed around characters. Through accounts that trace various economic, cultural, and social practices, this dissertation aims to examine the penchant for characters in Japan and its consequences. "Characterization" of Japan is an attempt to treat a seemingly trivial phenomenon seriously, demonstrating how it matters in the Japanese context, as well as outside of Japan. We will start with the very basic question: what is a character?

Figure 1. Kyoto city subway one-day free passes and JR West train IC card featuring characters; Source: Collected by author, April 2015.

Character, Commodity and Consumption

Character

"Character" (*kyarakutā*), according to the *Nihon kokugo daijiten* (the second edition, 2006: 309), the most comprehensive dictionary in Japan, has three meanings. The first refers to personality, characteristic and the personas appearing in a play, film, novel

and manga and so on. The second refers to the symbols or words in one system. The third refers to the characteristics projected in advertising campaigns or activities which include the uses of distinctive things, celebrities, animals and plants and so on. Other dictionaries offer similar definitions, for example, according to *Kōjien* (the fifth edition, 2006: 674), the term refers to personality; personas in a novel, film, play, manga story, and so on; and a letter or symbol. On the introduction of the use of the term "character" as a fixed phrase particularly referring to personas appearing in manga and anime to Japan, many scholars have cited the influence of Disney (Kayama and Bandai Kyarakutā Kenkyūjo, 2001; Tsuji, Umemura and Mizuno, 2009). In the 1950s, along with its relaunched animation works in Japan, Disney also introduced a character merchandising contract in which the personas in its animation works were described as "fanciful characters," "character" for short. Before that, the personas in manga and anime had been always called "*tōjōjinbutsu*" (literally, "those who enter the stage") or "*shuyōjinbutsu*" (literally, "the leading characters"). Impacted by Disney, the English term began to be recognized and used. For example, in an article titled "*Shōnen Sarutobi Sasuke manga eiga ni naru*" (The Work Magic Boy is Adapted for Film), in the 13 November 1958 edition of the daily newspaper *Yomiuri Shinbun*, the persona, Sasuke, was introduced as "*shuyōjinbutsu no kyarakutā*" (literally, "the main characters"), combining both Japanese and English terms.[3]

The use of the term "character" in this dissertation refers to not only the virtual characters in manga and anime but also those originating from other media and platforms. As a form of creative expression, manga makes use of the specific and still design of characters, while anime endows them with movement, which as Marc Steinberg argues, provides a "dynamically immobile image" (2012: 9). Both of them are useful to give characters narratives that are important to construct the imaginary character worlds and attract readers and audiences to follow and enjoy as well as develop a "contract" with such worlds. As Martin Barker argues, "A 'contract' involves an agreement that a text will talk to us in ways we recognize. It will enter into a dialogue with us. And that dialogue, with its dependable elements and form, will relate to some aspect of our lives in our society" (1989: 261). The contract to some extent provides a means for readers and audiences to enter the fantastic worlds of characters that manga and anime construct, while integrating their imaginations with the characters' world. It can be understood as a kind of "collaborative creativity," as Condry points out, whose "platform is better viewed in terms of characters and [character] worlds" (2013: 113).

The existence of characters as the platform implies that a character can be independent from the media forms of manga and anime, and function as what Thomas Lamarre (2009: xxiii) and Azuma Hiroki (2007:125) call a "nodal point." In his study *Kyarakutā to wa nanika* (What is Character), Odagiri Hiroshi points out three constituent elements of a character, which are "image, inner personality and

[3]To establish this, I searched for the term "character" (*kyarakutā*) in the newspaper databases of *Yomidasu Rekishikan* (from 1874) and *Asahi Kikuzou II* (from 1879). This article is chronologically the first found in the two databases that relates the term to manga and anime. After this article, the English term is widely used in articles about manga and anime.

meaning" (2010: 118-125). "Image" relates to character design, the "inner personality" highlights the personality that the persona presents, and "meaning" symbolizes the attributes or character type of the persona. A character is always the result of the integration of design combined with personality and symbolic meaning (Saitō, 2011). The second element is often linked to the discussion of *kyara* (chara). In fact, characters in Japan are also known as *kyara. Kyara,* is not simply an abbreviation of the term "character," but also refers to a psychologically complex sense, or "a proto-character situation" for all characters, as manga critic Itō Gō has argued in his book *Tezuka izu deddo* (Tezuka is Dead) (2014: 124). In the sense of the latter, *kyara* is different from character. Itō suggests that *kyara* is something similar to personality: it "precedes the character itself, evoking the feeling of some kind of existence or life force" (2014: 126-152). On the other hand character is based on *kyara* and can be read as a body image that expresses a certain personality and makes one imagine the life behind the text. However, in Japan, *kyara* has many other meanings. The term also refers to a real person's personality[4] or the type of one's role that he/she acts in social communication.

Here none of these three elements is absolutely necessary, which reveals one key factor of characters, flexibility. According to Odagiri, even if a character only has a name and one of these elements, as long as it can maintain its coherence through these, the character can be offered many options for transforming and extending to other media or platforms. For example, a manga character can be translated across different media from manga to anime, games and light novels, and so on. And the character can make these different media have an integrated and synergistic relationship with each other and therefore a network of multiple media surrounding the character is constructed. Moreover, this flexibility also indicates that many personas in other forms of media, such as designs (Hello Kitty) and video games (Pokémon), can be defined as characters and together they create the phenomenon of characters today.[5]

Significantly, it is this flexibility that allows characters to become commodities and enter our lives. A direct driving force for the commoditization of character comes from manga and anime. In his examination of the rise of the comic strip in America, Ian Gordon has argued that "[b]y stressing individual characters, the new comic art form lent itself to promotion and marketing" (1998: 7). This is the case in Japan too. The key factor that supports the sustainable development of manga and anime is the character merchandising which followed Disney's arrival in Japan, as this provides a mechanism for the commoditization of characters in order to make a profit. Tezuka Osamu, the producer of TV anime *Tetsuwan Atomu* (Astro Boy, 1963) and the creator of the manga of the same name, was the pioneer who relied on the example of Disney in practicing character merchandising in Japan. During the 1960s, the market became

[4]For example the phrase of *kyaradacchi* refers to the establishment of one's personality; see also Chapter 4.
[5]For details on the mixed media network see Chapter 2.

flooded with a variety of items, such as food, toys and accessories, which featured the character, Atomu.[6]

Following the first success, the potential of characters in marketing was quickly recognized by producers, and this led to the boom of character goods in the following decades. The statistics show that by the early 1980s the market scale of character goods surpassed 1 trillion yen (Kayama and Bandai Kyarakutā Kenkyūjo, 2001:192). Then, in the 1990s, despite the uncertain period following the rise and fall of the Bubble Economy, sales of the character retail market exceeded 1.5 trillion yen and continued to grow and reached a peak of more than 2 trillion yen in 1999 (*Charabiz DATA*, 2010). Since then, retail sales have essentially remained stable at around 1.5 trillion yen (*Charabiz DATA*, 2015). In this sense, the commoditization of characters, which began in the 1960s led to the development of a sizable segment of Japanese economy.

Commodity

Commodities, according to Herbert Marcuse, can be used by people to realize themselves and find their soul, which implies that "the very mechanism which ties the individual to society has changed" (1986: 9). This is the alienated phenomena proposed by Karl Marx (1844), in which the organic connection among labor, production and consumption is replaced by the relation of commodity mediated by its exchange-value. For Marx, every commodity has a use-value and an exchange-value. If the use-value expresses the social relationship between a person and an object, the exchange-value is purely an expression of the relationship between objects, without any social meaning. However, as clearly pointed out in *Capital* (1867), Marx argues that the commodity in fact represents a certain quantity of human labour. If commodities actually represent human labour, then the relationship between different commodities actually expresses a relationship between different acts of labour (Lee, 2000). Hence, what exchange-value expresses is also a social relation, but commodity conceals it by the relation of objects, which Marx calls fetishism.

Commodity fetishism, as many scholars have noted, implies the transformation of cultural and social values into the attibutes of objects. For example, Wolfgang Fritz Haug (1986) reveals how "commodity aesthetics" make the commodity further fetishized. He argues that commodity aesthetics is a technique that produces the appearance of commodity rather than its substance and plays an important role in attracting consumers' attention. According to Haug, this is a new commodity fetishism created by a perceptual technique. Judith Williamson (1978) focuses on the "ideology" that commodity fetishism produces in social life. By decoding advertisements, Williamson argues that the real distinction between people in contemporary Western society is decided by their position in the process of production. However, according to her theory, advertising conceals the real structure of society, obscures fundamental class differences, and recreates them through the consumption of particular commodities.

[6]See Chapter 1. Marc Steinberg (2012) also focuses on Atomu and does a very excellent job of examining this character's history.

Nevertheless, it must be borne in mind here that objects per se are inscribed with certain socio-cultural meanings and values, thus we should take another look from objects themselves.[7] As Arjun Appadurai argues in the introduction to *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*: "We have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things" (1986: 5). In his chapter "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process" in the same volume, in which commodities are regarded as having life histories and as being recorded as a cultural biography, Igor Kopytoff notes, "A culturally informed economic biography of an object would look at it as a culturally constructed entity, endowed with culturally specific meanings, and classified and reclassified into culturally constituted categories" (1986: 68). Thus "the production of commodities is also a cultural and cognitive process: commodities must be not only produced materially as things, but also culturally marked as being a certain kind of thing." Moreover, "out of the total range of things available in a society, only some of them are considered appropriate for marking as commodities" (1986: 64), since culture can intervene the development of commoditization by precluding some things such as "public lands and monuments" (1986: 73). In other word, in different societies, the standard for "the commodity *candidate* of things" (Appadurai, 1986: 13; emphasis in original) is different. And this difference is determined by culture and society.

Consumption

Thus commodities should be assessed as "things in a certain situation, a situation that can characterize many different kinds of thing, at different points in their social lives," as Appadurai points out. He continues, "This means looking at the commodity potential of all things rather than searching fruitlessly for the magic distinction between commodities and other sorts of things; this also means breaking the significantly with the production-dominated Marxian view of the commodity and focusing on its *total* trajectory from production, through exchange/distribution, to consumption" (1986: 13; emphasis in original).

According to Steven Miles, people are increasingly recognizing the fact that "our lives are not solely determined by our relationship to the means of production" and that we in particular cannot ignore the impact of consumption (1998: 2). Without this recognition, there will be a "failure to observe the actual changes which have taken place over the last century in the balance of influence between these two forms of interactions with goods" (1998: 2). Miles also argues that consumption is generally defined as the "purchase and use of goods," at the heart of which lies not only an economic conception but also a cultural one (1998: 3). The latter plays a particularly important role in the "reproduction, representation, and manipulation" of social

[7]A more elaborate discussion on social meanings and values will follow in section on consumption of this introduction.

culture and supporting our present realities (1998: 3). In short, consumption is "a set of social, cultural and economic practices" (1998: 4).

The development of consumption as a historical process has been thoroughly studied, especially in relation to Europe and North America. For example, the series of *The Fontana Economic History of Europe* (1973-1980) edited by Carlo Maria Cipolla study the multiple effects of structure, convention and fashion on consumption in Europe; Fernard Braudel examines the daily consumer life of Europeans in pre-industrial period including food, drink, dress, fashion, housing and technology in his *Civilization and Capitalism, 15-18 Century* (1979); and the critical essays in American History from 1880 to 1980 brought by Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears in *The Culture of Consumption* (1983) focus on the new cultural values and sensibilities raised by the evolution of consumer capitalism in American society and point out that these direct to the shift from a "producer ethic to a consumer ethic."

The most recent publication is Frank Trentmann's *Empire of Things* (2016), a monumental volume of over 800 pages, tracing the story of consumption since the 15th to the 21st century. He first looks at the changing meaning of the concept of consumption per se and notes that the term experiences a "miraculous metamorphosis between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries" (2016: 2). According to Trentman, originally meaning the using up, consumption was emphasized as wasteful or involved spending and led to certain economic loss or moral decline until the seventeenth century when it instead became "something positive and creative" (2016: 2). For instance, from the late seventeenth century, consumption began to be considered as an important process for "enlarging market for producers and investors" (Trentman, 2016: 2), as Adam Smith pointed out in *The Wealth of Nations*, "Consumption is the sole end and purpose for all production" ([1776] 1937: 625).

The 18th century was when people first experienced the expansion of the commoditized world with many new commodities being brought into Western society, which caused changes to the content and customs of consumption. These changes stimulated "a demand for pleasure and play in the area of consumption" (Bell, 1972: 33) and caused the consumption of luxury goods to become fashionable and trendy. This era has been closely examined by Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford, who study the cultural meanings that are derived from the process of consumption in their *Consumers and Luxury: Consumer Culture in Europe 1650-1850* (1999). Christopher Berry (1994) also takes an interest in the idea of luxury, and his study reveals the relationships between luxury consumption, government, social order and social identity. By interpreting acquiring luxury goods and services as a public display of economic power, as early as the end of the nineteenth century, Thorstein Veblen (1899) proposed the idea of "conspicuous consumption" and emphasized both the cultural and social significance of consumption. These approaches examine consumption and its culture, consumer culture, from a broader perspective and position them as an important requirement for the development of society.

In the 20th century, consumption became a means towards shaping individuality, particularly following the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism. Fordism promoted the take-off of mass production and standardized goods while improving the potential of

consumption (by increasing workers' income). However, as the main way of accumulating capital in the industrial age, since the 1960s certain structural defects in Fordism have been exposed—it ignored the consumer market segment, could not meet the diverse requirements of consumers, and had, therefore, what David Harvey terms "rigidity" (1990). This led to a conflict in the market and created the conditions for the arrival of post-Fordism, in which the heterogeneity and individualization of people were carefully considered. Consumer choice became one of the premises for production; the centre of social life had been shifted from production to consumption.

In Harvey's opinion, two aspects of these changes in life and consumption deserve close attention: the growth in importance of immaterial characteristic of commodities and, correspondingly, the growing importance of the production of a symbol system and visual images. They give the term "consumption" a critical distance from the meaning of "using up" and divert the focus on the "*significance and character of the values, norms and meanings*" produced in consumption practices (Lury, 2011: 10-11; emphasis in original). Further, Jean Baudrillard (1988) positions the sign-value of commodity as the starting point and examines consumption in a perspective of the political economy of the sign. He suggests that consumption, in fact, is a kind of symbolic act or act of using signs, which constructs a symbolic society at a deeper level.

The symbolic interpretation of consumption must certainly be based on the socio-cultural context, since objects are concrete manifestations of social practices. The work of anthropologists Marry Douglas and Baron Isherwood (1979) looks at the function of commodity in rituals and points out that goods can be a symbol of social status. Douglas particularly notes the significance of objects for humans, especially in producing and maintaining social relationships.

The fact that consumer culture is neither an independent symbol system nor a negative and direct reflection of the existing social reality and order was emphasized by Pierre Bourdieu (1979; 1980). He argues that specific social practices can form a bridge between the subjective agents and the objective social structures and can internalize the latter to become the "habitus" of the former. The habitus is, on the one hand, shaped by social practices, while on the other contributes to social production, since it can generate and regulate the practices that form the social life. Moreover, the close relationship between the habitus and practices is always presented as being embodied in the body. For Bourdieu, habitus can contribute to the cultural competence of an individual, for instance in terms of taste, which can be seen as one's internal "cultural capital." In Bourdieu's view, the ownership of goods presents multiple chances for people to demonstrate the cultural capital they possess, and therefore consumption is an important way of achieving "distinction." In this way, he revisits the complicated relationships between culture and social class, and extends the power relations behind capital from the economic field to the cultural and social fields, thereby avoiding economic determinism.

Since the 1980s, the theoretical discussion on consumption, which also focuses on different aspects and uses concrete examples, has been burgeoning. Those include works such as Daniel Miller's *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (1987), Colin Campbell's *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (1987), Gary

Cross's *Time and Money: The Making of Consumer Culture* (1993), Ben Fine and Ellen Leopold's *The World of Consumption* (1993), Scott Lash and John Urry's *Economies of Signs and Space* (1994), Grant McCracken's *Culture and Consumption* (1990), Celia Lurry's *Consumer Culture* (1996), David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989), Mike Featherstone's *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (1991), Zygmunt Bauman's *Intimations of Postmodernity* (1992), Martyn Lee's *Consumer Culture Reborn* (1993), George Ritzer's *The McDonaldization of Society* (1993), Sharon Zukin's *Point of Purchase: How Shopping Changed American Culture* (2004), Andrew Wernick's *Promotional Culture* (1991), Robert Bocock's *Consumption* (1993), Gabriel and Lang's *Unmanageable Consumer* (1995), Paul du Gay *et al.*'s *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman* (1997), Thomas Frank's *The Conquest of Cool* (1997), John Fiske's *Understanding Popular Culture* (1989), Don Slater's *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (1997) and Joanne Entwistle's *The Fashioned Body* (2000), and studies such as Russell Belk's "Studies in the New Consumer Behaviour" (1995), Fred Davis's "Of Maids' Uniforms and Blue Jeans" (1989), Fredric Jameson's "Postmodernism and the Consumer Society" (1985), Mica Nova's "Modernity's Disavowal: Women, the City and the Department Store" (1997), Stuart Hall's "Encoding/ Decoding" (1990), Arjun Appadurai's "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy" (1990), Morris Holbrook's "Nostalgia and Consumption Preference" (1993), Robert Kozinets's "Utopian Enterprise" (2001), John Clark's "'Mine Eyes Dazzle': Cultures of Consumption" (1991) and Barbara Stern's "Deconstructive Strategy and Consumer Research" (1996).

As part of contemporary consumption, character cosnumption is embedded in the web of complex processes that involve many of the practices of consumption described above. At the same time, it is rooted in the social and cultural context of Japan. In the next section, I will try to demonstrate that the study of character consumption can offer us a window into a better understanding of the complicated interactions between people and commodities.

Character Consumption

Character consumption in general refers to the purchase and use of specific commodities—character goods derived from character merchandising. Character goods are akin to mass-produced cultural goods which, though criticized by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1944) as falling into the trap of standardization, facilitate the production and consumption of culture and enable people to enjoy it. Thus, on the one hand character goods share features with other commodities, such as the use-value and exchange-value proposed by Marx. On the other hand, as Baudrillard (1988) argues, with fetishism turning to the sphere of consumption, sign-values become inherent to commodities, in particular character goods.

Indeed, putting children as the primary target of character goods turned them into children's favourites and thus secured strong roots in the development of children's culture in Japan. Because of their affinity for manga and anime, Japanese children soon become consumers of character goods. This to some extent has accelerated the socialization of children, by urging them to take on the role of consumers

prematurely. From this starting point character goods then extend beyond the children's market to adults. This extension not only led to the expansion of character consumption, but also secured for characters a role in social-cultural phenomena, such as the *shōjo* (girls) and *otaku* (geeks), resulting in the diversification of character consumption.

Such diversification also highlights the symbolic qualities of character consumption, which coincides with the very postmodern tendency of consumption. According to Miles, this trend focuses on the "symbolic processes characteristic of consumption" (1998: 23). Therefore, consumption is much like what Baudrillard describes "a *systematic* act of the manipulation of signs" (1988: 22-25; emphasis in original) which constitutes the meanings or discourses that can realize consumers' self-worth.

As many scholars have discussed, consumption is related to a "choosing self" (Slater, 1997: 59) and highlights self-realization (Lears, 1983) and self-improvement (Pendergast, 2000). In his book *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, Mike Featherstone has argued that influenced by the postmodern qualities such as "'liquefaction of signs and commodities,' the 'effacement of the boundary between the real and the image,' 'floating signifiers,' 'hyperreality,' 'depthless culture,' 'bewildering information,' 'sensory overload' and 'affect-charge intensities,'" the aestheticization of everyday life has come into play (2007: 64-80), and significantly, this postmodern world encourages everybody to believe that they can "be whoever they want, as long as they are prepared to consume" (Miles, 1998: 24).Thus consumption may go beyond specific social restrictions and become a way of taking control of their lives. This sense of control can be also gained by consuming characters. As Anne Allison puts it, a character is "a device for self-realization (*jikojitsugen*)" (2004: 40). In particular, by satisfying individuals' need for sensibility and individuality, character consumption realizes the idea of self, including the construction and expression of self-identity.[8]

At this point, character consumption must be placed in the bigger picture of contemporary Japanese society. Consumption per se is closely related to the social context, as revealed by Veblen and Bourdieu through their understanding of the social significance of consumption (despite their focus on social mobility). As I will explain in chapters of this study, character consumption is also linked to social and cultural practices such as *iyashi būmu* (healing boom), and may reflect and be affected by specific culture complexes such as the *amae* (dependency) and the animist sensibility in Japan. Noticeably, this dissertation explores two aspects of the relationships between character consumption and Japanese society. The first of these is the new symbol system that has been constructed as a result of character consumption, and which is full of signs that may change one's perception of reality and even bring out the "more real than real" world of hyper-reality (Baudrillard, 1988). In this sense, the consumption of characters is equated with the consumption of signs, through which a "characterized identity," comprised of character signs, is born (self-identity-construction).

[8]For a more elaborate discussion on characters and self-identity see Chapters 3 and 4.

The second relates to the new way in which society is represented in contemporary Japan. Sign-value makes the use of commodity not only symbolic but also expressive, for example, consumption can be representative of class, taste and individuality, as discussed above. Therefore consumption is a means for expressing self-identity. This is particularly based on the body, since consumption is "a body project" (Clammer, 1997: 12). Through various modification works, the body, a "presentation of self in everyday life" (Goffman, 1959) and a "site for the inscription of a variety of signs and values about identity and difference" (Appadurai, 1997: 84), is inevitably transformed into the most beautiful consumer product (Baudrillard, [1970] 1998). This is precisely what is happening with character consumption in Japan. As I will explain in Chapter 4, with the "characterized identity" consumers are keen to pursue the bodies of characters and consume their own bodies through makeovers and shape-overs. It occurs not only out of individual need but also out of socio-political necessity. For example, the Japanese belief, Shinto, cultivates a sense of belonging and an animist sensibility, and lies the foundation of using anthropomorphism to create character-styled bodies for many objects, from natural creatures to everyday items. In the case of politics, politicians both use characters and character-styled bodies in order to approach the public. The same application can be found in the way that the public expresses its political voice. As Michel Foucault (1995) has argued, there has always been conflict between power and the body. In such a contention, mediated by the body characters are put at the centre of the social stage and play an active role in social communication.[9] Characters become a form of discourse and reflect, constitute and represent contemporary Japan. A "characterized society" is thus formed.

Nevertheless the impact of characters is not peculiar to one particular society but, as Allison and Christine Yano have argued, should be investigated in a global context because the phenomenon has already awakened the global imagination and stimulated a global desire. And this phenomenon is much like the "decentered globalization" proposed by Iwabuchi Koichi (2002) that features a general transnational flow. Driven by Japan's cultural exports and exchange of manga and anime, characters have been brought onto the world stage and received a warm welcome. Today more and more consumers in other areas of the world are consuming Japanese characters.

This process has, in part, been led by the Japanese government, which has carefully constructed a platform for the export of characters through related cultural policies and diplomacy. As I indicated at the beginning of this introduction, characters have been a crucial aspect of the strategy of "Cool Japan" and promoted as an image of the nation. On the other hand, characters per se can provide the pleasure and fantasy that readers, audiences or consumers all over the world may become captured by, and more importantly characters makes them have shared experience (of characters) with each other whereby a connecting bridge is constructed.

[9]For more on the role that characters play in social communication see Chapter 4.

Studying Characters

The phenomenon of character consumption has attracted interest of scholars for some time. Generally speaking, the character research conducted by Japanese scholars usually comprises three different features. The first is an initial exploration, which is always dependent on related studies and tends to lack theoretical independence. However, in turn, this provides the foundation for a broader perspective, in which characters are explored through various aspects. For example, Saitō Ryōsuke traced the history of Japanese toys in his book *Shōwa gangu bunkashi* (A Cultural History of Shōwa Toys, 1978), which recorded the development of character toys in the postwar period and provided much evidence for further contemporary textual research. Equally, while Kan Tadamichi (1968) and Tsurumi Shunsuke (1984) paid little attention to characters, their studies discussed many cultural phenomena and social events relating to Japanese children and characters in the postwar period.

From the late 1980s onwards, a clearer understanding of characters began to emerge. Many scholars began to focus on characters in their discussion of manga, anime, and (sub)cultures such as *shōjo* and *otaku*. However, this was also the period when theories about Western consumption and postmodernism were widely introduced and applied in Japan. From such a theoretical basis, since the late 1980s some Japanese scholars have tried to interpret characters by combining the study of them with discussions of Western theories. For example, Ōtsuka Eiji (1989) proposed the "theory of narrative consumption," which highlighted the significance of narrative in understanding the character worlds and their function in contemporary consumption in Japan. As a social critic and anthropologist, he contributed many books on characters, including *Manga no kōzō: Shōhin tekisuto genshō* (The Anatomy of Manga: Commodities, Text and Phenomenon, 1987), *Iyashitoshite no shōhi* (Consumption as Healing, 1991a), *Tasogare toki ni mitsuketa mono: "Ribon" no furoku to sonojidai* (Things Found at Twilight: "Ribbon" Premiums [furoku] and Their Age, 1991b), *Sengo manga no hyōgenkūkan: Kigotekishitai no shūbaku* (The Expressive Space of Postwar Manga: The Curse of the Symbolic Body, 1994), *Kyarakutā shōsetsu no tsukurikata* (How to Make the Character Novel, 2003), *Atomu no meidai: Tezuka Osamu to sengo manga no shudai* (The Atomu Thesis: Tezuka Osamu and the Main Theme of Postwar Manga, 2003), *Monogatari shōmetsuron: Kyarakutāka suru "watashi", ideorogika suru "monogatari"* (The Extinction of Narrative: The Characterized "Me", and the Ideologicalized "Narrative", 2004) and *"Otaku" no seishinshi: 1980-nendai-ron* (Intellectual History of "Otaku": A Theory of the 1980s, 2007).

Ōtsuka's discussions indeed have a fundamental and leading significance in the study of characters and have enlightened subsequent researchers. Azuma Hiroki (2001; 2007) is one such researcher, who uses Ōtsuka's perspective as the basis for his work, but pays less attention to the narrative of the character world, instead stressing the relationships between characters and a "database." The premise of Azuma's work is based on his study of the practices and postmodernity of *otaku* consumption—which

follows the typical pattern of character consumption.[10] By aligning this with postmodern theoretical discourse, he has coined the term "database consumption" to help us to understand the economic, cultural, and social changes evoked by character consumption in contemporary Japanese society (since the mid-1990s).

The third feature of studies of characters in Japanese academia is the preoccupation with a practical analysis of the character industry through marketing data and the interpretation of business terms since the middle of the 1990s. For example, Tsuchiya Shintarō (1995) analyses the structure and strategy of the character industry and points out that the character industry, as a "soft business," will remain in a crucial position in the future in Japan. Yamada Tōru (2000) looks at the character industry from the perspective of the market for characters, while Ushiki Ri'ich (2000) focuses on interpreting the legal knowledge that surrounds character merchandising and sets out a legal framework for a character business. A similar effort is made by Tsuji Yukie, Umemura Osamu, and Mizuno Kōji (2009), who offer us a comprehensive understanding of characters from the perspectives of culture, commerce and intellectual property. Moreover, since the mid-1990s, many institutes have deployed data investigations, such as the surveys conducted by the Bandai Character Research Institute (2000, 2004) and the annual reports published by Character Databank Company (since 2002), and have analysed the whole industry in detail.

Based on these studies, many Japanese scholars have tended to explore the phenomenon of characters within Japan's cultural soil. For example, Tsurumi argues that Japan has "its own long-standing tradition of cartoons and even narrative comics" such as the *chōjū-jinbutsu-giga* (Scroll of Frolicking Animals, 12th century) which may "call to mind Walt Disney's animated cartoons of Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck" (1984: 30-31). Shimizu Isao (2009) traces Katsushika Hokusai's (1760-1849) manga in the Edo period as a source for modern characters. Aihara Hiroyuki (2007) suggests that characters are derived from traditional Japanese beliefs, such as Shinto and Buddhism, which in part affect the Japanese to establish spiritual connections with objects. In his famous exhibition "OTAKU: characterology=space=cities," Morikawa Ka'ichirō (2005) reveals that *moe*, a kind of affective response to characters, is comparable with *wabi-sabi*, the traditional Japanese aesthetic value.[11] Aoki Sadashige (2014) argues that characters could be the force that the enterprises and the nation rely on to contribute to building their brands. This, in part, explains why characters are appointed as Japan's ambassadors, representing Japan on the world stage, and carrying a great deal of expectation from the Japanese government.

When compared with the abundance of research into the subject by Japanese scholars, academic publications in English that focus on characters are rather scarce. This is surprising but reasonable, considering the fact that the broad-ranging analysis of characters by Japanese academia is relatively recent. It is for this reason that most of

[10]For details of otaku consumption and Azuma's study see Chapters 2 and 3.

[11]*Wabi-sabi* as a kind of Japanese aesthetics suggests such qualities as "impermanence, humanity, asymmetry, and imperfection" (Juniper, 2003: 2); See "Venice Biennale the 9th International Architecture Exhibition the Japanese Pavilion," 2005, accessed 1 March 2016, https://www.jpf.go.jp/j/project/culture/exhibit/international/venezia-biennale/arc/9/02.html.

the initial studies of characters in Japan were attached to research on other topics, such as children and mass culture, although it should be mentioned that in many of these studies characters were not clearly highlighted or recognized as a subject in their own right. In her study Linda Simensky points out, there is literary absence on the topic of cartoon characters in Western academia, particularly that of character merchandising (2012: 217). However, there are some researchers making contributions, for example, John Canemaker's *Felix: The Twisted Tale of the World's Most Famous Cat* (1991), Jim Korkis and John Cawley's *Cartoon Superstars* (1990), Alan Bryman's *The Disneyization of Society* (2004) and *Disney Discourse* (1994) edited by Eric Smoodin.

The most solid book on the topic of the Japanese characters is Marc Steinberg's *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan* (2012) which elaborates on the initial development of character merchandising in Japan. Steinberg also looks at the designer toys within the logic of character merchandising. In addition Anne Allison's *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination* (2006) offers a detailed exploration of the development of Japanese character toys in both Japan and America. Ken Belson and Brian Bremner (2004) reveal the story of a specific character, Hello Kitty, and the billion dollar feline phenomenon caused by her. Yano traces the global development of the character, in her book *Pink Globalization: Hello Kitty's Trek across the Pacific* (2013). Allison and Yano also contribute to an earlier book, *Pikachu's Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokémon*, edited by Joseph Tobin (2004), which analyses the phenomenon of Pokémon all over the world. Debra Occhi (2012) in her study "Wobbly Aesthetics, Performance, and Message: Comparing Japanese Kyara with their Anthropomorphic Forebears" specifically examines the development of *yurukyara* (literally, the "wobbly" character) and points out that they root in the religious, the civic and the commercial.

Furthermore, this topic is always included in the discussion of manga, anime, and Japanese popular culture. For instance, Frederick Schodt outlines the world of Japanese comics in his books such as *Manga! Manga!* (1983) and *Dreamland Japan* (1996) and introduces many manga characters to the West. Ian Condry looks at the collective action that surrounds anime and characters in his study *The Soul of Anime* (2013). Anne Cooper-Chen discusses the globalization of Japanese popular media and the interaction between fans all over the world and characters such as cosplay in her *Cartoon Culture* (2010). The book *Debating Otaku in Contemporary Japan* (2015) contributed by Patrick Galbraith, Thiam Huat Kam and Björn-Ole Kamm *et al.* involves the role that *otaku* play in character consumption. *Mechademia* (2006-2015), a series of ten books edited by Frennchy Lunning, not only interprets the studies of Japanese scholars but also provides many analyses of Western researchers about manga, anime and fans and so on. Thorsten Botz-Bornstein examines the aesthetics relating to characters in his *The Cool-kawaii* (2011). These indeed provide a variety of perspectives for studying characters.

Sources, Methodology and Structure

As I have explained in the literature review section above, from the late 1980s onwards, Japanese scholars have gradually built up a broad academic basis for research

on character consumption. However, these studies are lacking any theoretical perspectives and have not engaged in any dialogue with the theoretical literature on consumption, which has been burgeoning in Europe and North America since the 1980s. Integrating theoretical approaches towards consumption into the analysis of character consumption is an important contribution of this thesis, which will contribute to a more thorough understanding of the phenomenon.

This main goal of this dissertation is to pinpoint the place of consumption surrounding characters within the Japanese society, to paraphrase John Clammer, to demonstrate "its role in daily routines, its transforming effects on social relationships, its attitudes to the body and its place in the construction of meaning systems" (1997:24). As characters were increasingly transformed into commodities, as consumers were drawn to consume, their presence became emblematic for Japanese society. Exploring the merchandising and consumption of characters in Japan within a commercial, cultural and social context, and gaining a deep understanding of them have become more necessary than ever now, as the global expansion of Japanese characters is booming.[12]

My analysis is based on the combination of sources such as governmental and institutional documents and commercial statistics, newspapers and magazines, online surveys and interviews, from Japan to elsewhere. The bulk of examples which I have chosen and cited in this dissertation are well known in Japan and beyond. Besides, I introduce relatively unknown instances (such as Binchō-tan) whose distinctive features (such as *moe* anthropomorphism) may have been discussed in Japanese but have not been fully made recognized to the English-speaking world.

In this thesis I rely primarily on qualitative research methods. I work on the data collected from above described sources based on archival research including studying the historical periods of the postwar Japan and reading a vast literature and discourse on characters and character franchises; textual analysis including interpreting Internet users' opinions and stories that appeared on newspapers and news; case studies including focusing on the case of China, interviewing Chinese readers/audiences/consumers of the 1980s generation and analyzing the particular Chinese character Green Dam Girl; interpretation of statistics including that of character retail market, content industry and whitepapers on *karōshi* (literally, death from overwork), youth and national livehood in Japan, and character industry in China; and interpretation of visual materials, including that of Kumamon and Green Dam Girl.

My approach is interdisciplinary, with a strong emphasis on social scientific methods: semiotics, sociology of consumption and psychological analysis. In particular, Baudrillard's (1983; 1988; [1970] 1998) semiotic interpretation on consumption introduces a paradigm for my analysis of character consumption. Douglas and Isherwood's (1979) and Grant McCracken's (1988) studies of the social and cultural attributes of consumption provide a basis for my understanding of characters and subcultures. Baudrillard's and Featherstone's (1991) understanding of

[12]See Chapter 5 and the example of "Pokémon Go" in Conclusion.

the postmodern tendency presented in contemporary consumption provide a foundation for my analysis in Chapter 3 and 4. Charles Horton Cooley's (1902) "the looking-glass self" and George Herbert Mead's (1934) theory of the self found the models for my interpretation of the interaction between the individual and the character. Marcel Mauss's (1979) "the techniques of the body," John Fiske's (1989) "the body politic" and Michel Foucault's (1980; 1995) and Bryan Turner's (1996) theoretical works on the body, power and society provide a basis for my investigation of characters, self-expression and social communication. Carl Jung's (1983) theory on transference and William James's (1890) research on possessions and the self provide a direction for my analysis of individuals' psychological needs for characters. These studies, covering commodity, sign, identity, the body, aesthetic, politics and communication, form a wide spectrum of theoretical interpretations for discussing the emerging phenomenal status of characters and its impact on Japanese society, and gravitate toward a certain direction that reveals the process of the "characterization" of Japan.

I will also focus on the historical development of character merchandising and character consumption by tracing from the early practices in Britain and America at the outset of nineteenth century to the most recent practices in Japan since the postwar. Although it is chronological, it is thematic, following the different features in each era. The historical development also helps us to understand both character merchandising and character consumption. As Martin Heidegger suggests in his *Being and Time*, "The interpretation of something as something is essentially grounded fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception. Interpretation is never a presuppositionless grasping of something previously given" ([1953] 2010: 146).

Moreover, I will look at the transnational flow of characters based on Japan's cultural exchange activities, and their diffusion within a particular local context by examining the local economic, cultural, social and political factors. As Frank Lechner argues, "Diffusion, the simple spreading of things or information, ties people through common practices or shared experience" (2009: 15). The diffusion of characters is also based on people's common practices or shared experience and therefore creates an ever more intimate cultural connection between Japan and other areas in the world.

This dissertation consists of five chapters, each focusing on a different aspect of character consumption that in my view are critical for exploring the topic: the rise of character merchandising in Japan, character consumers and consumption, characters merging into one's self-identification and the implications of this for individuals and society, and the role that characters play in cultural exchange and cultural diplomacy and their diffusion in neighbouring country, China. These are the main aspects that my analysis will focus on. Topics, such as the pictorial techniques of manga and anime; the art history of manga and anime; the designs of characters; the development of characters in advertising; the classification of characters; the profit formulas used in the character marketplace; and the legal protection of characters, will not be explored in depth, as they lie outside the scope of this study.

Chapter 1 reveals the mechanism by which characters become commodities: character merchandising. I discuss the definition of this key concept and point out its

characteristics and its significance for exploring characters. I briefly review its history and underline the important role that Disney played in its development, especially as the concept arrived in Japan in the wake of Disney. I then examine its initial development in Japan, in which the success of Tezuka and his character, Atomu, marked a milestone.

Chapter 2 looks at consumers and consumption in the historical process of characters permeating various aspect of Japanese life. The chapter explores the development of character toys along with the clear expansion of consumers from children to adults. By focusing on how characters become part of *shōjo* culture and *otaku* subculture in Japan, the influence of Disneyland, and the media mix, the chapter then examines the diversity and novelty of character consumption.

In Chapter 3, I mainly answer the question of why consumers consume characters. First I look at what they look for in characters, comfort and desire which highlight the inner connection between individuals and characters. To examine both factors, the chapter includes data from domestic surveys conducted in Japan and personal voices I collected online. The chapter also focuses on the symbolic world constructed by character consumption, which includes a shift in the individual's sense from reality to "hyper-reality," narrative consumption and database consumption. Through this process, the individual gains a sense of self and thus characters become closely linked to one's self-identity.

The body provides an important physical material for self-identity. Chapter 4 looks at how characters, mediated by the body, involve in society and social communication. The chapter covers the display and cosplay of the body, the necessity of socio-political uses, and the use of the body as a medium for communication. By studying these aspects, a deeper understanding of the role of characters in contemporary Japanese society can be achieved.

The final chapter shifts the focus to the world stage. I examine the process of characters going overseas, particularly to neighbouring countries, primarily China, where I conducted personal interviews with some who were born in the 1980s. By gathering the responses from these Chinese voices, it becomes clear how Japanese characters have taken root in China. I then focus on a recent trend in China that reveals the phenomenon of recontextualization in the process of the cultural diffusion of characters. My goal here is to show that a close cultural interaction is being constructed between China and Japan, mediated by characters.

My concluding remarks provide a critique of characters. By analyzing the alienation of character consumption and the illusionary "dream" built by producers and marketers, I argue that characters reflect social development and its inevitability. It is the importance of characters for understanding contemporary Japanese society.