



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## The "characterization" of Japan : from merchandising to identity

Han, R.

### Citation

Han, R. (2017, March 21). *The "characterization" of Japan : from merchandising to identity*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/47022>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/47022>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/47022> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

**Author:** Han, R.

**Title:** The "characterization" of Japan : from merchandising to identity

**Issue Date:** 2017-03-21

## Chapter 4

### Character, the Body, and Japanese Society

In Chapter 3, I have discussed how characters are involved in the process of individuals' identity construction and how this can lead to a form of "characterized identity" – an identity influenced by characters. Identity construction and identity expression are two different aspects of the same process. Thus we must now turn to the ways in which "characterized identity" is expressed and diffused.

British sociologist Anthony Giddens augured that "certain types of bodily appearance and demeanor plainly become particularly important with the advent of modernity" (1991: 99). These types he sees as new expressions of the self, which are standardized as a result of commodity capitalism, since the logic of capitalism may make everything be transformed into a consumer good with a value, including the expression of identity. In a consumer society, increased attention to physical appearance becomes constitutive of self-identity (Miller, 2006: 11-12). The body thus becomes the focus of an increasing amount of transformation, and through this the body is increasingly tied to one's self-identity (Entwistle, 2000). The close relationship between personal identity and the body provides us with a means of thinking about the expression of "characterized identity." Indeed, the body as the material incarnation of one's self is always the primary tool for self-expression and its image is an important part of one's overall self-image.

#### Characters and the Body

Self-image, although offering a relatively stable mental picture, includes not only elements known by that person about the self (which form the self-identity) but also those details available to others, namely bodily appearance. These details constitute the material basis of an individual. To be specific, aspects such as height, weight, and skin colour become the materials of identity expression. This leads to increasing attention being paid to the materiality of the body.

Many scholars position the materiality of the body as the starting point for interpreting certain social practices. In the argument about "habitus," Pierre Bourdieu (1979) points out that "habitus not only operates on the level of everyday knowledge-ability, but is inscribed onto the body, being revealed in body size, volume, shape, posture, way of walking, sitting, ways of eating, drinking, amount of social space and time an individual feels entitled to claim" (Featherstone, 2007: 88). All of these elements of the body betray the habitus of one's origins. Yet Bourdieu develops the body as a symbolic entity that is an important bearer of social status. French sociologist Marcel Mauss (1979) suggests that the body is transformed into cultural symbols through "the techniques of the body" and these techniques guide individuals to use their bodies in particular societies. The same point is made by British anthropologist Marry Douglas, who points out that there are two bodies: the physical body and the social body. In her *Natural Symbol*, she argues that the former is

constrained and modified by the latter and that “there is a continual exchange of meanings between the two kinds of bodily experience so that each reinforces the categories of the other” (1973: 93). Yet Douglas proposes a natural tendency for the body that is symbolized by society. From these approaches we can see that the body is not only a natural phenomenon but also a socio-culturally constructed object.

The historian and philosopher Michel Foucault placed intense emphasis on the importance of the body, putting it at the centre of his scholarship. For Foucault, the body is not only the starting point but also the destination, because the body is marked by the past and gives rise to the desires, failings, or mistakes which will mark the future. Foucault points out that the emergent disciplines of modernity are closely linked to the management of individual bodies. He starts from the interdependent relationship between power and knowledge, which is embodied in his view of a discourse. For Foucault, discourses are practiced on the body and hence the body is implicated in the “exercise of power” (1980: 58). The investment of power in the body is in fact a method of surveillance by which an individual can realize the self-management of his/her own body through discipline, as occurs in dieting, and the bodies of populations are managed, in the sense of bio-politics. In contemporary society, Foucault’s view of the body encourages individuals to care for themselves, especially when potential dangers threaten human health. In Western society, individuals are asked by governments to maintain an appropriately healthy body (Entwistle, 2000). However individuals focus on caring for their body not only because this is required by an organization but because it is also required by the self, whose importance is magnified within consumer culture.

As Featherstone has argued in his influential study “The Body in Consumer Culture,” in the context of contemporary consumer society, the body is always seen as the vessel of the self that points to “the performing self,” placing “greater emphasis upon appearance, display and the management of impressions” (1982: 18-33). For Featherstone, the body is the visible carrier of the self. A similar point is made by Chris Shilling (1993), who argues that the aesthetic of the body increases an individual’s ability to gain more satisfaction via the effective control of appearance. Featherstone thus concludes that through many visible images, consumer culture widely promotes the circulation of fashionable body image and directs people’s understanding of the body through advertising and the mass media. He also suggests that there are two categories: the inner body and the outer body. The former refers to concerns about the maintenance and repair of physical bodily functions; the latter refers to “appearance as well as the movement and control of the body within social space” (1982: 18). Of the relationship between these two, he notes “it is the appearance and management of impressions of the outer body that is of particular interest... the prime purpose of the maintenance of the inner body becomes the enhancement of the appearance of the outer body” (1982: 18). Therefore, consumer culture becomes increasingly concerned with bodily appearance.

This leads to a rise in products associated with appearance. More directly, the body becomes the “finest consumer product,” as suggested by Baudrillard ([1970] 1998: 129-136). According to Baudrillard, the body is omnipresent in “advertising, fashion,

and mass culture” and is surrounded by a “hygienic, dietetic, and therapeutic cult.” Yet “the obsession with youth, elegance, virility/femininity, treatment and regimes, and the sacrificial practices” are all attached to it. However, these “rediscoveries of the body” do not mean that the body is liberated. It is still “indexed to the code and the norms of a society.” In short, the body is moulded under the conditions created by the logic of capitalism. It has been transformed into a consumer product that can be manipulated and packaged for pleasure, desire, and play. In essence, this is the body as a sign.

So how is the body embodied in character consumption? It starts with individuals’ increasing awareness of the body of the character. In the example given in Chapter 1 of *Shō-chan*, the readers paid attention to the body of *Shō-chan*. They looked at the changes to *Shō-chan*’s body and actively speculated on the reasons for those changes. Ōtsuka notes that it might be because the readers were able to sense “another reality” from *Shō-chan*’s body, that is, the “reality of the character” (*kyarakutā no riariti*) (2013: 78-79). As I discussed in the last chapter, although the character world of *Shō-chan* was fictional, readers who perceived it as existing felt its “reality,” thus mistaking the character world for real life. It was certainly not the case that the readers could not differentiate between the fictional and the real. Their fevered imagination regarding the changes to *Shō-chan*’s body came from the fact that they could empathize with the character. This effect was what Ōtsuka calls “the principle of reality” (*genjitsu gensoku*) in the fictional reality (2013: 87-88).

Another aspect of the “the principle of reality” is the realist technique expressed by the bodies of characters. Aihara argues, “The complicated real world can be displayed simply and sympathetically by the manga-style body of a character in a realistic and classic way” (2007: 79). The realism and sympathy that Aihara mentions refers to the most important characteristic of the body of a character, namely depicting the “reality of an actual body” (*nanami no shintai no genjitsu*) (Ōtsuka, 2004b: 28). This is also one of the main issues that the Tezuka Osamu—considered the “god of manga”—tries to expound in his manga works. As the pioneer of postwar manga, the most distinctive feature of Tezuka’s work was his use of manga symbols (non-realistic expression) to realize an intersection with reality (Ōtsuka, 2004b: 28-31). For example, in a scene of his *Shōri no hi made* (Until the Day of Victory, 1954), the character’s body, created from a pattern of symbols, was shot by a machinegun and injured and bloodied. Ōtsuka calls the body created from patterns of manga symbols a “symbolized body” (*kigōteki na shintai*) (2004b: 25), and notes that it was Tezuka who first used the “symbolized body” to describe a realistic scene. By giving the “symbolized body” such realistic attributes, Tezuka also opened up the possibilities for the development of postwar manga in Japan.

In Tezuka’s subsequent works the character’s body was given realistic attributes, as can be seen with Atomu—Tezuka’s most successful character. In Tezuka’s story, Atomu was a robot invented by Dr Tenma for the purpose of replacing his son, who had been lost in a traffic accident. In his book *Inside the Robot Kingdom: Japan, Mechatronics, and the Coming Robotopia*, American writer Frederik Schodt argues that in contrast to earlier robots, Tezuka’s robot has “an extremely original, humanistic

bent” (1988: 75). Thus Atomu’s robotic body expresses much humanity and, even though he is a robotic boy, there is the possibility that he could die like a human. The published schematics of Atomu’s body show “a maze of wires and circuitry,” which means that unlike some American superheroes Atomu could be “damaged or malfunction and have to be repaired” (Schodt, 1988: 76).

However, although the bodies of the characters created by Tezuka could exhibit a sense of “reality,” they were “symbolized bodies” with considerable symbolic meaning: they did not depict a real body. Following Tezuka, there was a tendency to create increasingly realistic character bodies, especially in *shōnen* manga and *shōjo* manga, both of which developed the trend of using a clear image of a real body. According to Ōtsuka (2004b), the former such as Takamori Asao (1936-1987) and Chiba Tetsuya’s *Ashida no Jō* (Tomorrow’s Joe, 1968) focused on the specific expression of the boy’s body, and not only described it as a whole but also looked at parts of the body such as the face, muscles, and skeleton. These details corresponded with those of a real body. In this sense, the exploration of the body of a character became that of a real body. *Shōjo* manga, such as Shimanaka Takako and Yamato Waki’s *Mayuko no nikki* (Mayuko’s Diary, 1970), adopted both the techniques of the “symbolized body” and a real body image to depict girls’ bodies, which promoted readers to become aware of a sexual body as well as the inner self in the girl’s body (Ōtsuka, 2004b: 77-79). In this way, the bodies of characters may be ones quite closely linked to bodies in reality. The sense of “reality” has increased, making it easy to arouse a certain resonance and desire among readers and audiences.

Furthermore, individuals began to reproduce the bodies of characters as a desirable consumer product. In Japan, “garage kits” (*garēji kitto*), model figures portraying the bodies of human or other living creatures, frequently depicted characters. Their development can be considered an extension of the character toys explored in Chapter 2. In contrast to other “character toys” launched by toy manufacturers, garage kits were originally produced by amateurs. When character toys were first produced, although the industry had focused on the characters and produced toys based on them, the products in some aspects could not meet the amateurs’ individualized requirements. Unable to find the right character toy on the market, fans had to produce them themselves. As garage kits became popular, many professional makers participated in production and developed it to be a major category of character goods. Garage kits always reproduce characters in a high precision and fidelity way and hence satisfy consumers’ desires to own a perfect representation of their ideal character body.

In contrast to the garage kits, *dakimakura* (hug pillows) also pursue the idea of owning the body of a character, albeit in a simpler way. Rather than reproducing the body of a character, its image is printed directly onto a large pillow as long as a full-size human body.<sup>1</sup> Thus the body of the character is turned into a body-sized pillow, which gives the character’s body a physical attribute. The physical attribute is that it can be embraced and thus bring security to those embracing it (Galbraith, 2009).

---

<sup>1</sup>A *dakimakura* is available in two main sizes, 160cm or 150cm in length with a 50cm circumference. The images of the bodies on it are mainly 2D female characters but also include male characters.

Thus, as one consumer of *dakimakura* notes, “There are two things you should be mindful of when buying a body pillow... First, there’s image quality. And then you have to choose one that feels good on the skin” (quoted from Katayama, 2009). In other words, the security it offers comes from two aspects: the large pillow per se (product quality) and the depiction of the character’s body on it (image quality); this combination satisfies consumers’ imaginations and realizes direct contact between them and characters.

Through the above practices with regard to the bodies of characters, including the building of a “reality,” the realistic expression of the character body, and the consumption of character bodies, individuals gradually build up good feelings about and intimacy with the bodies of characters. This enables the image of the character body to become part of the cultivation of the aesthetic of their own bodies. In fact, it corresponds with the requirements of consumer society, in which the body is seen as the finest commodity and “an object ready for transformation” (Featherstone, 2000: 2). I suggest that this is mainly reflected in two phenomena: the display and the cosplay of the body.

The display of the body refers to a tendency to associate the visual representation of the body with characters. And the term cosplay, abbreviated from “costume play,” originates from a form of character-acting performance in which the participant imitates a character usually selected from manga, anime, a game, fiction, or film by dressing up in the character’s costume. To some extent cosplay is also a kind of display, because the essence of it is to build an ideal body like that of a certain character through the use of costumes, accessories, and cosmetics.

As anthropologist Ted Polhemus points out, the boundaries of the body are not clear, “it does not end with the skin...should include hair, nails, and the bodily waste materials...surely the decorative body arts and body painting should also be considered...it has been shown that it is insignificant to sharply differentiate between bodily decoration and adornment on the one hand and the closing of the body on the other” (1978: 28). Therefore, individuals are keen to consume the decorations, accessories, and daily items related to characters and combine those with their own bodies and lives. For instance, with their increasing concerns about Shō-chan’s body, the readers also looked at the character’s hat, Shō-chan-bō. When sales of the hat were launched, the readers were eager to buy it. Ōtsuka notes, “The premise of the readers’ desire for Shō-chan-bō is that they see Shō-chan’s body as their own” (2013: 90). The same phenomenon can be seen with Akadō toys and *henshin*-functional toys. Children wanted these character toys and by playing with them their desire to be the characters could come true. Moreover, today one can often see on the streets of Tokyo a “Hello Kitty girl,” who dresses up in many Kitty items including pink-bow hair-clips, a Kitty watch, a Kitty print dress, and a Kitty-head-style handbag. These combinations constitute a personal lifestyle. According to an article in the *Daily Mail* (11 June 2014), since she became hooked on Kitty at 14 years old, one English woman has spent £50,000 on collecting Kitty items, and she has led a completely Kitty-styled life. In Japan, a 1980 article of *Yomiuri Shinbun* newspaper told a same story of a young Japanese female whose life was full of at least 5 thousand character items of Mickey

Mouse and other Disney characters (15 June 1980). Moreover, such complete character lifestyles are often enjoyed by *otaku*, in whose bedrooms all kinds of character items can be found.

Furthermore, the bodies of characters, whether “symbolized” or reflecting a real body image, often have some characteristics that individuals aspire to. For example, in their questions about Shō-chan the readers also raised the fact that Shō-chan never seemed to grow up and his body seemed to stay young. Here what the readers had noted was the issue of time stagnation in the character’s body. This has been a convention of character creations since Shō-chan (Ōtsuka, 2013). Thus many characters have the potential traits of a real body that they may never grow up, and be unchanging or forever young. This corresponds to the aesthetic of looking good in consumer society: the emphasis on bodily appearance leads to having a youthful body being important to personal happiness. Hence individuals begin to value “makeovers” and “shape-overs,” which include a long list of body modification practices, such as anti-ageing treatments, dieting, exercise, make-up, and cosmetic surgery, in order to achieve a beautiful body or the same body as their favourite character. The phenomena of “Barbie Syndrome” and “Ken Syndrome” which represent some people’s hopes of becoming a real-life Barbie or (her boyfriend) Ken doll attest to their intense affection for the unreachable character body.<sup>2</sup> In another instance, in order to gain the same fitness and strength as the character Popeye, one man even “injects himself with a potentially lethal cocktail of oil and alcohol to grow fake biceps” (11 March 2014 *Daily Mail*).

In Japan, the first signs of this trend emerged with the prewar trendsetter, *modan gāru* or *moga* (the Modern Girl), who used make-up to create big Betty Boop eyes, as Laura Miller explains in her book *Beauty Up: Exploring Contemporary Japanese Body Aesthetics* (2006). Miller also offers the example of a visual anthropology brochure used to promote the science of beauty in Japan, and notes that it is entitled the “Cinderella Book.” In her another study of youth’s beautification practices, Miller notes that a Japanese girl may think of “the enormous pools of emotion found in her favourite manga characters” and modify her eyes (2004: 85-87). The popular strategies used by Japanese girls for this purpose, as Miller examines, specifically include changing the “composition of eyes” such as wearing the colourful contact lens and using eyelid tapes and glues or having the double eyelid surgery. Yet the fact that longevity and health products are popular in Japan today is, to some extent, due to the fact that individuals want to remain as youthful as these forever-young characters. Such modification work may improve health or lead to morbidity, but ultimately through these practices those individuals’ bodies are closely tied to characters and their personal achievement of their likenesses, because such bodies can always win more attention and approval from others. This is similar to the “anti-ageing” or “amortality” trend (Mayer, 2011) that exists in today’s society, which requires various efforts to breach the limits of the laws of nature and create an ideal body that is

---

<sup>2</sup>In Japan, there is similar example: Vanilla Chuam, a Japanese woman, has spent over 100, 000 dollars on more than 30 plastic surgeries to look like a French doll (McCormack, 2013).

admired by others. With the development of technology and science, rather than being an unachievable dream, not ageing appears to be possible for people in everyday life. In this sense, new avenues are available to assist in the aim of achieving the likeness of a character's body and the modifications necessary in the pursuit of this goal.

Compared with display, cosplay directs to a more completed and marked representation. Cosplay was first popularized by *dōjinshi* (fanzine) artists at the Comic Market, when they dressed up as the characters they had created to promote their own *dōjinshi* works. Anime fans then copied this practice, as cosplay offered a visible and achievable way to express their passion for a specific character. Fans' participation facilitated the objectification of cosplay: gradually cosplay was not attached to the Comic Market but became one of its main areas and those who purely wanted to enjoy the pleasure of dressing up without it being related to the narrative-creation of *dōjinshi* emerged. Hence many cosplay events have been held at the Comic Market and more and more fans and *dōjinshi* artists have become cosplayers and formed various groups and circles.

For these performers, cosplay is an efficient way of realizing the conjunction of the self and a character, inasmuch as they wear the character's costume and copy the character in all its actions. Thus display and cosplay can be distinguished by the fact that while display is much like free self-expression with an individualistic style, cosplay has to comply with some "official" regulations, at least those relevant to the background of the character. This distinction highlights another style of self-presentation that uses the self's body to express "alternative identities, scenarios and experiences" (McCormick, 2007: 4, quoted from Gn, 2011: 584) whereby the actual self is hidden and an anonymous self emerges. By virtue of the anonymous self, the cosplayer can be seen without any aspects of self, at least in the viewers' eyes. Viewers can easily accept cosplayers' performances because they think that these players are the characters and they are acting.

This factor maintains a line between cosplay and reality, by limiting cosplay to within a particular time and space such as the Comic Market. In response to the question "what do you think about cosplay?" put forward in an online questionnaire, one respondent said, "I do not have any experience of cosplay but I can accept it when it is in some event. If it steps out of the event it would feel strange... When a male cosplayer wearing his cosplay costume appeared in an Izakaya [a little pub] he triggered uproar right away. The surrounding people all took pictures of him."<sup>3</sup> Thus a cosplayer, only in a relatively independent field, may escape from the criticism of the public that may see cosplay as an irrational activity and be endowed with great freedom to use a character's body for self-expression and to gain great self-gratification.<sup>4</sup> Here, although cosplay must be located within certain clearly delineated spaces, it actually offers the possibility of functioning both as an explicit expression

---

<sup>3</sup>See "What do you think about cosplay?" Oshiete.goo, 3 June 2003, accessed 14 August 2015, <http://oshiete.goo.ne.jp/qa/565068.html>.

<sup>4</sup>According to Rahman, Liu and Cheung, cosplay is about the "imaginative self and performing identity," which can "give participants pleasurable experiences, meaningful memories, self-gratification, and personal fulfillment" (2012: 317-318).

and as an implicit, autonomous symbol that is involved in the programming of everyday life. The use of the term “implicit” reveals a series of potential opportunities in which the boundaries of cosplay may become blurred with those of real life, allowing it to exchange its stage with that of real-life, as has happened with the new phenomenon of the Maid Café (*meido kafe*).

Since the turn of the millennium the Maid Café has stepped into public view and become increasingly popular. The highlight of the Maid Café is that it brings cosplay into the daily lives, or to put it in the other way around: the real world is cosplay-ed. Try to imagine drinking a cup of coffee in café, something which you may experience every day, but instead of a normal café you have entered a two-dimensional atmosphere in which all the waitresses are two-dimensional characters. In such a situation it may be hard for you to distinguish between the cosplay-ed world and real life and therefore the “reality” of the Maid Café generates.

The Maid Café is part of a subcategory of “cosplay restaurants,” and the first Maid Café, Cure Maid Café, opened in Akihabara, Tokyo, in March 2001, with the aim of selling cosplay costumes (Hotta, 2005: 34). “Cure” means *iyashi*, implying that this café aims to provide a calm environment in which customers (at first mainly *otaku*) can have a rest after spending the day shopping (mainly the character goods) in Akihabara while enjoying a character-surrounded (costumed staff) atmosphere. Starting with the Cure Maid Café, the waitresses at Maid Cafés all wear the same, maid-style uniform, which is the unique feature of Maid Cafés. Alongside the concept of *iyashi* and the costumed waitresses, Maid Cafés also have other characteristics, driven by its subsequent development.

In 2002, another Maid Café, Café Mai:lish, opened and set a new trend in this service industry (Hotta, 2005: 34-42). Its main goal was to increase the positive feelings about Akihabara, where not only computer-related products but also popular culture items such as manga, anime, and games are sold. The waitresses in Mai:lish were professional cosplayers. They had their own cosplay names while working. These names were usually the ones they used in their cosplay activities. In this way, they simultaneously blended in with the maids (inside the shop) and other characters cosplaying (outside the shop). After 5 pm, the waitresses were allowed to dress as they wished and were able to show their “real body,” but they were still not allowed to be their “real self.” Thus the waitresses working in Café Mai:lish actually had a double anonymity, which might be hard to achieve in a space like the Comic Market. However, although having a similar theme of *iyashi*, Café Mai:lish chose to break the “calm atmosphere” found in the Cure Maid Café by allowing the waitresses to offer cordial greetings to the customers. During the order taking and serving the maids often had friendly conversations with the customers. This gradually developed to be one of the key features of Maid Cafés. For example, when a customer enters the shop, the waitresses line up and say, “Welcome home, Master (Mistress).”

Since the establishment of Café Mai:lish, various features have been added to Maid Cafés. For example, the waitresses now not only have their own name badges but are also introduced and promoted on each café’s website; a greeting is not enough and interaction during ordering and service is also important; waitresses can add other

character elements to their own maid costumes such as angle wings (see the list of character elements in chapter 3); and events are held regularly. Based on these changes, some rituals and rules have formed that customers are expected to follow. For instance, the maid and customer seldom talk about things relating to work and home or the world outside the shop, but instead talk about the “present self” inside the shop; additional services such as back massages are offered but not sexual ones; and photography of the waitress or the café’s interior is forbidden without permission and/or paying an extra fee.

The rules in a Maid Café function to make it an intermediate space in which the body can be adapted to be representative of a maid character; it can be endowed with one, two or more identities; and the dressed body can connect the fictional reality of characters (2D) with real life (3D). Thus the Japanese novelist and critic Honda Tōru has pointed out that the Maid Café in fact creates a “2.5 dimensional space” (*2.5 jigen kūkan*) (2005: 19). Being somewhere between fiction and reality, the customers feel as if they are living in the same dimension as the maids. As someone posted on 2ch about his/her feelings when he/she first visited a Maid Café: “...because they are 16- or 17-year-old girls who do not have any connection with the real world I am able to enjoy another dimension or a fictional world.”<sup>5</sup> In his study, Patrick Galbraith (2011) points out that visitors to Maid Cafés do not see maids as real but as characters. And, as he has observed, there are no mirrors in a Maid Café so the customers cannot see themselves and therefore can perform as themselves in the role-play. In this process the customer’s body does not change but it becomes unconsciously engaged in a way that can be understood in terms of affect (Gn, 2011). According to Brian Massumi, affect is “a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act” (1987: xvi).<sup>6</sup> That is to say, the setting of a Maid Café and the intensity it passes to customer will draw out an autonomic reaction from the body (Maasumi, 1996): the customer’s body will respond to the maid’s body—the cosplayer’s body that is in fact the body of a character.

Maid Cafés must be placed in the context of *otaku* consumer culture. The “2.5 dimensional space,” the affect, and the characters’ bodies greatly cater to the fantasies of *otaku* and cultivate their loyalty as consumers. However, *otaku* consumers have not turned Maid Cafés into a niche consumer market. It is their continuous interest and loyalty that have contributed to the Maid Cafés’ survival, development, and growth, and which have attracted more and more mass consumers including salarymen, tourists, and women to Maid Cafés. Maid Cafés have gradually become more commercial and professional, and have become a popular part of the service industry. Following Maid Cafés, a number of similar businesses have been launched including Butler Cafés, High School Girl Cafés, Shrine Girl Cafés, and so on.

---

<sup>5</sup>See “The first time visit to a Maid Café,” 2ch, 6 September 2012, accessed 14 August 2015, <http://hayabusa6.2ch.net/test/read.cgi/otaku/1346594496/31>.

<sup>6</sup>In this sense, it also can be referred to as *moe* (see chapter 3), accurately “maid *moe*.” For more detailed discussions concerning “maid *moe*” see Galbraith (2014).

*Shōjo* culture also plays a crucial role in the development of Maid Café and cosplay. Since the 1970s, girls have been closely linked to character consumption (see chapter 2). *Shōjo* is regarded as a way of life that has swept through Japanese society (Ōtsuka, 2001a). Participants in *shōjo* culture are always fashion-conscious, like the above-mentioned *moga* who become the stylish Western modern girls by making up like Betty Boop, which means that they are particularly sensitive to the functions of costume and the body. As Japanese scholar Sugiura Yumiko (2008) points out, young Japanese women always match their clothes to suit the occasion because they believe that “appearance is productive” (quoted from Narumi, 2009:11). For them, fashion, dress, and the body are tools that can help to build good interpersonal relationships and produce something useful for their participation in social life. This is the body as capital for realizing personal purposes, which also can be observed in cosplay activities. Today cosplay in Japan is mainly performed by young women.<sup>7</sup> Some of them are keen on cosplaying the young-girl-character who wears the sailor school uniform. Mitamura Fukiko (2008) argues that sailor-style school uniform is a typical example of cosplay, and its proliferation in *shōjo* culture makes Japanese females have the experience as a cosplayer. Therefore, for instance, for the waitresses who work in school-themed cafés and wear the sailor-style school uniforms that they would have worn as students, cosplay is the nostalgia of their girlhood, a chance of re-being one’s self, as well as a means of practicing self-exploration.<sup>8</sup>

From the above discussion, it is clear that display and cosplay are two differing forms of body consumption. In a consumer society, the body can be seen as “a changeable form of existence which can be shaped and which is malleable to individual needs and desires” (Turner, 1996: 5). Through their efforts and work on their bodies people can achieve the appearance they want. This is the body as a project that can be intentionally modified, completed, and improved. The body can thus be seen as an artefact—it is the “uncertain body” that is “less bound up with inherited models of socially acceptable bodies... and tied more to modern notions of the ‘individual’ and personal identity” (Entwistle, 2000: 18). Characters fit into this uncertain body, especially when an individual has a “characterized identity.” Based on the “characterized identity,” the body is modified, completed, and improved to match the body of the character. We can call such a body a “characterized body.”<sup>9</sup> At this point, both the inner and outer self are in a close relationship with characters. However, it should be noted that contemporary notions of selfhood are strongly influenced by society. As Bryan Turner in his *The Body and Society* argues, “the new self is far more mobile, uncertain and fragmentary...because the modern self

---

<sup>7</sup>In Japan many female cosplayers are fans of *yaoi* works (depicting gay male relationships) and call themselves *fujoshi* (literally, “rotten women”). They prefer to cosplaying male characters, namely cross-dressing. In his study “Cosplay, Learning, and Cultural Practices,” Okabe Daisuke (2012) has investigated the phenomenon based on his fieldwork in Japan.

<sup>8</sup>Mitamura (2008: 128-131) suggests that many Japanese females have the sailor-style uniform complex because it is a symbol of their girlhood. One article of *Asahi Shinbun* newspaper also points out, “the sailor suit is changing from adorable and cute, a look that ‘appeals to the boys,’ to a uniform that ‘girls like to wear for themselves’” (7April 2012).

<sup>9</sup>The “characterized body” also directs to the anthropomorphic transformation of the body of objects, which I will interpret in next section.

corresponds to and is produced by a new uncertainty, differentiation and fragmentation of the risk society” (1996: 21).

### **“Characterized Bodies” in Japanese Society**

Sean Sweeney and Ian Hodder (2002: 1) suggest that following a shift from industrial age to the post-industrial age, the body also complete the transformation what Turner calls “from a labouring one to a desiring one.” The shift means the body has become separated from many of its traditional functions, such as its relationships with property, control, and ownership. Thus the utility of the body is deconstructed. In turn, an emphasis on pleasure, desire, differentiation, style, and appearance becomes central to one’s self-identity. According to Turner, “we should argue that the notions of the self in consumer society ought to be seen in terms of the body-image that plays the distinctive role in the understanding and evaluation of the self within the public arena. It is typically the surface of the body which is the focus of advertising, self promotion and public relations. It is also the body surfaces which are the foci of the social stigmatization...the modern consuming self is a representational being...” (1996: 7). Turner calls this change the “social dislocation of the body,” meaning that “the body has been more exposed to the playful manipulation of consumerist culture” (1996: 6), which also contributes to the aestheticization of the body.

The aestheticization of the body refers to the fact that after the utilitarian functions of the body become less important, the appearance, visual effects, viewing values, and consumer values of the body are highlighted, which creates the conditions for the involvement of characters and the formation of the “characterized body.” In short, the aestheticization and the “characterization” of the body go hand in hand. However, it does not mean that the body has been completely separated from its utility. The attentions to bodily appearance to a large degree have some utilitarian goals, for instance, the above-mentioned importance of a productive appearance for young Japanese women and not aging trend, like a character. Thus the aestheticization provides a way for individuals to accumulate their bodily capital.

However it should be noted that the aestheticization of the “characterized body” is also driven by social forces, or more accurately by ideology. In his book *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Terry Eagleton has argued, “The aesthetic is no more than a name for the political unconscious: it is simply the way social harmony registers itself on our sense, imprints itself on our sensibilities. The beautiful is just political order lived out on the body, the way it strikes the eye and stirs the heart” (1990: 37). In this sense, the aesthetic of the “characterized body” in fact “transform the individual bodies into the body politic” (Fiske, 1989: 92). Eagleton also notes that power and order may become aestheticized, and the aesthetic may become a mode of asserting social control by “inserting social power more deeply into the very bodies of those it subjugates, and so operating as a supremely effective mode of political hegemony” (1990: 28). John Fiske who also looks at the impact of a social law or power on body argues, “The relationship between the body beautiful and the body ugly, between the healthy and the unhealthy...are social relationships of norms and deviations, and therefore political relationships aimed at naturalizing in the body the norms of those with most

power in the social formation” (1989: 92). The aestheticization is thus not subject to individuals’ sensibilities, but uses the name of aesthetics to discipline the sensitive body, thereby functioning as a form of regulation. In essential, it has been a kind of discourses and plays the same role of power in disciplining the body.

This brings us back to Foucault’s point that the body is a product of power. In his *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault points out that the body is “directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (1995: 25). The historical moment of discipline acting on the body was “directed not only at the growth of its skills, nor at the intensification of its subjection, but at the formation of a relation that in the mechanism itself makes it more obedient as it becomes more useful...” and then it became “a policy of coercions” (1995: 137-138). In other words, in traditional society, power disciplines the body in an apparently mandatory and violent way. However, in contemporary society the discipline of power is transformed into people’s voluntary and happy impulses through concealment of the “knowledge” of the body and realization of the “truth” discourse, and so becomes a kind of collective unconsciousness in our daily lives.

Hence the “characterized body” in fact conceals the impacts of both sides: the inner desire coming from an individual’s heart and the external demand of the social environment in which the individual lives. The former is specifically embodied in the display and cosplay of the body, and the latter will be examined from two perspectives: the sense of belonging and political use.

Spiritually the sense of belonging in Japan is in part affected by its indigenous belief, Shinto.<sup>10</sup> In Japanese culture, there is a native belief in *yaoyorozu no kami* (eight million gods). As the essence of Shinto, *kami* refers to the divinity that is manifest in diverse forms: “rocks, trees, rivers, animals, places, and even people” (Picken, 1994: xxii). It can be interpreted as animism, in which animate and inanimate objects have spirits or souls. And *yaoyorozu no kami* can be interpreted as the meaning of “myriad” or polytheism, which relates to almost every object that comes into contact with people and their world. Within such an environment, Japanese people gradually start to believe that they can build the same spiritual connection with those objects as with humans and even form an attachment to them.

These ideas dovetail nicely with the contemporary desire to forge spiritual relationships with characters, as Aihara (2010) argues in the introduction to the exhibition, “JAPAN: Kingdom of Characters.” As the previous examples show, the characters of robots, monsters, animals, superheroes, and so on are well welcomed in Japan. Aihara notes, “Comparing a variety of animals and natural entities in one’s surroundings to one’s own feelings allows people to establish a spiritual mooring... The Japanese tend to sense a mysterious power from having anthropomorphic characters in their midst that is akin to the power of the culture’s many gods.” This

---

<sup>10</sup>Many scholars also suggest that characters are not only drawn from Shinto but also from Buddhism, with its symbolic value of animals and metamorphosis (McVeigh, 2010; Buljan and Cusack, 2015).

provides an explanation as to why cute Hello Kitty emerges to draw attention to safety in trains instead of indifferent warning signs; Atomu becomes a money box produced by Daiwa Bank, implying the promise of prosperity; and Pikachu's image is depicted on a plane belonging to All Nippon Airways, evoking strong feelings of intimacy and warmth (Allison, 2006). Through these characters they feel a familiarity that ties in to their personal attachments and common beliefs: since ancient times the spiritual and the material have been inseparable; "the phenomenal world is seen as permeated by and given life by a spiritual world" (Reader, 1998: 46). This is an integral part of the Shinto belief, as explained by *Jinja Honchō* (Association of Shinto Shrines),<sup>11</sup> as well as the origin of the feeling that characters evoke—a sense of belonging and a place of spiritual refuge. Here the anthropomorphism is not only an artistic expression but also a specific embodiment through which the spirit can visit the world and be active in the theatre of Japanese life.

However, animism, spirit and anthropomorphism may be not appropriately interpreted as "an essential, timeless component of Japanese culture as if the latter itself is stable, coherent, and homogeneously shared by all Japanese (which it is not)," but as "an animist sensibility [that] percolates the postmodern landscape of Japan today in ways that do not occur in the United States," as Allison suggests (2006: 12-13). She continues, "Investing material objects and now consumer items with the sensation of (human/organic/spiritual) life, such New Age animism perpetually (re)enchants the lived world...in this sense (and others), Japan offers an alternative capitalism to...the standardized (Western) form capitalism would take in any and all countries across the world." It is the "New Age animism" that helps consumers to form attachment with characters.

I would like to suggest that this "New Age animism" also makes conditions for using anthropomorphism as an abundant source to create characters, which are widespread in Japan. For instance, the baseball team the Hanshin Tigers personalizes one part of its team name, "tiger," through the use of mascot characters including Torakkī (To-luckey), Rakkī (Luckey) and Ki-ta,<sup>12</sup> which represents the players' sportsmanship and the baseball fans' enthusiasm. Enterprises use characters to embody their corporate culture or product culture, for instance Kyoro-chan (a bird) who embodies confectioner Morinaga Seika's chocolate product; Pyon-chan (a rabbit) who embodies pharmaceutical company, Esuesu Seiyaku, and Sato-chan (an elephant) who embodies Satō Seiyaku.

In order to revitalize local economies and develop *furusato* (hometown)-themed tourism, regional governments have created anthropomorphic characters known as

---

<sup>11</sup>See "What is Shinto?" *Jinja Honchō*, accessed 18 September 2015, <http://www.jinjahoncho.or.jp/en/shinto/index.html>.

<sup>12</sup>Torakkī (To-luckey) was created in 1987 and his name combines the Japanese words Tora (tiger) and Lakkī (lucky). Lakkī (Luckey) was originally created as Torakkī's sister, but since the mid-1990s she has been positioned as his girlfriend. Ki-ta is Lakkī's younger brother and was released in 2011. They all are mascot characters for the Hanshin Tigers.

*yurukyara*<sup>13</sup> headed by Hikonyan. Hikonyan was created by the local government of Hikone city for the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of founding of Hikone Castle in 2007. According to the profile published on the official website of the character, “Hikonyan is designed as an anthropomorphic white cat [see **Figure 16**] that is said to help the third lord of the castle, Ii Naotaka, out of lightning and therefore he wears the same helmet with Ii’s family helmet currently saved in the castle museum; his name is elected from 1,167 submissions; in the local the character is affectionately known as *mochi* [the Japanese rice cake]...”<sup>14</sup> During the celebration, Hikonyan appeared on various local products and made considerable revenue for the city. Finally, the celebration events attracted more than 750,000 visitors and Hikonyan also became nationally known.<sup>15</sup> After the celebration ended, there were many voices asking for keeping it as the local character and thus Hikonyan became the *yurukyara* of Hikone city. Following Hikonyan, there are more than a thousand such characters including Kumamon (for Kumamoto Prefecture), Bari-san (for Yimabari city), and Sanomaru (for Sano city) that have been created.<sup>16</sup>

In regard to the body of *yurukyara*, an important fact is that they are always embodied in the form of *kigurumi* (costumed-character) which provides them a physical body with mobility and accessibility. Thus *yurukyara* can engage in real life and have close interaction with people. For example, in the big events of *yurukyara* held each year such as “*Yurukyara matsuri*” (“Yuru-character Celebration”, first held in 2008, since 2013 has been renamed as “the local characters Expo in Hikone”) and “*Yurukyara guranpuri*” (“Yuru-character Grand Prix”, first held in 2010), those costumed-characters can dance on the stage and play with children and adults off the stage. Yet they often appear at the corner of life and act as a sale man selling oranges, or a fireman popularizing security knowledge or a salaryman going to work.<sup>17</sup> These contribute to building the “reality” of *yurukyara* which, as I discussed in Chapter 3, makes individuals perceive that they are real and therefore become attached to them.

---

<sup>13</sup>*Yurukyara* is a contraction of *yurui* character. *Yurui* literally means “loose,” “wobbly,” or “slack” but in this application it has a number of connotations including “gentle” or “weak,” “laid-back,” “light-hearted” or “unimportant,” “healing,” and “cute” (Inuyama, 2011; Occhi, 2012). The broadness of the meaning brings about a large number of *yurukyara* who become an instant phenomenon in Japanese society. *Yurukyara* are created not only for the local places but also the enterprises, governmental institutions and parties.

<sup>14</sup>See <http://hikone-hikonyan.jp/profile/>, accessed 1 March 2016.

<sup>15</sup>See “*Nyūjōsha ga 75 mon jin o toppashimashita!*” (Tourists broke 750, 000), 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Hikone Castle News, 25 November 2007, accessed 2 March 2016, [http://hikone-400th.jp/news/2007/11/1125post\\_99.php](http://hikone-400th.jp/news/2007/11/1125post_99.php).

<sup>16</sup>According to the 2015 ranking of “*Yurukyara guranpuri*” (Yuru-character Grand Prix), a big event for voting people’s favorite *yurukyara*, there were 1,727 *yurukyara* including both the local *yurukyara* (1,092) and enterprises’ *yurukyara* (635) that took part in the event. See “*Yurukyara guranpuri*,” accessed 2 March 2016, <http://www.yurugp.jp/about/>.

<sup>17</sup>See the example of Kumamon in Chapter 5, and Kumamon’s twitter, accessed 2 March 2016, [https://twitter.com/55\\_kumamon](https://twitter.com/55_kumamon).



**Figure 16.** Hikonyan; Source: The official website of Hikonyan.

Another anthropomorphic phenomenon around characters that has arisen is the world of “tan.” Originally the term “tan” is similar to “chan,” used above as an ending-nickname to call children or cute things. Here it refers to an anthropomorphic *moe* character world. According to *Gijinka tan hakusho* (Anthropomorphism tan White Book), the phenomenon of “tan” has developed from the *dōjin* subculture on the Internet such as 2ch since the late 1990s, and differs from the existing anthropomorphism found in manga and anime: it mainly transforms objects (most of which are everyday items without narratives) into *moe* girl-character images (2006: 4-5). For example, among them a famous character is Binchō-tan. The pronunciation of “tan” in Japanese is as the same as that of coal. Binchō-tan is an anthropomorphic character made out of traditional Japanese charcoal called *binchōtan*. Binchō-tan is a girl and her image is constituted of the *moe* character elements of big eyes, blue hair, and a small body, with the obvious characteristic of carrying a *binchōtan* on her head. Binchō-tan quickly attracted a following and is now the local mascot for the hometown of *binchōtan*—Minabe machi—which has built a metaphorical bridge between the character and actual charcoal. As a form of commercial exploitation, Minabe-machi has adopted the image of Binchō-tan to promote their local speciality: the character appears on the packaging and promotional posters for *binchōtan*, which also provides the character with a chance to appear in the daily life. More importantly, in this process the charcoal is endowed with a *moe* “characterized body.” As well as charcoal, many other objects have been given a corresponding character-tan. For example, the habanero chilli pepper has been turned into Habanero-tan, a little girl with red hair and a green plant stalk as her hat; the high-speed train Fasutekku (Fastech) has been transformed into Fasutekku-tan, a young girl whose cat-like ears are the same shape as the air brakes of the train; and the chain of Seibun-irebun

(Seven-Eleven) convenience shops has become *Sebure-tan* (abbreviated from *Sebun-irebun*), a girl whose uniform is red and green, the same colours as the shop, her shoes are printed with the number 7, and her hair-grip is in the shape of the number 11. “Tan” gives objects a *moe* “characterized body” and in this sense it can be referred to as “*moe* anthropomorphism” which, according to Galbraith, emphasizes “the affectivity of the human form” (2012: 354-355). It is the affectivity that stimulates the strong desire for the (*moe*) “characterized body.”

The tendency towards the “characterized body” is sensitively captured by Japanese politicians. They actively use the “characterized body,” or even become a character, to increase their intimacy with the public. As Fiske writes, “Though the body may appear to be where we are most individual, it is also the material form of the body politic, the class body, the radical body and the body of gender; the body is where politics can best disguise itself as human nature” (1989: 70). The formula of characters plus politics equals a political mask can thus be formed. The campaign stage becomes a display case for the political mask, and audiences (the public) are attracted and cheer for the politicians behind the masks.

This trend has arisen in response to the proliferation of characters in public sphere. Many governmental institutions, public sector organizations, large-scale events and governmental policies also use existing popular characters or create their own as their mascots. For instance, in 1987 the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department designed its mascot character, *Pīpo-kun*, with the aim of building up the image of a beloved and trusted police force; the train on the Kanazawa Seaside line in Yokohama has licensed the image of *Atomu* for its promotional posters since 1989; Expo 1985 in Tsukuba used the character mascot *Kosumo hoshimaru*; and finally, with the introduction in 2016 of the *Mainanbā* (My Number) Policy (an individual number system), the Japanese government has created a character, *Maina-chan*, for promotional purposes. These characters are anthropomorphic creatures and their bodies represent most *kawaii* traits: they are “sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, and weak” (Kinsella, 1995: 220). They exist not merely as symbols but also as transitional objects that, as Miller’s analysis of the “zoomorphic urge” in public culture in Japan states, “allows us to redirect attention and emotions away from areas thought to be indelicate or troublesome” (2010: 69) and find a new feeling of sustenance. In such a way, the public can live in a relatively free environment by circumventing sensitive words such as state, rights, and rules. Through characters, the relationship between the official and the public shifts from being distant to being softer and closer.

Such a softer and closer relationship leads to the widespread uses of characters in politics. In 2007, the members of the Democratic Party of Japan (*Minshutō*) designed a *yurukyara*, *Minshu-kun*, based on their party symbol of a red ball, and used him in local campaign material to help their candidates win the twenty-first elections to the

House of Councillors.<sup>18</sup> The Democratic Party wanted Minshu-kun to be imagined as a close friend who would serve the citizens and solve their problems. The campaign materials also enabled Minshu-kun to inhabit the personal sphere of people's homes as easily as the public space. Thus, when Minshu-kun appeared on the street, people did not feel awkward, some but rather were glad to meet him, accept him, and even to watch his anime series.

A similar character strategy was adopted by the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan (*Jimintō*, LDP). In November 2012, the LDP called on the whole of Japan to submit character illustrations that represented party leader Abe Shinzō and secretary general Ishiba Shigeru in order to stimulate voters' focus on the forthcoming lower house election. However, this was not the LDP's first attempt to utilize character: during the leadership of Koizumi Jun'ichirō, a character called Shishirō (Mr. Lion) was created to promote Koizumi as "the lion-hearted" Prime Minister. "Shishi" means "lion," and referred to Koizumi's wild mane of grey hair. Shishirō had an animated lion's body but his head was replaced by Koizumi's face and hair. For the purposes of party publicity, Shishirō was commodified in Koizumi character goods, including "T-shirts, mugs, hand towels, stickers, fans and mobile-phone straps." Shishirō's image also appeared on the Internet, on the website of the LDP, as a download for desktop backgrounds and in computer games (*The Japan Forum Newsletter*, 2002). As a character, Koizumi was popular.<sup>19</sup>

Koizumi's proliferation benefited not only from the half-character body of Shishirō, which rendered him much more approachable and acceptable, but also from the "self-character" constructed by Koizumi himself. Through it Koizumi used the body in the way mentioned by Fiske above and perfectly aligned politics with human nature. According to Aihara, in contrast to the stereotype of a politician, what Koizumi offered was a "thin, poor and slovenly otaku image," with his particular lion-like hair making him look as if he had just woken up (2007: 90-94). Nevertheless, when he participated in television talk shows, his words were always concise and powerful, positive and imaginary, and frank and humorous, which triggered a "Koizumi fever" and was welcomed by the mass media. They described him as "'maverick,' a 'wide horse,' 'lone wolf,' 'a bit of an oddball' (*henjin*), 'a lone reformer,' a 'pied piper,' and 'Koizumi the Lionheart'" (Mulgan, 2013: 48). Some of his phrases became buzzwords, such as *kome hyappyo* (one hundred bags of rice) in 2001, and *sapuraizu* (surprise) in 2004. These phrases were easily adopted by the public and worked as a form of communication between the public and Koizumi.

In fact the public were less interested in Koizumi's specific policies than in him. They were interested in the buzzwords mainly because they had been spoken by Koizumi. As Aurelia George Mulgan (2013: 48) examines, a Japanese male, though, had never voted and paid attention to election, visited LDP's gift shop to buy 20

---

<sup>18</sup>As the Democratic Party of Japan and the Japan Innovation Party merged into a new one, the Democratic Party (*Minshintō*) on 27 March 2016, the logo of the party also changed. Minshu-kun thus was not adequate for the new party. In April, Minshu-kun retired from his stage. In September, the Democratic Party began to raise new *yurukyara* designs.

<sup>19</sup>In her book *Pink Globalization*, Yano has elaborated on the phenomenon of Shishirō (2013: 63-67).

posters of Koizumi. He explained that he in fact was not a supporter for LDP but wanted to have the poster of Koizumi in his room. He bought so many posters because his friends and relatives also wanted them. In addition, Koizumi often invited one member of his cabinet—Tanaka Makiko to be his television show partner who usually played the role of a neighbourly “*oba-san*” (aunt) (Aihara, 2007: 92). The image of them acted like an *otaku* and an *oba-san*, providing television entertainment, even though their focus was a serious election. The public cared less about their views than about enjoying the performance and so they came to be called the “national dolls” (*kokumin no oniocha*) (Takazawa, 2001: 80). Their style of speech, mannerisms, appearances, and other characteristics unrelated to politics became fascinating to the public. The reason why they were called “national dolls” lay in the “self-character” which Koizumi intentionally constructed with his own body, including his appearance, the words he said, and the performances he gave in front of the mass media. This overlapped with Koizumi’s role as a politician and it was this role that the public responded to. This creation of a self-character brought results: Koizumi won the election and Shishirō was a commercial success. And Koizumi maintained his self-character to the end: he brought the character-effect into his administration, which the media called “theatre-style politics” (*gekijōkata seiji*). Koizumi chose to grasp the hearts of the people and not wake them up until they believed that the world in which Koizumi’s character existed was the real one. This is the hyper-reality that Koizumi created, with which he also realized the “characterized politics” (*kyarakutāka suru seiji*) (Ōtsuka, 2001b: 234).

Ōtsuka (2001b: 234-235) proposes the term the “characterized politics” during an analysis of the self-character of the former Prime Minister Obuchi Keizō (1937-2000), who was known as *Heisei-ojisan* (Heisei-uncle).<sup>20</sup> When he became Prime Minister in 1998, *The New York Times* commented that he was lacking in charm, like a “cold pizza.”<sup>21</sup> Despite this, Obuchi always attempted to create intimacy with the public and was famous for his *bucchihon* (Obuchi’s telephone).<sup>22</sup> As a result of this, Obuchi’s image was used on a Heisei-Obuchi telephone strap, thus creating Obuchi merchandise. For Ōtsuka, this reveals a process in which Obuchi himself becomes a dramatic character that effectively attracts the attention of the public.<sup>23</sup> This is also the case for Koizumi. However, Koizumi intentionally established his Shishirō character. Thus following Ōtsuka’s view, I would like to argue that the characterized politics or the characterization of politics refers both to the use of a specific character, such as

---

<sup>20</sup>Heisei is current era name in Japan, starting on 8 January 1989, the day after Emperor Shōwa died. At that time Obuchi was serving as the Chief Cabinet Secretary and was responsible for formally announcing the end of Shōwa era and the new era name of Heisei for the new emperor.

<sup>21</sup>The article quoted the words of Neuffer, who was a specialist in Japanese politics: “Obuchi has all the pizzazz of a cold pizza. He wouldn’t be calling the shots. He’d simply be a puppet for the party elders” (Kristof, 1998).

<sup>22</sup>*Bucchihon* combines Obuchi’s “buchi” and telephone’s “phone,” referring to the phenomenon that Obuchi often phoned famous people. Since Obuchi did this without any prompting, it always made the recipient feel embarrassed. This word was one of buzzwords in 1999.

<sup>23</sup>The same point is made by Kayama Rika who argues the fact that human beings are gradually characterized has been accepted in Japan (2001: 10-11).

Shishirō, and to the building of a self-character. These two important features are both embodied in recent practices.

As the characterization of politics has been widely recognized and adopted, it has quickly spread throughout Japan. For instance, Japan Communist Party (*Nihon Kyōsantō*) has created a series of characters as members of its promotion department (*kakusan-bun*) to promote the Party's path, guidelines, and policies.<sup>24</sup> In addition, Komei Party (*Kōmeitō*)<sup>25</sup> has launched Komesuke, a *yurukyara* based on rice, the most familiar staple food for the Japanese, to bring the party closer to the public.

However, for politicians the characterization is particularly embodied in their self-characters which emphasize the *kyaradachi* (the establishment of a personality). This term is well recognized as being used by Asō Tarō. It is said that during the LDP's leadership election in 2007 he evaluated himself and his competitor Fukuda Yasuo (the former Prime Minister): “[*Watashi wa*] *kyara ga tachisugiteiru*, [*Fukudashi wa*] *amari sō ja nai*” (I invest too much in establishing my *kyara* but Fukuda not) (16 September 2007 *Asahi Shinbun* newspaper). Today a trend of “*kyara* being everything” (*kyara ga subete*) has become very popular in Japanese politics (Aihara, 2007: 90). In this context *kyara* can be understood as the personality of a politician which is important for building his/her recognizable and distinctive self-character. As shown in above example of Koizumi, politicians first use their bodies to construct a character-image and from that character-image their *kyara* is derived. The self-character of politicians consists of their character-image constructed by their bodies and their *kyara*, and the two are always inseparable. For example, Asō is keen on establishing his *kyara*. He admits publicly that he loves to read manga and browse 2ch. According to *Asahi Shinbun* newspaper, there is an anecdote about him being seen reading the manga *Rōzen meiden* (Rozen Maiden, 2002) in Tokyo Haneda Airport when he was Minister of Foreign Affairs, which earned him the sobriquet *Rōzen Asō* and *Rōzen kakka* (his excellency Rozen) (15 September 2008). Further, Asō makes many visits to Akihabara and delivers campaign speeches in which he labels himself as a manga *otaku*.

Another example offered by Aihara (2007: 94-95) is that of Higashikokubaru Hideo, who adopted *kyaradachi* to help him win the election to be governor of Miyazaki Prefecture in 2007. Before Higashikokubaru became a politician he was well-known as a comedian. During the election campaign, he sometimes acted in funny ways, sometimes imitated other politicians, and sometimes gave speeches in dialect. The public was thus impressed by his versatility and drawn to the self-character built by him. In the same year, in the elections for the governor of Tokyo, Ishihara Shintarō beat his competitor Asano Shirō. Ishihara was known as an influential author in Japanese literature. While he was still at university, he won the Akutakawa Prize for his novel *Taiyō no kisetsu* (Season of the Sun). This novel was then adapted for theatre, and its performance led to the birth of the postwar rebellious youth subculture known

<sup>24</sup>See “*Nihon Kyōsantō, Kakusan-bun*” (Japan Communist Party, promotion department), accessed 18 September 2015, <http://www.jcp.or.jp/kakusan/>.

<sup>25</sup>*Kōmeitō* is a political party in Japan. *Kōmei* means “justice” or “fairness.”

as the *taiyōzoku* (sun tribe). As the author, Ishihara was seen as the leader of the *taiyōzoku*. During the election, Ishihara exhibited his charisma by his powerful statements that always caused a public discussion. Aihara commented on it for *Asahi Shinbun* newspaper in an article by using a metaphor of “class president vs. class committee member” and implied that Ishihara had become the leading role of this election and must welcome his victory (2007: 96).

A more recent example is provided by Koike Yuriko who won the election and became the first female governor of Tokyo in July 2016. During the election, she also came to Akihabara, stood in front of the Gandamu Café, and expressed her idea of “turning Tokyo into an Anime-land.” She built the self-character based on her own experience of cosplay, “Last year I cosplayed the character Mahōtsukai Sarī [the magical Sally, see **Figure 17** and **18**] and became Mahōtsukai Yuri[ko] [the magical Yuri] and this year is the Ribon no kishi” (17 July 2016 *Dirī* news). She yet appealed to the public, “I am living in Toshima where the origin of anime, Tokiwa-sō,<sup>26</sup> is situated. In order to promote Tokyo, I will devote myself to connecting Toshima and Akihabara to create attractive content for the world and attract many foreign tourists. Please support Mahōtsukai Yuri to be the governor of Tokyo!”

Here, although the self-character may not have a “characterized body” or a specific character to which it relates, it expresses the self-image of politicians for the public, especially in the context of the idea that “contemporary elections are in need of building on a visual foundation” (Grabe and Bucy, 2009). Furthermore self-character can play the same role as that of character. Koizumi’s *otaku* image is devoted to strengthening the thought that he has simple and powerful ideas, which in turn makes the public feel reliable and tranquil; Higashikokubaru’s funny actions can entertain the masses (mood transition) and bring out their vitality; Ishihara’s leader personality can evoke people’s nostalgia for their youth, implying that a powerful political pattern arrives following the election of a former spiritual leader; and Koike’s magic acts as a kind of superpower that promotes the future development of Tokyo. What the individual seeks from characters is also embodied in the self-character of politicians. Thus “characterization” is quite a smart and modern strategy through which politicians can construct images that appeal to the public, and gain their support. The rise of “characterization” as a political force has created incentives for politicians to adopt a character or construct and act a self-character themselves.

Hence, Foucault argues that “the power exercised on the body is conceived not as a property, but as a strategy, that its effects of domination are attributed not to ‘appropriation,’ but to dispositions, manoeuvres, tactics, techniques, functionings; that one should decipher in it a network of relations, constantly in tension, in activity, rather than a privilege that one might possess; that one should take as its model a perpetual battle rather than a contract regulating a transaction or the conquest of a territory” (1995: 26-27). Yet Foucault notes that it is not only the “overall effect of its strategic positions, acquired or preserved, of the dominant class” but also “an effect

---

<sup>26</sup>*Tokiwa-sō* is a Japanese style apartment building in Toshima, Tokyo. From the 1950s and 1960s many young manga and anime artists including Tezuka Osamu lived here and developed their manga and anime career.

that is manifested and sometimes extended by the position of those who are dominated.” Thus it is not only politicians who use the “characterized body” for their own purposes, but the public too. The public expresses its opinions of certain politicians through “characterization” of politicians’ bodies. For example, on the 2ch one poster uses ASCII character art to depict the “characterized body” of Asō (see **Figure 19**) as a response to the policy of “*kane ga nee nara kekkonshinai hō ga ii*” (no money, no marriage) that Asō proposed in a conversation with college students in Tokyo in 2009 (24 August 2009 *Asahi Shinbun* newspaper). In their works, many *dōjin*, light novel authors and illustrators depict “characterized bodies” that include certain metaphors, such as Seitō-tan (Party-tan) for parties, and Kenhō-kyūjyō-chan (the Ninth-article-of-the-constitution girl) and Kenpō-musume-tachi (Constitution-girls) for the Japanese laws.

The above practices show that characters have been socio-politically identified and accepted in Japan. The sense of belonging is visibly depicted in the character’s body and coordinates with beliefs and emotions, which have laid the foundation for their political use. Politicians sense these connections and have used them on their own bodies. They use characters as a strategy and technique to soften power and ensure that it is taken for granted. This hugely affects the attitudes of both politicians and the public towards characters and the “characterized body,” and also pushes characters to the centre of the social stage, where they influence social interaction and social communication.



**Figure 17.** In order to coincide with the election activity, Koike’s twitter account posted the picture of her cosplay experience in 2015, with tweets: “I will put Tokyo as the source of culture, since there are many cultural sources in Tokyo such as Comic Market and major publishers. Tokyo will try its best to support Comic Market”; Source: Twitter of Koike Yuriko.



## Communication as the Essence of Characters

The term “body techniques” mentioned at the beginning of this chapter is proposed by Mauss to mean “the ways in which, from society to society, men know how to use their bodies” (1973: 70). He also notes, “In any case, it is essential to move from the concrete to the abstract.” That is to say, aside from concretely representing and modifying the body, how the body is utilized, which may imply an abstract and deeply rooted function in social communication and delivering meanings within certain socio-cultural contexts, is also crucial.

In contemporary society, with the body becoming the finest commodity, new techniques are constantly being invented, particularly when the body encounters characters. In fact, when characters are embedded in self-identity, social belonging or political uses through “characterized bodies,” they are involved in a communication process. In some sense, the essence of identity-expression and the diffusion of ideological meanings lies in the communication in which characters per se can function as the medium to send, deliver, and accept information. This provides a broad understanding of three key elements to communication as the essence of characters: first, modifying the self’s body and forming a “characterized body” for communication; second, using the “characterized body” as the self’s body for communication; and third, using the body of a character as a medium for communication. The first two have been examined in the previous two sections, and the third one will be explored in this section. The body of a character, existing in the fictional world and always revealing many potential traits of a real body, does not necessarily direct to “a given entity with a specified functionality and direction of activity” but “a construction site of exploration and connection” and therefore it can be used to actualize not “merely the specific set of affects...but the entire (or, at least a larger) range of affects” (Cox, 2003: 2-3). I argue, it in fact transforms the body of a character into an abstract field and reveals the potentials of its whole entity, the character. Thus I will examine how a character functions as a medium. Marshall McLuhan suggests, “The medium is the message” that can “create an environment by its mere presence” (1964: 8). That is to say, characters can influence their surroundings, especially their communication environment.

In fact, character consumption per se assures a certain type of communication, and characters serve as a language that consumers can choose to use. The birth of Atomu in the 1960s is an example of this. The development and the robot theme of Atomu was a manifestation of the attitudes of the era, the policy guidance of the nation, and the expectation of the people—science and technology. As discussed in previous chapters, postwar Japan had pinned its hopes on science and technology as the way to realize economic recovery and improve the nation’s standing in the world. It was believed that Japan would never have the chance to return to the world stage if it did not master the technology of mass production. Thus, in the 1950s the Japanese government and its leaders embarked on an exploration of the domestic consumer market for electrical goods and built up the idea of the *akarui Nihon* (bright Japan), symbolizing the future of Japan. By the 1960s, this had had a measurable effect and the

popularity of the three sacred treasures was the best evidence of this. Against this backdrop, Atomu, as a robot who stood for peace and combined technology and fantasy, became a national hero. According to Schodt, Atomu was “a child of science” who lived in a future full of technological gadgets and hence created “a standard of living that Japanese could only dream about” (1988: 76). The national hero thus, as he suggests, was linked with “a wonderful future that science and technology could provide.” The Japanese, and particularly the future of family and nation—the children—were fascinated by Atomu and the advanced technologies beyond him (see, for example, Allison, 2006; Schodt, 2007). Children were the loyal audience of the *Atomu* television series as well as the consumers of Atomu character goods. Inspired by Atomu, when they grew up they became the backbone of the technology industry in Japan (Wagner, 2015).

In the 1970s, the atmosphere changed and came to have a much softer feel as, with the rise of the *shōjo* culture and *kawaii* style, cute characters stepped onto the historical stage, including the superstar Hello Kitty. In Chapter 2 I noted that Hello Kitty was originally designed as a decorative character that provided the gift company Sanrio with new business opportunities. She was also embodied in Sanrio’s market strategy as well as its company slogan—“small gift, big smile.” By linking to the cultural tradition of exchanging gift, Hello Kitty goods became a good choice of consumers for gifts, which involves the character in the wide and active social communication. Japan has a long history of gift exchange, and the obligation and responsibility of the individual, family, society, and state to use gifts to build and maintain close social relationships corresponds with the social need for *kizuna* (bonds).<sup>27</sup> Significantly *kizuna* focuses on emotion, which caters to the appeal of the individuality and sensibility that have arisen as a result of the prosperity of consumption. These emotional ties are pursued by individuals because they constitute the foundation of an individual’s life and the needs of the nation because they sustain “a strong interpersonal network” that suffers from the “threats of modernity and stresses of daily life,” as Yano points out (2013: 69). At the same time, Yano continues, Hello Kitty radiates a wish of happiness which helps social communication to go more smoothly and achieve more smiles. Hello Kitty promotes various products and appears on many gifts because she is able to oil the wheels of social communication.

In the 1980s some qualitative changes occurred (see chapter 2) which implied the diversification of character consumption in Japan on the one hand and on the other hand the issues increasingly came out. Against this background, an example was the Bikkuriman boom (see chapter 3), in which the characters, the story settings and the worldviews all came from character stickers—the gifts included with the Bikkuriman chocolate products. These stickers did not rely on any existing manga or animation narratives, but could be collected together to construct the world of Bikkuriman

---

<sup>27</sup>Particularly the aftermath of the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami reminded the Japanese to value the bonds among people and therefore *kizuna* was selected as the buzzword for the year. See “*Yūkyan shingo ryūkōgo tashō happyō*” (Announcement of the U-CAN top new words and slang for 2011), accessed 2 March 2016, <http://singo.jiyu.co.jp/nendo/2011.html>.

characters. Therefore, from Ōtsuka's (2001) perspective, Bikkuriman was typical of "narrative consumption" because the narratives of the Bikkuriman characters were constructed by consuming the chocolate, sticker by sticker. It was the process of collecting small segmented images and fragmented text, in which every Bikkuriman sticker was a medium for content and transmitted useful information, which contributed to the "grand narrative" of Bikkuriman. However, such a content medium was not separate from the social context, particularly when it caused the same "reverse consumption" phenomenon as had happened with the Kamen raidā snack (see chapter 2). Consumers were eager to purchase the Bikkuriman chocolates but only for the stickers included with them; they spent much money while causing a huge waste of chocolates; although the prices of the rare stickers had surged, consumers still wanted them, regardless of cost (6 August 1988 *Yomiuri Shinbun* newspaper). These actually represent the negative aspect of contemporary consumption. But with individuality and sensibility have been the key factors in the development of consumption in Japan (see chapter 3), such negative impact may point to "the capacity for self and lifestyle transformation," particularly "for the individual who has 'only one life to live'" (Featherstone, 2007: 115). In this sense Bikkuriman was the medium for the content as well as for the social context, accurately reflecting the issues and situations in Japanese society.<sup>28</sup>

In the 1990s many social issues were triggered after the Bubble Economy collapsed. This increased the stress and uncertainty of the Japanese to such a level that they were desperate for comfort and fell deeply in love with *iyashi-kei* characters (see chapter 3) such as Tarapanda (Lazy panda). In some sense, *iyashi-kei* characters were an extension of cute culture, but during such a disturbing period they were endowed with a special mission: they were a medium of security that could relieve the restlessness of individuals and communities, and the unrest of state and society.

These examples reveal the ability of characters to act as a means of communication, either material (as a commodity or gift) or immaterial (in terms of emotion and security). The role that characters play in communication has become even more important. Particularly driven by the development of computers and the Internet, face-to-face social interaction has broken down and a "stranger society" has gradually been constructed (Giddens and Sutton, 2009). In such an environment, communication has been emphasized as having a vital function and has become the key word for the era. Being a vital means of communication, especially social communication, has effectively facilitated characters' involvement in the activities of constructing, maintaining, and expanding the social network of contemporary Japanese society.

---

<sup>28</sup>Although the consumers of Bikkuriman chocolates were mainly children, the money they spent on the product had reached the adult level. An evidence for it was the phenomenal sale record: 400 million Bikkuriman chocolates were sold in three years. According to Children Research Institute's Takayama Hideo, what attracted children was Bikkuriman's "irrational world." He argued that children were sensitive with the change of the time and reflected the social trends: the omnipotence of technology had been less attracted than the mystery world (18 April 1988 *Yomiuri Shinbun* newspaper).

In the mid-1990s, the tamagotchi as a character-raising game quickly dominated the Japanese toy market: its name is derived from *tamago* (egg) and *wotchi* (watch) and also offers an indication of what it looks like—a portable game device with a round, egg-shaped body. By simply pressing the three buttons on it, a player can take care of a computerized “virtual pet” and bring it up. Its cuteness and roundness first attracted girls, who were considered social trendsetters, but tamagotchi rapidly became popular with a much wider market. The popularity of the tamagotchi lay in its role in communication through its ability to form close relationships. Players had to devote themselves to their characters, raising them as if they were their own “child.” The player had to feel a sense of responsibility as the parent and invest emotionally in the digital creature. Thus the game was also an intimacy-building process in which through the “child’s” development one sees one’s own existence and a strong sense of self (Ishikawa, 2007). When the “child” had grown up, the player could choose for the tamagotchi to be “married off,” make friends, or create a “family” through connecting with another tamagotchi. In this way, tamagotchi is helped to forge intimate relationships between players. The characters thus could act as the language or social capital for exchanging, communicating, and interacting.<sup>29</sup>

A similar example can be found in the world of Pokémon. Pokémon is one of the biggest successes for character merchandising, with its success beginning with the Game Boy game. According to Tajiri, the game’s designer, his motivation for creating the game was to provide children with “a means of relieving the stresses of growing up in a postindustrial society” (Allison, 2004: 41). Today people spend a lot of time on various indifferent technological devices, thereby neglecting social interaction and communication. To counter this, through his work Tajiri aimed to endow such devices with a sense of humanity. Thus in the Pokémon game, players are always encouraged to receive and share a variety of information through the characters. For them, the characters are not only part of the game but also represent other players. The exchange in the virtual world actually symbolizes interaction between real people. Eventually, this leads to the players getting a “space of their own,” as Allison points out, that “cushions kids from the world of school, home, and daily pressures” (2004: 42). This allows them to avoid the difficulties of the real world and to build intimate and pure relationships. Such friends and pure friendships are not unique to Pokémon. In other character-mediated worlds, such as that of Yu-Gi-Oh trading cards,<sup>30</sup> the most fascinating thing for consumers is that through collecting, exchanging, and playing with the character cards they can gain information that helps them to make friends and find something in common to build their own social circles. Similar to tamagotchi and Pokémon, the play environment of Yu-Gi-Oh trading cards is full of

---

<sup>29</sup>Many scholars also have argued that the relationships established and maintained through *tamagotchi* are superficial or a kind of techno-intimacy (Ishikawa, 2007; Allison, 2006). I will return to this question in Conclusion.

<sup>30</sup>Yu-Gi-Oh trading cards are a collectible card game based on the Yu-Gi-Oh manga and its anime adaptations and series. The game was released by Konami company in 1999 and soon became a bestseller. In 2011, total sales of the Yu-Gi-Oh trading card game had reached 25 billion cards and held the Guinness World Record at the time. See “Guinness World Records,” accessed 2 March 2016, <http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/best-selling-trading-card-game>.

intimacy, pureness, interaction, and communication, and more importantly, it is an indispensable part of their social network.

Undoubtedly characters' involvement may divert attention from the existing network, such as the primitive familial bond. Characters such as tamagotchi, which became a "real pet" and a "real friend" to some extent, are seemingly able to establish a stronger connection with children than parents, suggesting the possibility of characters acting as a replacement for family (as the survey in chapter 3 showed). This creates an incentive for parents to try to use a common topic—characters—to rebuild their relationships with their children. By purchasing character goods for their children, taking them to character theme parks, and reading and watching manga and anime together with their children, characters appear to help parents to bridge the gap between them and their offspring.

Moreover, contemporary parents are distinct from the earlier generation, who do not accept characters and see them only as a childish culture. For example, one reason why she had a Mickey-Mouse-styled life explained by the young Japanese female mentioned above was that "my mother likes Mickey very much and always buys his character items for me...when I realize it, my surrounding has been all 'Mickey's'" (quoted from *Yomiuri Shinbun* newspaper). Particularly since the first character-raised generation (of the 1960s), whose childhoods were flooded with characters and character goods, most Japanese have grown up with the companionship of characters. When they become parents, it is easy for them to accept characters and they are happy to enjoy characters with their children (Yamada, 2000). Characters are thus not a replacement for a social network, but informational tools used to maintain them. As tools, the multiplicity of characters diversifies the forms and understandings of relationships. Following this, individuals' social networks are rapidly expanding. As Douglas and Isherwood (1979) argue, the scale of communication is increased by the informational component of consumer goods. Individuals can build connections with like-minded others through sharing information. The emergence of collaborative characters led by the development of the Internet is a good example of this. As a user-generated medium, Hatsune Miku, discussed above in the section on the media mix, brings her fans together to share and communicate information about her with others and together enjoy all things of Miku. For those who take part in this collaborative activity, the relationships among them may be not directly formed but are maximally expanded. While they may not know each other, through this common interest—Miku—they can still connect on the same platform. In this way, it is possible to construct an anonymous network and attach it to individuals' social networks. And character is the knot, combining both and expanding them further.

## **Conclusion**

When Turner proposes the notion of a "somatic society," he points out that it is a "society within which major political and personal problems are both problematized in the body and expressed through it" (1996: 1). Indeed, the body constitutes the territory of the self, depicts the image of the self, and is inseparable from the self. Yet in

contemporary consumer culture the body has become the finest consumer good and a project that can be worked on and increasingly linked to one's self-identity. This situation has furnished the right conditions for individuals to consume characters in a bodily way: on the one hand, through working on it the body is transformed into the "characterized body" to express one's "characterized identity" directly and visibly; on the other hand, the "characterized body" takes on ideological meanings such as social belonging and political uses. Here both identity expression and ideological meanings are involved in a process of information exchange. In this process characters are the media that can serve as a communication method between an individual and others, and individuals and society.

Thus the essence of characters is communication. Through the self's body, the "characterized body," and (the bodies of) characters, individuals effectively construct, maintain and expand their social network in both material (commodity, gift) and immaterial (emotion, security) ways. This promotes characters to being the central knot that connects various social relationships. In this sense, characters can influence society through their breadth and depth, resulting in a character-based society. This is, in fact, the "characterization" of society, which means that characters, as a form of discourse, reflect, constitute, and represent contemporary Japan.