The "characterization" of Japan : from merchandising to identity

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Conclusion

This dissertation has endeavoured to achieve one basic goal: to show the development of merchandising and consumption around characters in Japan. Based on the historical and transnational development of character merchandising, from the initial explorations in the world to contemporary practices in Japanese society, it describes the origins of character merchandising and its impact on Japan. Character merchandising resulted in the character commodity boom, and more importantly stimulated the desire of consumers to consume characters. However, the diversity of character commodities is not the only reason for this. A theoretical analysis suggests that the main reason behind the rise of character consumption lies in the development in Japan of mass consumption which exhibits postmodern characteristics that emphasize individuality and sensibility. Thus character consumption becomes a method of self-identification for individuals, in which characters, mediated by the body, can influence contemporary Japanese society broadly and deeply. Such influence has also resulted in characters being representative of the country and acting for it on the world stage. By triggering the global imagination and desires, characters have strengthened the transnational cultural connections between Japan and other countries.

In order to accomplish the aforementioned basic goal, this study began by examining the term "character merchandising." In terms of commercial exploitation, Dr Syntax, Ally Sloper, the Yellow Kid, Buster Brown, and other early characters contributed to the development of character merchandising and laid the foundations for Disney, which ultimately constructed an organized system to fully exploit the potential of merchandising. Following Disney's global steps, the dawn of characters in Japan also included character merchandising, with the term "character" being introduced to Japan in the 1950s. As discussed in Chapter 1, character merchandising is defined as the process of licensing the rights to a character for exploitation. Thus merchandising not only guaranteed the sustainable development of manga and anime due to the income it created, but also facilitated the emergence of a number of character goods in the market. At the same time, the rise of the mass media, especially television, in postwar Japan offered immediate advantages for this market: it created a media environment for the characters and cultivated the number of character consumers.

On the other hand, as we saw in Chapter 2, producers such as toy makers and food companies, which were authorized to produce character merchandise, also actively participated in the market. This led to a character commodity boom in the 1970s, when the group of character consumers expanded considerably to include children and adults, men and women. In the 1980s, the development of characters tended to be more culturally diverse, because of their links with *shōjo* culture and *otaku* subculture and, especially the opening of Tokyo Disneyland provided a paradise for consuming

characters. Since the 1990s, new media and technology, such as the Internet, have endowed characters with considerable dynamism and have embedded them in social communication networks while bridging the connection between Japan and other areas. In this sense, character merchandising, as Allison argues, "glues society at its roots" (2004: 40).

At this point it is important to emphasize that the appearance of character merchandising was a new phenomenon in Japan. This not only refers to the fact that character merchandising was a new concept borrowed from the West, but also that it offered a new way of selling products by combining commodity and character together under licence (Steinberg, 2012). And recognition of the move towards character merchandising is a recent phenomenon that did not begin to emerge until the 1970s. The attention paid to the character market supports this. While it was clearly understood that character merchandising offered a big market with much potential in the period up to and including the 1980s, it was not until the 1990s that specific statistics about its position in the retail market were provided. These figures provided an intuitive understanding of the character industry, especially as, despite the effects of the collapse of the Bubble Economy, the scale of and sales in this market continued to increase, leading to expectations about its future development. Since 2000, the market has matured and become a relatively independent field that is an indispensable part of the Japanese economy today.

Given this, it is possible to say that character merchandising has experienced long-term development in Japan. Today it is regarded as a characteristic of Japan, not only supported by its economic effect but also because characters are "enchanted commodities" that can "function as transmitters of enchantment and fun as well as intimacy and identity" (Allison, 2006: 16-17). This essentially explains why individuals consume characters. Chapter 3 explored how consuming characters satisfies individual pleasure, builds affinities between individuals and characters, and helps to construct self-identity, aspects which coincide with the postmodern tendency of consumption in Japan. With the development of mass consumption in postwar Japan, individuality and sensibility became the goals pursued by consumers. When they consume characters, comfort and desire are the two key factors that stress the inner connectivity between the individual and the character, and stimulate the individual to access the character world. In terms of exploring the inner aspect, Aihara Hiroyuki's pioneering work, *Kyaraka suru Nippon* (The Chara-ized Japan), is especially noteworthy. This book is based on the Bandai Character Research Institute's domestic survey of 2004, and from the psychological functions of being with a character or character goods draws out eight elements, including "tranquillity, protection, escape from reality, mood transition, a return to childhood, self-realization, hope of transformation, and vitality" (2007: 27-50), which provide a comprehensive framework for the data, ideas and practices of relationships between individuals and characters.

Further, the inner connectivity demonstrates the intimacy felt for fantastic character worlds, which depends much on individuals' perceptions of "reality." In this regard, as long as they can sense the "reality," the fictional character or character world is "real" because they believe it is real. As fans of Hatsune Miku have said, "We don't

care if it is real, we just care if it feels real" (Kelts, 2014). However the "reality" of characters such as Miku, who is a virtual celebrity singing songs created by software and dancing via computer technology, also relates to the hyper-reality developed by the media and technology. More importantly, it involves the character world in the postmodern simulacrum of a world full of signs. This, in effect, involves the consumption of characters into the realm of signs, which is specifically embodied in narrative consumption and database consumption. Proposed by Ōtsuka Eiji, narrative consumption emphasizes the existence of a grand narrative that can be approached through accumulating the segments of the narrative, which implies that an understanding of the character world can be gained through the consumption of small narratives. In contrast, Azuma Hiroki investigates character consumption in the form of a database model, by highlighting the collapse of the grand narrative and the shift of the character world towards one consisting of character elements. Both models are useful to individuals who can construct a style for themselves through choosing, combining or creating narratives or elements. As such, the self is realized and characters become an important part of this constructed self-identity.

An equally important factor, emphasized in Chapter 4, is that characters provide a means for the expression of identity, specifically through the body. This is very true for the Japanese, who believe that the body reveals the true self (Igarashi, 2000). The integrity of the body is magnified within the context of consumption and consumer culture and becomes the "finest consumer product." This transformation has twofold implications: consuming the body of a character and consuming one's own body as that of a character. Therefore when walking the streets of Japan, it is not unusual to see numerous exquisitely produced character garage kits and person-height-sized character pillows displayed in shop windows; men and women whose appearance, make-up, accessories, and costumes are very like those of certain characters; and cafés, restaurants, and theme parks which have a 2.5-dimensional atmosphere.

In many respects, the body is not only the private property of an individual but is also a juncture for various social discourses. As we have seen in this dissertation, the sense of social belonging that relies on the animist sensibility makes conditions 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 directly transform their bodies into characters in order to approach the public. The same application can be found in the way that the public expresses its political voice. This shows that in the dialogue between politicians and the public characters can function as the medium for social communication. Indeed characters are an important medium that can deliver the spirit of the era, build bonds with each other through gift giving, reflect social reality, meet social needs, and effectively construct, maintain, and expand social networks. Thus, as far as social breadth and depth are concerned, a character-based society exists.

As characters have permeated Japan, they have even been appointed as ambassadors for the country. Since the 1960s the government of Japan has promoted cultural exports and exchange, and in recent years it has announced a series of cultural policies. These policies particularly focus on a China-centric East Asia. In part this is because

China has a big domestic market, but more importantly it is because Chinese fans share their memories and the present time with Japanese characters. As shown by the interviews with some of the Chinese generation of the 1980s, characters have accompanied them from their childhood, through adolescence and into adulthood. They do not merely like Japanese characters but also identify with them and consume them. This is the current reality in China, where an increasing proportion of the population is attracted by Japanese characters. Characters also contribute to local cultural diversity in China—the Chinese Internet users have recontextualized Japanese characters within the context of Chinese society and have created their own character culture. In this sense, the consumption of characters is not necessarily linked to cultural imperialism or national identity but rather to ever more intimate cultural interaction.

Their transformation into commodities and permeation in Japanese society through merchandising and the building of intimate relationships with consumers through consumption seems to have answered the central question of this dissertation, "How have characters become an indispensable part of Japanese lives?" Then, "does it tell us something about Japanese society?" This question is not easy to answer because the phenomena of characters in Japan indeed involve many aspects. However, through an analysis of this study, some conclusions can be drawn. Firstly it reveals the specific conditions and situations in each era of Japan after the Second World War. For example, in the 1950s Disney's impact on Japan start from the influx of American culture, which represented not only a cartoon fever but also a tendency towards American lifestyle in the postwar period. The revival of Japanese toy industry relied on the export policy of the US occupation period. By the 1960s and 1970s, the development of television promoted children to enjoy and consume characters. The background of the era was the fact that the high-speed growth of postwar Japanese economy had brought with radical changes including urbanization, technology and media (Ashkenazi and Clammer, 2000: 7-9). In the 1980s *otaku* subculture began to play an important role in consuming characters, which reflected and was affected by the development of consumer society in Japan. Since the 1990s characters are closely linked to healing (*iyashi*), comfort for sociality, connectedness (*tsunagari*) between individuals, and nostalgia for childhood or a past (*ano koro*) because of economic downturn, horror attack, natural disaster, and work and life stresses. These also imply a central place for that key element in consuming characters—consumer affect.

As Clammer suggests that a major theme of Japanese culture is "the pre-eminent place given to emotions" (1997: 12), with which consumer affect fits very well. Consumer affect cements the intimate connection between one's self and characters while contributing to involving character (signs) into one's identity and forming a "characterized identity." With such identity the individual can effectively collect the self-knowledge and practice self-seeking (*jibun sagashi*), self-realization (*jiko jitsugen*) and self-creation. This trend also coincides with the postmodern tendency of consumption in Japan: commodity-sign, sign value, individuality and sensibility are much valued by consumers.

Significantly, consumer affect contributes to "consumer aesthetics" that are not only about the "New Age animism" suggested by Allison (2006: 11-12; see also chapter 4), but also inscribed on the body and bring out the "characterized bodies" in Japanese society. The "characterized bodies" are identity-expression of individuals and satisfy the social-political needs. Driven by such consumer aesthetics, characters involve in social communication and imply a new pattern, as well as become a form of discourse of Japanese society.

Is there something distinctive about Japan? I would like to suggest that the phenomena of characters, involving the specific historical development in Japan, consumer affect and consumer aesthetics, contribute to a consumer style (the term I borrowed from Allison) that may be internationally recognized as "Japanese." Particularly with Japanese characters travel globally, it becomes familiar to consumers all over the world. This is exemplified by the process of Japanese characters diffusing in other places of the world. As the case study of China showed, many of those encodings through characters on identity, intimacy, communication, consumerism and social-cultural/political interactions are what Chinese consumers practiced in the past and are practicing today. However, Chinese consumers also have their own encoding/decoding process (see chapter 5). In this sense, such a character consumer style has been organized around "Japan," to paraphrase Yoshimi Shun'ya, "less as an overt symbol than as an invisible system of signs, meanings, and desires" (1999: 102-128, quoted from Allison, 2000: 69).

It is important to note that there are still some issues and arguments associated with characters. For example, many postmodern experiences, as discussed in this study, such as sign-play, depthlessness, hyper-reality, and simulations, can be seen in characters, but these experiences may also create alienation which implies "a sense of disempowerment" of the management of objects and symbols (Clammer, 1997). Pleasure can be given by character consumption, but, as noted in Chapter 1, as the recent social worries both in and beyond Japan show, it can be followed by obsession, violence, censorship and disorder: examples include the stories of "real man marries a character pillow," "Saudi Arabia has banned Pokémon" and "maintaining vigilance against the cultural invasion of Doraemon in China" (Philips, 2010; Cheng, 2014). These stories are also the evidence for *The End of Cool Japan* (2016), as McLelland *et al.* assert. They remind us that with the idea of "Cool Japan" there are many ethical, religious and nationalistic challenges. Allison observes the phenomenon of tamagotchi and points out that the emotion and communication that people build through the character is a kind of "techno-intimacy" which represents the prosthetic interaction and sociality and in fact makes them ever more likely alone (2013: 101).

Yet as a new way to promote the proliferation of commodities and a key factor in stimulating desire, characters inevitably fall into the aspect of consumerism that "has a fundamental influence upon the everyday social life in advanced capitalist societies" and "offers us the illusion of consumer freedom" (Miles, 1998: 5). This indicates that character consumption is essentially driven by the development of capitalism, and that it is easy to lose individuals in their desire for consumption and excess, such as the all-Hello-Kitty-style fashion and life, and the precarious body modifications made to

match a certain character mentioned in Chapter 4. When individuals cannot help themselves from indulging in this trap of character consumption, its negative impact or a mistaken cognition towards character commodities occurs.

In effect, this is more of a "dream" created by producers and marketers. As Hockheimer and Adorno (1944; see also Adorno, 1991a; 1991b) point out, in the culture industry consumers are, in fact, deceived by the producers and marketers. The ultimate goal of the producers and marketers is to dominate the market and make huge profits. To this end, the production of cultural products is governed and standardized. However, cultural products per se can offer the illusion of individuality. It is this comforting illusion that conceals the ideology of the culture industry and distances the subject from the material reality. Thus inspired by this dream, numerous character "super-consumers" appear, who find satisfaction in possessing more character goods and are proud of being the trendsetters of character consumption. This is exemplified in the consumers of the Kamen raidā snack and the Bikkuriman chocolates (see chapters 2 and 4)—they are purchasing the characters (stickers), but discard the food.

By making this assessment, I am not trying to deny the importance of characters and the role that they play in production and consumption, but to provide an alternative viewpoint that helps us to better understand them. For example, as we have seen in this dissertation, when individuals are free to construct and express their identity through consuming characters, they are exposed to "the risk of the chosen and changed personal identity" (Beck, 1992: 136) or the risk of a multiple personality. However, as discussed in Chapter 3, the existence of a multiple personality does not necessarily imply schizophrenia but rather is an inherent requirement of society. It also illustrates the opinions of both Azuma and Mead. For Azuma, the existence of a multiple personality can be understood as a "cultural movement," corresponding to the fact that "our society itself is strongly seeking a multiple personality-type model" (2009: 112). For Mead, "A multiple personality is in a certain sense normal," since it is the "social process itself" that requires us to divide "ourselves up in all sorts of different selves" and answer to "all sorts of different social reactions" (1934: 142). That is to say, characters mirror the fundamental development of a society.

In this sense, characters are more than the personas in manga, anime, games, light novels, or other media; they are a key that can open a door for us to understand contemporary Japanese society. This is not only because characters as commodities have permeated the daily lives and cultivated many character consumers, but also because, in the process, characters have gradually become embedded in various aspects of Japanese society. As we have seen in this dissertation, character consumption is combined with multiple cultural aspects, such as *shōjo* culture and *otaku* subculture, and constitutes an important part of contemporary consumer culture in Japan. The popularity of characters also comes from consumer affect and animist sensibility, which also create an affective foundation for the presence of characters in Japanese society. Motivated by the former, characters become a means of being oneself and are an important part in the process of individual self-identification. The latter

contributes to using characters to build upon a sense of social belonging, on which the use of characters in socio-political life is based.

Furthermore, following the global spread of characters, they have not only created a bridge between Japan and other countries but have also helped consumers in the world to indulge in the global imagination and desires that they evoke. The recent worldwide hit of "Pokémon Go," the GPS-crossover game for smartphones based on Pocket Monster characters, is such an example. Since the debut in game in 1996, Pokémon has been 20-year-old. During these two decades, more than 280 million video game software units and numerous products have been sold worldwide, and animated TV series had been broadcast in 95 countries and areas (Yoshida, 2016). Hence, though "Pokémon Go" is not first released in Japan (due to the technique reason), it makes the instant hit in Australia, New Zealand, the U.S. and most of Europe, for example, in the Netherlands a popular playing and meeting place for "Pokémon Go" players has been named the Pokémon capital. The thirsty Chinese fans even play the unofficial version (the game had not been released in China by September 2016) by borrowing the artificial maps based on countries where the game is available. The hit is in part because of the new and attractive concept of the game, using augmented reality technology, which links the fictional character world to the real life (GPS data) and therefore constructs the "reality" of these Pocket Monster characters. But significantly, it indicates a fact that these Japanese characters have been deeply embedded in the lives of consumers all over the world. Thus when these Japanese characters reappear in the new commodity form, their enthusiasm is rekindled easily and quickly.

Most passion is offered by its home country, Japan. In the first three days of the release of the game, more than 11 million people downloaded the game, which made the game the number one most download app in Japan. The game was even "treated as a national event, with widespread news coverage and a cautious endorsement from the government" (Soble, 2016). Such a hit also promotes the new development of character merchandising and consumption. For example, many local places such as Miyashiro Prefecture and Miyazaki Prefecture (where are impacted by the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake) expect that this game will help them attract more visitors and rebuild the local tourism (through setting the popular monster characters in these local places and attracting the players to catch). Besides, the politicians look at the hit and use it. On the final stage of election of the governor of Tokyo, another candidate Masuda Hiroya sought votes by putting forward a slogan, "Go to vote through Pokémon Go!" (*Pokemon Go de senkyo ni Go!*). These examples all direct to an evident fact that characters have been embedded in Japan widely and deeply.

Though it is a specific field, character is a broad research subject. Many aspects are worth exploring further. For example, many scholars have pointed out that the Japanese self is a mode that allows for the embracing of conformity together with space for expression of individuality (freedom) (Clammer, 1997: 161; Kondo, 1990); moreover, social stratification including distinctions of class, income, age, gender, and so on plays the crucial role in consumption practice and consumers in Japan, then do

these also embody in the consumption of characters? If so, then how? If not, then why? These indeed raise fruitful directions for future research.

This study has demonstrated how characters are embedded in Japan, focusing on character merchandising and character consumption. It has not only studied characters, but viewed them as crucial to understanding contemporary Japan. In this regard, it is important to understand not only how and why characters have become an important component of Japanese society, but also the implications behind the development of characters with respect to the relationships between objects, people, and society. The importance of characters, in my opinion, should be understood as an abstract but specific framework from which we can establish an image of contemporary Japanese society. To establish the framework, I have accessed multiple disciplines and developed a historical and theoretical approach that may be useful for others interested in the study of characters and will hopefully encourage further research. It is my hope that this study will help to deepen and expand the understanding of characters and the merchandising and consumption that surrounds them, as well as the economic, cultural, political, and social aspects of the kingdom of characters, Japan.