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The "characterization" of Japan : from merchandising to identity
Han, R.

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Author: Han, R.

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Summary

This study examines the merchandising and consumption practices that have developed around characters in Japan. Although merchandise based on characters had appeared on the Japanese market in the early twentieth century, characters did not exert influence until the 1960s, when they were transformed into various commodities as a result of character merchandising. Since then characters have begun to play an important role in the social, cultural, and political development of contemporary Japan.

A wide range of topics is involved in this study, from merchandising to consumption, and from individuals to society, both in Japan and elsewhere. In particular, this study focuses on the events that are crucial for understanding how characters are embedded in contemporary Japanese society: the rise of character merchandising and the commodity boom it brought about; the development of character consumers and their consumption activities; the involvement of characters in one's self-identity and the implications of this for individuals and society; and the role that characters play in connecting Japan with other places. From studying these subjects, a clear image of the "characterization" of Japan can be established.

This study consists of seven parts: an introduction followed by two chapters describing the history and characteristics of character merchandising and character consumption; two chapters discussing theoretical interpretations regarding the relationships between characters, individuals, and society; a final chapter looking at the performance of Japanese characters on the world stage and their diffusion in a local context; and a conclusion.

In the introduction the main concepts are explained, along with theoretical discourses on commodity and consumption. Chapter 1 examines the development of character merchandising from the exploration in U.K. and U.S. in the early nineteenth century to practices in Japan in the postwar period. The three sections focus respectively on the definition of character merchandising; its brief historical development from the British character, Dr Syntax, to Disney; and the impact on Japan following the arrival of Disney.

The popularity of character commodities gave rise to the consumption of characters. Chapter 2 concentrates on the development of character consumers and consumption in Japan. Not just children but adults too have become loyal consumers of characters. Character consumption also involves in various cultural aspects of Japanese society, including *shōjo* (girl) culture and *otaku* (geek) subculture, and the popularity of Disneyland. Moreover, the advances in technology and the media expanded the platforms available for character consumption, absorbed many media forms, and ultimately constructed a mixed media network for characters. All of these factors have contributed to the diversity of character consumption in Japan.

Summary

The reasons why consumers consume characters are explained in Chapter 3. Characters can provide them with comfort, and help them to realize, affirm, and inspire the self, factors which strengthen the internal connections between them and characters. This close connection with characters also encourages consumers to sense the “reality” of characters and the character world, although the extent to which this occurs depends on individual perceptions. In addition, as the postmodern features have been deeply intertwined with consumer life through the development of the mass media, characters become part of the postmodern simulacrum of a world full of signs. This, in effect, has moved the consumption of characters into the realm of signs, specifically into either narrative consumption or database consumption. Significantly, this is a process in which characters have become linked to one’s self-identity, therefore enabling the formation of a “characterized identity.”

Chapter 4 discusses how characters, mediated by the body, are involved in society and social communication. The body, as the basis for the expression of self-identity, is the primary site that the effects of characters can be seen on: with an increasing awareness of characters’ bodies, individuals begin to modify themselves to achieve “characterized bodies.” The “characterized bodies” comes not only from an individual need but also from socio-political necessity, specifically the sense of social belonging and the use of characters in politics. Moreover, characters can act as media and promote the development of social communication.

Chapter 5 turns to the world stage and concerns the role that characters play in building close connections between Japan and other nations. The chapter first looks at the progress of characters going overseas and highlights that a direct driving force for this is the Japanese government’s policies on cultural exchange. The focus then shifts to the particular context of China, where Japanese characters have been steadily consumed by Chinese audiences since the 1980s. Those audiences have grown up with the Japanese characters and like and identify with them, as well as using them to build their own character culture. In this sense, Japanese characters not only construct shared memories, but also a shared present between China and Japan.

The questions of how and why characters have become an important component of contemporary Japanese society and what the implications behind this development are, are not easy to answer. However, through an analysis of this study, some conclusions can be drawn.

Character merchandising, as a mechanism that transforms characters into commodities, caused the character commodity boom in Japan. This led to characters being widely consumed by consumers, including by children and adults, both male and female, while securing a role for them in socio-cultural phenomena, and creating a diverse range of ways to consume characters. Character consumption provides a means for consumers to pursue the expression of their individuality and sensibility, which not only deepens the inner connection between them and characters, but also closely ties characters to their self-identity.

Furthermore, consumers use characters to express their self-identity, which is reflected in the display or cosplay of their bodies. This is a form of personal presentation, but it is also a requirement of society that characters are put at the center

of the social stage and play an active role in social as well as international communication. In this sense, characters, as a form of discourse, reflect, constitute, and represent contemporary Japan.

