

【講演】

“Kawaii” — The Keyword of Japanese Girls’ Culture—

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In the past, things associated with the “Japanese culture” include “No,” “Kabuki,” “tea ceremony” and “Japanese waka” are so-called traditional culture which has a history of over one thousand years. Recently, however, such traditional culture has been replaced by the subculture of “anime” and “manga” etc. As a Japanese literary scholar, I have ambiguous feelings about this phenomenon. However, “subculture” is now certainly the center of the Japanese culture which is disseminated throughout the world. For example, the word “otaku” is now internationally understood.

As the bearer of the Japanese subculture, “otaku” mainly refers to men but actually, a form of subculture has been developed by women as well. The center of female subculture is “shojo manga.” Today, I will try to pick out one keyword which is representative of female subculture.

That word is “kawaii.” “Kawaii” is difficult to translate: the English word closest in meaning is “cute” but it doesn’t mean exactly the same thing. The word “kawaii” not only created subculture of young women after the seventies, it also influenced the inner mind, behavior, and the way of life for young women.

According to the dictionary, the essential meaning of the word “kawaii” is “the feeling of protecting the growth of someone weaker than oneself while hoping to bring them towards a desirable condition”; in short, it’s the feeling that you tend to have towards someone even weaker and smaller than you.

However, currently Japanese people, especially women, are using the word “kawaii” more broadly. For example, among “Ochadaï” or Ochanomizu university students, everyone has said “Teacher so-and-so is kawai-i” at least once. Moreover, they have said this about older male teachers. Originally “kawaii” was not the sort of word used for older people or for male teachers. This is because it is a word used when the

person you are addressing is smaller or weaker than you. Therefore, if young Japanese girls say “sensei kawaii,” and while they are clearing looking at that teacher, are they perhaps expressing that the teacher is lower than they are? That is not the case. Respecting the teacher yet saying that he is “kawaii” is never a contradiction.

From what direction did this usage of the word “kawaii” enter the Japanese language? I think the answer to that lies within the flow of today’s “onna no ko bunka” (girl’s culture) which I will introduce to you.

In current Japanese literature, the authors at the center of those who are translated and read in real time are not surprisingly Haruki Murakami and Oe Kenzaburo. Once, Yoshimoto Banana’s *Kitchen* was translated throughout the world and awarded various literature prizes as a new work of Japanese female literature. However, since it was written in 1987, already almost twenty years had passed since its original publication. I feel that even if today’s Japanese college students read this piece, it does not give them a new impression but rather one of ordinary content. If they were American students, I would feel this way even more.

However, at the time this book was presented, it was undoubtedly something new. One can observe the following ideas in her works. Firstly, she circles around the traditional idea of the home, having dismantled the patriarchic organization of the household. In addition, relationships : that is to say she presents a new family model which lacks blood ties while introducing transgender and stretching the borders of gender roles. Moreover, although you don’t see it in *Kitchen*, the next work she wrote contains various forms of incest romance. That too, if you look at it from a different perspective, this work is a challenge to the very nature of traditional family relationships because she challenges the largest taboo in family relationships.

“Ojisan” or middle-aged critics were surprised by Banana’s

works and highly evaluated them. However, for Yoshimoto's actual readers, in short, young teens and women in their twenties, these characteristics were not unusual because similar features were depicted in shojo manga long before the appearance of Banana.

Rather, I would say that Yoshimoto Banana was influenced by shojo manga, which she used to read. Banana said that she was a fan of comic artist Mariko Iwadate. And also, the relationship between the aunt and the main character in *Kanashii Yokan* is similar to the world that Minori Kimura already depicted in her manga. In contrast, food or the act of eating, which is essential in *Kitchen*, and relationships within the family both come to be depicted in Yumiko Oshima's *Diet* in a more vivid way and with a critical mind. So when we think about contemporary women's literature since the 1990s, what kind of literary lineage should we have in mind? This lineage is completely different from so-called canon by male authors.

Let's take a look at the genealogy of girl's stories since after the war. Moreover, I'd like to think about shojo manga since the seventies in terms of what kind of inner mind the shojo manga are narrating to girls and what do they mean for Japanese women in contemporary times?

First, to find the origin of girl's stories, we can go back to shojo shosetsu, written around 1910 or in the Taisho era. The pioneer figure for shojo shosetsu is Nobuko Yoshiya, who wrote *Flower Tales*. There are a lot of female writers who started to write stories because they were big fans of Nobuko Yoshiya. For them, Yoshiya is the so-called "kokoro no furusato" (hometown of the heart). This current continued after the war but started to deteriorate. Around this time, the works that Japanese girls of the post-war time were reading included *Anne of Green Gables* by L.M. Montgomery. In fact, Japanese women read the story of Anne more than anybody else in the world.

Other translated stories include Louise May Alcott's story *Little Women*, Jean Webster's *Daddy Long Legs*, and *Dear Enemy*. These works, in fact, were translated much earlier than Anne, and were translated right after the original works were published. *Anne of Green Gables*, *Little Women*, and *Daddy Long Legs*, for the young Japanese female readers, were almost like bibles. After the 1970's, the basis of shojo manga culture was constructed. There were two currents: manga artists such as Moto Hagio, Keiko Takemiya, and Ryoko Yamagishi who were called "24nengumi" meaning they were born in Showa 24 (1949). They are now

considered charismatic manga artists and the dealt with radical and philosophical issues as well as the issue of gender in their works in a way that was ahead of the times. This current is often academically studied.

However, there is another current which is related to the keyword "kawaii" which I discussed before. This current was invented by such manga artists as Aiko Mitsu, Yumiko Tabuchi, and Hideko Tachikake. According to Hideshi Otsuka, their works are called "otomechikku manga" or "maiden's manga". This manga, written by otomechikku artists, spread the idea of "kawaii" among girls.

The heroines who appear in otomechikku manga are all shying, ordinary, and not particularly intelligent. They are not often beautiful, and they are visually "cute". At the same time, they have cute inner minds. Otomechikku manga is a kind of manga which helps foster self-affirmation for girls; their characters are ordinary but "cute". They can be the way they are. In other words, girl readers are told that they don't have to stand out; they can be the way they are and do not have to try to be better than they are now. Because of your imperfections, you're cute.

Around the seventies, a big event happened in girls' culture concerning our keyword "kawaii". In 1947, Sanrio created characters called Hello Kitty and Patty & Jimmy. "Kitty-chan", who is a globally popular character, was created in 1974. The total sales of Sanrio in 1973 were around 19 million dollars; but because of the appearance of "Kitty-chan" the sale was raised to more 300 million. This is called the miracle of Sanrio. Around this time, stationery and goods started to be called "fancy goods". This is how it happened: not only in the minds of girls but also with goods surrounding them, had the idea of "kawaii" developed exponentially.

Next, I will explain what will happen to "kawaii" in the future. Many critics, including Otsuka, consider that because of the emergence of feminism, the "kawaii" boom started to deteriorate after the eighties and or that the value of "kawaii" has decreased. The eighties were an era of bubble economy. Women's consumerist activities became accelerated. Career women started to appear in trendy TV dramas. The keyword of the eighties is considered to be "desire", but by the time the bubble burst, people felt fatigue and the keyword from the eighties to the nineties changed into "searching for oneself" and "healing". Along with these keywords, Haruki Murakami and Banana Yoshimoto's works gained popularity.

Looking back, “kawaii” seems to be a kind of temporary mode, but this is not true. The taste of otomechikku manga (maiden’s manga) of the seventies was inherited by the world of fiction. Cabaret stories, which became popular in the eighties, are a type of works targeted 100% at young girls. This series was called Cabaret Bunko and was published by the Shueisha Company. The origin of Cabaret Bunko is found in shojo stories written in the Meiji and Taisho eras. They, in turn, originated in American girls’ stories like *Little Women* and *Daddy Long Legs*.

By the way, how do we accept the idea of “kawaii” in our lives in reality? Korean women, though they are Asians, do not want to be called “kawaii”. They want to be called beautiful: “Kawaii”, according to them, is a word indicates a pet or “Kitty-chan”. Therefore, as adult women, they are not happy to be called “kawaii”. And of course, western women also think the same way. A woman wants to be recognized as an independent “adult” woman. To be called “kawaii” suggests that they are immature; it has a negative connotation. In my opinion, Japanese women want to be called “kawaii” forever. This has both positive and negative implications. Now, let us think about the word, “kawaii”.

There are two aspects of the word “kawaii” which I want to mention. First, if we follow the conventional meaning of “kawaii”, the fact that women want to be called “kawaii” (keeping in mind that the word is used by superiors to refer to their inferiors) suggests that they allow themselves to be dominated within the power structure by men.

In relation to this, after the 70s, the meaning of the new “kawaii” that had come to be associated with girls as introduced in the words of Hideshi Otsuka: “the term ‘kawaii’ was a word that was used to dominate women, however, women turned around the meaning of the word and used it as a way to take control of their world. In short, they have the power to reconstruct their own world by using this new idea of ‘kawaii’.”

It makes a difference to think about where this word is being directed. Certainly, when the word “kawaii” is directed by girls towards the outside world it will create power as Otsuka pointed out. However, when this word is directed inwardly towards girls themselves it prevents Japanese women from becoming mature.

People probably still don’t know exactly what kind of thing is called “kawaii”. In recent Japanese subculture there is a term called “moe” which is equally as hard to define as “kawaii”. Some characters like “Kitty-chan” are definitely cute. “Kitty-chan” was purposely designed; it was made to be thought cute by Japanese people. It has a large rounded head and body that are roughly the same size, two eyes that are spaced far apart, and no mouth. If a mouth is depicted, it will create various expressions which will produce self-assertiveness in the character. “Kitty-chan” has a simple design.

As for the “kawaii” referred to by high school girls, it may not necessarily be understood by Ochanomizu students. By sharing the idea of “kawaii” people create small communities. In any case, today we still have the term “kawaii” and it is a very important concept when we think about Japanese society and young girls.

Lastly, I’d like to go back to literature. I started my talk by referring to Banana Yoshimoto. The biggest contribution of Yoshimoto was making society recognize the importance of shojo manga. The middle-aged men who were impressed by Yoshimoto’s work were taught by young women that shojo manga was much more advanced. To me, who was a college student at the time, it was a feeling of “you just realized this now?” Shojo manga used to be considered unimportant. But by the appearance of Yoshimoto, shojo manga started to be treated with respect. Because of the influence of cultural studies, when we study Japanese subculture we all discuss shojo manga. We appreciate Yoshimoto because the girls’ culture that we love so much is finally recognized. I am hoping that girls’ Cabaret stories will be studied as well.

It is very important to understand the history of Japanese girls’ culture when talking about contemporary women’s writers. Kei Yuikawa who received the Naoki award and Natsuo Kirino, a mystery writer who was recently nominated for the Edgar award, used to write for Cabaret. I believe Japanese culture and literature will develop further and hope that the study of girls’ culture will be developed as well.