CHAPTER 8

Ch 8: Cute and Cool in Contemporary Japanese Visual Arts

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Introduction

In February 2009 the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced three new ambassadors to Japan. Announced as *kawaii taishi*, “cute ambassadors,” three young female fashion icons, Aoki Misako, Kimura Yû, and Fujioka Shizuka, were promoted to represent Japan as “Trend Communicators of Japanese Pop Culture.”

Figure 8.1 is a photo from the official announcement ceremony in Tokyo. News media around the globe reported on this event, and many images of the new pop culture ambassadors circulated worldwide. The three cute ambassadors have been busy travelling the world to engage in events related to Japanese popular culture, such as the Japan Expo in Paris in July 2009, Salón del Manga in Barcelona in November 2009, or participating in a Lolita’s Parade in Rio de Janeiro also in November 2009. Thousands of fans of Japanese sweet and cute popular culture gather at such events to cheer their idols and to be part of the activities through dressing up in the same style of clothes or participating in amateur catwalk display. Blog comments on YouTube video documentation of such events reveal enthusiastic expressions, as when the user identified as kagenotenshi writes “kawaii,” or shatteredlolita exclaims that “you just have to love the gothic lolita fashion.”

The cute ambassadors are subject to great attraction and thousands of fans around the world have expressed their fascination. One fan expressed devotion toward one of the cute ambassadors, Aoki Misako, in a comment on a YouTube blog: “Misako!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

* All Japanese names in the text are given in the Japanese order with last name preceding given name. The text was first published in a shorter version in *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies* 29:1 (2011), 39–60.


Is my idol and is the cutest thing in the world. I have seen her alive and she is even [more] beautiful than [on] pictures and videos. Misako keep it up!’’

In contrast to the apparent wholehearted admiration of fans around the globe, the appointment of three cute ambassadors was received by Western media with equal amounts of blunt ridicule and dumbfounded headshaking. One blogger commented: “Is this serious? It seems so and still can’t find my jaw somewhere around the floor.” The announcement was mainly dismissed as either the Japanese government’s total disregard of the fine art of diplomacy, or as yet another proof of the Japanese government’s complete surrender to the logics of soft power promotion of popular culture to boost Japan’s Gross National Product.

The main concept in this performance of international diplomacy is the word kawaii. Kawaii translates as sweet, cute, innocent, pure, gentle, vulnerable,
