

## *Kawaii* as Represented in Scientific Research: The Possibilities of *Kawaii* Cultural Studies

### Abstract

In this paper, I will analyse and classify the scientific discussion of *kawaii* (which means ‘cute’ in English), one of the most important components of contemporary Japanese popular culture; which has been diffused throughout the world and become a transnational culture. I will identify three main discussions in *kawaii* studies: (1) *kawaii* as a Japanese proper aesthetic and its origin; (2) *kawaii* as making a Japanese social feature out of immaturity; and (3) *kawaii* as a form of globalised culture from the points of view of politics/diplomacy, globalisation, and orientalism. I will delineate further research possibilities to be carried out in Japanese popular contemporary culture, particularly *kawaii* culture and its relevance in the global and transnational communication age.

**Keywords:** *kawaii*, Japanese popular culture, Japanese aesthetics, transnationalism, orientalism.

### 1. Introduction

This paper argues for the possibilities of scientific research on *kawaii* (which means ‘cute’ in English), one of the most important components of contemporary Japanese popular culture, which has been diffused throughout the world and become a transnational culture.

Since the 1990s when items of Japanese popular culture such as manga, extravagant street fashions, and video games began to be exported to the world, the term *kawaii*<sup>2</sup> has been used in Europe, particularly during the French-organised Japan Expo, a Japanese cultural festival, and indeed throughout the world. The term *kawaii* has also become a

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<sup>2</sup> In the actual Japanese situation, the description of *kawaii* varies among Japanese magazines. For example, the term *kawaii* could indicate a style attracting the opposite sex in the Japanese fashion journal *Cancam*, which appeals to university students and young office workers (Reiko Koga, *Kawaii no Teikoku* [The Empire du “Kawaii”], Tokyo: Seidosha 2006, pp. 123–137). At the same time, this term refers to a style independent of the opposite sex’s opinions and emanating from Japanese society, such as the Gothic Lolita style that appeared in the fashion magazine *Cuties*, which is read by teenagers, or an encore of the “Otona *kawaii*” (literally “adult cute”) style, in the feminine maturity magazine *Story*, whose readers are primarily women in their forties (Kyoko Koma, “*Kawaii* in Europe Seen through a Questionnaire Survey in France and Lithuania”, in *Reception of Japanese and Korean Popular Culture in Europe*, Kyoko Koma (ed.), Kaunas: Vytautas Magnus University, 2011, p. 67).

representative keyword<sup>3</sup> for ‘Cool Japan’<sup>4</sup>; as evidenced by the appointment by the director general of the Public Diplomacy Department in the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs; of three people from fashion and pop culture, as ‘Trend Communicators of Japanese Pop Culture’, or ‘*Kawaii* Ambassadors’, in order to promote Japanese pop culture, which currently enjoys high popularity among young people worldwide. In contrast to the first Japonism of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, 21<sup>st</sup>-century Japanese popular culture, considered a second Japonism by the Japanese government<sup>5</sup>, has spread into a highly information-orientated world shaped by the Internet. *Kawaii* can be considered a 21<sup>st</sup>-century transnational culture that has diffused across borders.

Even though an appreciation of contemporary Japanese popular culture is one of the most common motivations for students to learn the Japanese language and study Japan in general terms at university; the amount of scientific research on contemporary Japanese popular culture including *kawaii*, is extremely limited because this object of inquiry is not considered part of the high culture that has traditionally been studied. However, it is possible to find some tentative research on *kawaii* culture by Japanese and foreign scholars. Therefore, in this paper, I will analyse and classify the scientific discussion on *kawaii*, examining the problems that are central to its interest inside and outside Japan; looking at how researchers position and represent *kawaii* culture, and even how they recognise Japan through the *kawaii* phenomenon. Through this analysis and survey, I will identify the further possibilities and central problems in research on Japanese popular contemporary culture, particularly *kawaii* culture.

## 2. The publication of scientific books on *kawaii* in Japan influenced by the popularity of Japanese pop culture

*Kawaii* has been accepted outside of Japan since 2006<sup>6</sup>, when Japanese contemporary popular culture came into fashion worldwide.<sup>7</sup> During that year, a book on *kawaii* was published by the author Inuhiko Yomota, professor of Meiji

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<sup>3</sup> One of the keywords of Japan Expo 2012 in France, considered one of the biggest Japanese popular cultural festivals, was *kawaii* (*Nikkei Entertainment*, September 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Cool Japan is a Japanese cultural phenomenon that includes anime, fashion, and foods that are popular outside Japan (evening edition of the *Japanese Economics* newspaper, 8 January 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Aurelijus Zykas, “Traditional and Popular Culture Discourses within the Post-war Development of Japan’s Cultural Diplomacy”, *Acta Orientalia Vilnensia*, Vol. 12–1, 2011, p. 113.

<sup>6</sup> Before the beginning of the *kawaii* boom abroad, a book on *kawaii* called *The Kawaii Syndrome* (1994) by Shuichi Masubuchi, *Shojo Minzokugaku* [Ethnology of Shojo] (first edition published in 1989) by Eiji Otsukawere was published. Masubuchi discusses *kawaii* as a second-rate cultural notion under the leadership of women and children that describes Japanese feelings, behaviour, and lifestyle in contemporary Japanese society (Shuichi Masubuchi, *The Kawaii Syndrome*, Tokyo: NHK Publisher, 1994, pp. 18–19). Otsuka argues it was since the end of forties of the *Showa* era when the *kawaii* shōjo culture has been seriously started to diffuse in Japan (Eiji Otsuka, *Shojo Minzokugaku*, Tokyo: Kobunsha, 1996, pp. 48–68).

<sup>7</sup> As a result of French cable television specialising in Japanese popular culture. *Nolife’s* Japanese business manager Suzuka Asaoka also said in my interview with her that in about 2006–2007, Japanese popular culture and *kawaii* culture started to gain more of a reputation.

Gakuin University, and produced by Chikuma Edition as a paperback book aimed to reach a very broad audience. Three more books on *kawaii* were published in 2009: *A Study on Kawaii Paradigm Design* by Tomoharu Makabe with Heibonsha; *The Empire of 'Kawaii': Fashion, Media and Girls* by Reiko Koga with Seidosha; and *World Kawaii Revolution: Why They Want to be Japanese*, written by Takamasa Sakurai, a member of the Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and published by PHP. In 2010, in the book *The Future of Japanese Creative Power: Possibilities of Cool Japanology*, edited by Hiroki Azuma, a Japanese sociologist, Shinji Miyadai detailed the history of *kawaii* since 1963 in Japanese society in his chapter, titled “The Essence of *kawaii*”. In 2011, T. Botz-Bornsteins published his book *Cool kawaii* in which the two aesthetics influencing international youth culture are described. In 2012, during its exhibition on *kawaii*, the Yayoi Museum published a book titled 『日本のかわいい図鑑』 [Nihon no *kawaii* zukan] (*The Japanese Kawaii Illustrated Reference Book*) written by Keiko Nakamura.

Three points of discussion on *kawaii* raised in these books are summarised below.

1. *Kawaii* as an aesthetic native to Japan,
2. *Kawaii* as an immature culture,
3. *Kawaii* as a diffused and acculturated culture in foreign countries (in terms of cultural studies and public diplomacy).

I will survey these points in detail, in order to identify and examine the central problems in research on Japanese popular contemporary culture, particularly *kawaii* culture, and to propose further research possibilities.

### 3. A discussion about *kawaii*

#### 3.1. The origin of *kawaii* as an aesthetic sense native to or acculturated by Japan and its development.

The origin of *kawaii* as an aesthetic sense native to or acculturated by Japan and its development is one of the unavoidable questions for scholars studying the *kawaii* phenomenon.

Inuhiko Yomota published the first essay on *kawaii* at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when Japanese popular culture was diffusing into a more general, worldwide culture. The publisher asked him in 2002 when Japanese popular culture had started to become diffused. On the fourth cover of this book, there is the following summary:

“Japanese characters such as Hello Kitty, Pokemon, and Sailor Moon overwhelmed all of the world. (...) Why did Japanese *kawaii* give off such a dazzling light? This book is the first tentative attempt to analyse diachronically and synchronically the structure of *kawaii* by placing *kawaii* with the aesthetics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.” (Inuhiko Yomota, “*Kawaii*” *Ron* [Understanding “Kawaii”], Tokyo: Chikuma Shoten, 2006, last page)

The author analyses *kawaii* historically as an aesthetic. The source of *kawaii* is firstly argued to originate from *Pillow Book*, by Seisho Nagon. Yomota explained that Arthur David Waley, translator of *Pillow Book*, chose to translate the term

うつくし(美し、愛し)[Utsukushi] into English as ‘pretty’. うつくし [Utsukushi], which can also correspond to ‘beautiful’, is someone who is ‘innocent’, ‘an infant’, ‘pure’, and someone who needs the protection of an adult.<sup>8</sup> The author continued to argue that *kawaii* as an aesthetic has been developed from *Pillow Book*; through the Edo kabuki popular novels, and the author Osamu Dazai, into the original Japanese aesthetic of a feeling toward things that are small, fragile and need to be protected from others. Yomota stated that “someone who personifies *kawaii* is not a mature, beautiful person, but feminine, childish, submissive, and pure which is considered an inferior one to me”.<sup>9</sup> He contemplated the close relationship between the grotesque and *kawaii* by considering the character of ET in Steven Spielberg’s film *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982). Yomota outlined his hypothesis about why we are attracted to the uncanny based on psychoanalytical books such as *The Uncanny of Freud*.<sup>10</sup>

In 2009 Reiko Koga, a professor at Bunka Joshi University, published her research on *kawaii* titled *The Empire of ‘Kawaii’: Mode and Media and Girls*, with the publisher Seido Edition in Japan. Unlike Yomota, Koga stated that the source of *kawaii* is “*shōjo* (‘girls’ in English) culture,” which was formed at the end of Meiji period and persisted until the beginning of the Taisho. Koga makes her point through diachronic analysis of *kawaii* from the beginning to the present day, touching on the media and customs of each period. According to her, the bases of Japanese native *Kawaii* culture are the Pre-war ‘girls’ culture, with its ideals 「清く、正しく、美しく」 [Kiyoku, tadashiku, utsukusiku] (Purity, Honesty, Beauty), the ‘Western’ young lady’s style, proposed by Junichi Nakahara<sup>11</sup>, and Japanese youth culture which after World War II<sup>12</sup>, sang the praises of liberty and consumption. Koga shows that the contemporary meaning of *kawaii* in Japan is polysemic, and includes not only immaturity, but also in particular other styles, such as bourgeois or French, that are not considered ‘immature’.<sup>13</sup>

In 2012, during its exhibition on *kawaii*, the Yayoi Museum published a book titled 『日本のかわいい図鑑』 [Nihon no *kawaii* zukan] which translates as (*Japanese Kawaii Illustrated Reference Book*) written by Keiko Nakamura. The author showed that ‘Hello Kitty’, which is a contemporary *kawaii* cultural character, became largely diffused throughout the world, through consumer goods and other character products which were created and developed originally in Japan under the strong influence of

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>10</sup> Yomota explained “the close relationship between *kawaii* and the grotesque is that although a woman’s sexual organs is the place where I was born, once it is hidden and suppressed, a sense of closeness to this organ seems to be changed to the uncanny. In grotesque things that are evaded, a trace of unconscious suppression is lays” (ibid., pp. 80, 81).

<sup>11</sup> Junichi Nakahara (1913–1983) is a Japanese painter who indicated guidelines for women’s ‘beautiful life’ through the publication of women’s magazine *Soreiyu* (1946), and the girls magazine *Junior Soreiyu* (1954) (Keiko Nakamura, *Japanese “Kawaii” Encyclopedia*, Tokyo: Kawade shobo shinsha, 2012, p. 123).

<sup>12</sup> Koga, *Kawaii no...*, p. 34.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 202–216.

Western culture.<sup>14</sup> As Koga said, on admitting that the Japanese *kawaii* ‘good shave’ absorbed, acculturated and appropriated Western culture; and as Nakamura argued, these Westernised *kawaii* goods are today being ‘returned’ to the rest of the world. The origin of *kawaii* is considered by K. Nakamura to be products created and sold by Yumeji Takeshita<sup>15</sup>, such as letter paper that was influenced by Western tastes.<sup>16</sup> That is, Nakamura agreed with Koga that *kawaii* culture diffused and interpreted as Japanese popular culture is not purely a Japanese aesthetic, but rather a kind of appropriation of Western culture in a Japanese style.

I was even able to find a research study on *kawaii* as a Japanese aesthetic by a non-Japanese scholar, specifically *The Cool Kawaii* by Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, published in 2011. Botz-Bornstein argued that recently *kawaii* has been one of two types of aesthetic dominating international youth culture, the other being African American ‘cool’ such as hip hop. When put together, *Kawaii* and ‘cool’ are able to play with different layers of reality, which permits them to achieve an almost dreamlike quality and makes them most appropriate for artistic productions. The Japanese aesthetic of *kawaii*, or ‘cute’, is distributed internationally by Japan’s powerful anime industry.<sup>17</sup> Although Botz-Bornstein argues that *kawaii* has no equivalent in Western culture and what equivalent there is, is definitely not ‘cute’, the *kawaii shōjo* (‘girl’ in Japanese) is not the personification of the traditional Japanese ideal of the feminine, but signifies an ideological institution of the modern Japanese women in the Meiji period, that is, a feminine image based on Westernisation.<sup>18</sup>

According to Botz-Bornstein, because *kawaii* can also signify Japanese girls street fashion, for him the term relates strongly to the girl, so his characterisation of the term *kawaii* is in relation to the ‘girl’, the *kawaii shōjo*. Thus the author defines *kawaii* as Westernised Japanese culture, acculturated into Western culture (which has no equivalent of the Japanese ‘cute’), which is then distributed internationally by powerful Japanese production companies. Botz-Bornstein concludes “[*kawaii* as New World Modernity] is neither *McWorld* nor a sort of ethicised anti-modernity. [*Kawaii*] culture suggests the use of ‘real-life’ juxtapositions, which attempt to incorporate both capitalist and counter-cultural values through a tragic interplay of opposing force”.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Nakamura, *Japanese “Kawaii”...*, pp. 4–5.

<sup>15</sup> Yumeji Takehisa (1884–1993) was a poet and painter. The beauty of the Yumeji style was in the big eyes of the Western style, which became very popular in this period (Daijisen). This could be explained by the fact that because of his popularity, Yumeji Takehisa often offered his images to the Japanese women’s fashion magazine 婦人グラフ [Fujin Gurafu] (*Women’s Graphics in English*) published by Kokusai Johosha between 1924 and 1928, which imitated the French fashion magazine *Art, gout, beauté* (Arbert Codde, Bedin 1921–1933, [dspace.bunka.ac.jp/dspace/bitstream/10457/1817/1/0210606\\_0014.pdf](http://dspace.bunka.ac.jp/dspace/bitstream/10457/1817/1/0210606_0014.pdf) (accessed 27.06.2013)).

<sup>16</sup> Nakamura, *Japanese “Kawaii”...*, p. 8.

<sup>17</sup> Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, *The Cool Kawaii*, Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2010, back cover.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxvi.

Thus, although the origin of *kawaii* is considered to be ‘*Pillow Book*’, as Yomota posited, it can also be considered a form of modernism from around the Taisho era, when the reception and criticism of Westernisation were mixed. As mentioned above, some scholars consider contemporary Japanese *kawaii* as being developed through the Japanese reception of Western culture. This tendency can be found in other Japanese cultural artefacts or phenomenon, because Japanese culture can be considered as an acculturated culture<sup>20</sup>; although Japanese *kawaii* culture tends to be considered a Japanese native feature characterised by ‘immaturity’.

### 3.2. *Kawaii* as ‘immature’ culture

*Kawaii* culture tends to be considered as an immature feature native to Japan.

Sharon Kinsella identified in her article “Cuties in Japan”<sup>21</sup> several aspects of *kawaii* culture from 1970 to the beginning of the 1990s, before Japanese contemporary popular culture became popular worldwide. She focused on ‘cute’ handwriting and slang, the fancy goods industry, cute clothes, cute food, cute idols, cute ideas, childhood romance, adulthood and individualism, cute ladies, cute consumption, and ‘anti-cute’ ideas! She stated that “*kawaii* style dominated Japanese popular culture in the 1980s. *Kawaii* or «cute» essentially means childlike; it celebrates sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak, and inexperienced social behaviour and physical appearances”. For Kinsella, “cute style saturated the multi-media and consumer goods and services whilst they were expanding rapidly between 1970 and 1990 and reached a peak of ‘saccharine intensity’ in the early 1980s”.<sup>22</sup> Through her analysis, which is based on the structure of *amae* (dependence) by Takeo Doi, Kinsella determined that, “the overwhelming desire of young Japanese, wrapped up in the nostalgic cute culture was to escape the restrictions governing their lives such as self-discipline (*enryo*), responsibility (*sekinin*), having to tolerate (*gaman*) severe conditions (*kuro*), working hard (*doryoku*), and their obligations (*giri, on*).<sup>23</sup>

Kinsella noted that *kawaii* culture suggested ‘immaturities’ such as longing “to escape from the restrictions governing their lives”, although she does not consider contemporary Japanese popular culture artefacts in her paper.

In contrast, Thorsten Botz-Bornstein did not treat *kawaii* as a Japanese native cultural phenomenon, as Kinsella did, but rather considered it “one of two types of aesthetics dominating international youth culture”. Botz-Bornstein stated that *kawaii* stands for “Dandyist and [is] closely related to the search for human dignity and liberation”.<sup>24</sup> *Kawaii* culture employs “some pattern in order to undertake a subversive

<sup>20</sup> According to Takeo Kuwahara, there are three Japanese cultural strata: a layer of Japanese conscience modernised under Occidental influence; a layer of Confucian Japanese culture, such as Japanese traditional warrior culture; a layer of shamanistic culture including elements such as shrine worship (Isao Kumakura, *Bunka to shite no manaa* [Manner as Culture], Tokyo: Iwanamishoten, 1999, pp. 7–8).

<sup>21</sup> Sharon Kinsella, “Cuties in Japan”, in *Women Media and Consumption in Japan*, Lise Skov and Brian Moeran (eds.), Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996, pp. 220–254.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251.

<sup>24</sup> Botz-Bornstein, *The Cool...*, pp. xxv–xxvi.

liquefaction of value, and it is social expressions that invite interaction and try to involve the spectator's imagination".<sup>25</sup> The *kawaiis* of Kinsella and Botz-Bornstein have one similarity – both contend that *kawaii* culture involves 'immaturity' and does not aspire to be the centre of social rules, rather it deviates from them.

Connected with Kinsella's thesis of *kawaii* culture as "immaturity and escape from Japanese rules", Charlène Veillon refers to Takashi Murakami and his work as a Japanese contemporary artist in her book *L'art contemporain japonais: une quête d'identité, de 1990 à nos jours* (Japanese Contemporary Art: A search for Identity, from 1990 to the present), L'Harmattan 2008.<sup>26</sup>

It is true that Takashi Murakami himself confesses to this immaturity in Otaku<sup>27</sup> or *kawaii* culture (Japanese popular cultural works), but the artist refers to the reasons as the 'castration' of Japan by the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the occupation of Japan by America after World War II:

"Regardless of the outcome of the war, the bottom line is that for the past sixty years, Japan has been a testing ground for an American-style capitalist economy, protected as in a greenhouse, nurtured and bloated to the point of explosion. The results are so strange that they are perfect. Whatever true intentions underlay Little Boy, the nickname for the Hiroshima atomic bomb, we Japanese are truly, deeply pampered children. As pampered children, we have constant tantrums while remaining enthralled by our cuteness (...) Unconditional love for things that are *kawaii* and *hetare*. An otaku life style (...) Our experience, this prescription for self-medicated denizens of a castrated nation-state, may well be appropriated in the future world as an exemplary model of rehabilitation".<sup>28</sup>

Shinji Miyadai, a Japanese sociologist, discussed the history of the *kawaii* culture in Japan in his article 「かわいいの本質」 [*kawaii no honsitsu*] ("The Essence of *Kawaii* in English"). He stated that the term *kawaii* has been used in Japanese media since 1963. In Japan, immaturity exists despite an obsession with maturity and an innate respect for authenticity, which is the origin of imitation, equivalent to immaturity. Against this background, we have feelings such as "we are an 'imitation'" that were provoked by rapid Westernisation and modernisation.<sup>29</sup> According to Miyadai, the function of Japanese popular culture/*kawaii* makes it irrelevant in the context of 'liberation'.<sup>30</sup> *Kawaii* functions best when people cannot have their dreams.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. xxv, pp. 63–65.

<sup>26</sup> Charlène Veillon, *L'art contemporain japonais: une quête d'identité. De 1990 à nos jours*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008, p. 63.

<sup>27</sup> In English, *otaku* refers to a variety of geek or fanboy/fangirl obsessed with anime and manga: <http://encycl.opentopia.com/term/Otaku> (accessed 29.09.2013).

<sup>28</sup> Takashi Murakami, *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005, p. 141.

<sup>29</sup> Shinji Miyadai, "Kawaii no Honsitsu" [The Essence of *Kawaii*], in *Nihonteki Souzouryoku no Mirai-Cool Japanology no Kanousei* [The future of Japanese creativity-Possibilities of Cool Japanology], Hiroki Azuma (ed.), NHKbooks, 2010, pp. 98, 99.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 208.

Thus, it is no longer useful in the Japanese context, although it could be appropriate in other places. The immaturity of *kawaii* functions as a kind of cocoon, in the terminology of Miyadai, a safe haven from the authenticity/maturity provoked by rapid Westernisation and modernisation.<sup>31</sup> Miyadai continued to develop the idea that this function is used not only in Japan, but also is diffused throughout the world wherever people cannot achieve their dreams. The increased number of people falling into dangerous situations because of globalisation also increases the number of the people who could be saved by Japanese popular culture.<sup>32</sup>

The expression of this function presupposes that *kawaii* culture could be formed as fiction, not as reality, in order to reinforce the binominal opposition, that is, ‘maturity’ (genuine) vs. ‘immaturity’ (imitation) from a Modernist point of view.

Nevertheless, it is possible to suggest that the immaturity (imitation) of *kawaii*'s nature has been constructed in light of the maturity (genuineness) of the Occidental standard, and from the Japanese point of view, the desire to bring the Occidental ‘standard’ closer after the Meiji period, and the opening of the country to foreign trade and diplomatic relations. It is true that a system of representation, the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ could produce an individual identity, while representations of ourselves and others produces a collective ‘identity’<sup>33</sup>; but how can “the point of view of ‘Modernist Cultural Understanding’”<sup>34</sup> be avoided when Japanese *kawaii* is examined?

Keath Vincent discusses the genealogy of Japanese immaturity. Considering *kawaii* as exemplified in the art of Takashi Murakami's satire against modernisation/maturation<sup>35</sup>, Vincent argued that we need to abandon the immaturity stereotype of Japan, which is based on binominal opposition, for example “men and women” or “mature and immature”<sup>36</sup>, and go beyond the presupposition of sexuality as the action between living men and women who aim to be ‘mature’ and ‘normal’.<sup>37</sup> Vincent proposes that the childish image of Japan could be a device that permits one to think long and hard about how the understanding of our childhood days and how a “graduation, awakening from this period and growth has been wrapped in the conceptual meaning of the Modern world”<sup>38</sup>.

Could the aesthetic of *kawaii*, as Vincent argued, be considered to have a relationship with a notion of Daisetsu Suzuki's 「無分別の分別」 [mufunbetsu no funbetu], which translates as (no-discrimination)? “No discrimination” is saturated with various duality concepts from Western thought: subjectivity vs. objectivity,

<sup>31</sup> Keath Vincent, “日本の未熟性の系譜” [Nihonteki Mijukusei no Keifu (*Genealogy of Japanese Immaturity*)], in 『日本の想像力の未来』 [Nihonteki Souzouryoku no mirai] (*Future of Japanese Creative Power-Possibilities of Cool Japanology*), H. Azuma (ed.), Tokyo: NHK Books, pp. 19–20.

<sup>32</sup> Miyadai, “*Kawaii* no...”, p. 252.

<sup>33</sup> Bruno Olivier, “Les identites collectives: comment comprendre une question politique brulante?”, in *Les Identites collectives*, Paris: CNRS Editions, 2009, p. 8.

<sup>34</sup> Vincent, “Nihonteki Mijukusei...”, p. 26.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

object vs. mind, existence vs. nothingness, God vs. human beings, existence vs. value, good vs. bad, and sacred vs. profane.<sup>39</sup> That is, “knowledge of wisdom” tends not to incline toward either side of dual oppositions in order to overcome its relativity, and to come up with an idea to unify West and East, and to speculate on the new world. Could *kawaii* be re-examined from the point of view of “knowledge of wisdom”, as a culture that is flexible enough to have acculturated Western culture, and to have “the incomplete beauty” native to Japan.

### 3.3. *Kawaii* as a diffused and acculturated culture in foreign countries (in terms of cultural studies and public diplomacy)

As a diffused and acculturated culture in foreign countries, *kawaii* is considered to have some possibilities as a public diplomacy ‘tool’. ‘Cool’ Japan, of which one of the most representative key word is *kawaii*, has been promoted by the Japanese government as a public diplomacy device. The two following discussions show opposite representative positions on this policy.

Takamasa Sakurai published his study of *kawaii* as a tool of public diplomacy, *World Kawaii Revolution: Why They Want to be Japanese*, with PHP. He conducted his research as a member of the Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy, of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In his book, Sakurai emphasised the popularity of Japanese popular culture and *kawaii* culture, showing positive ideas about *kawaii*, such as “*kawaii* is the most diffused Japanese word in the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” or “the girls of all of the world started to follow ‘Harajuku fashion’. Only the Japanese themselves do not know how Japan is loved”. The keyword for escape from depression is ‘*kawaii*’<sup>40</sup>, and so on. Through this book, the author proclaims the popularity of *kawaii* culture as a device for promoting business and cultural diplomacy. In contrast, Yasushi Watanabe discussed Japanese popular culture in his book 『文化と外交』[*Bunka to gaiko*] (*Culture and Diplomacy*) published in 2011 by Chukou Edition. Although he admitted that “from Pop music to home appliances, architecture to fashion, anime to food, Japan shows more cultural power than achieved economic power”<sup>41</sup>, he also stated that “aiming to achieve political ends with ‘Cool’ Japan<sup>42</sup> is very ambiguous” and “the original driving force of Cool Japan is not the government but the people”. Thus, he showed that “there is a risk of reducing its charm by half because of governmental intervention”

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<sup>39</sup> Kansho Ueda, 「禅と世界」[Zen to Sekai] (Zen and the World), 『禅と日本文化9—禅と現代』[Zen to Nihonbunka 9-Zen to Gendai] (Zen and Japanese Culutre-Zen and Today), Eshin Nishimura (ed.), Kyoto: Perikan Publisher, 1998, pp. 148–149.

<sup>40</sup> Takamasa Sakurai, *Sekai Kawaii Kakumei* [World Kawaii Revolution], Kyoto: PHP Shinsho, 2009, first cover.

<sup>41</sup> Yasusi Watanabe, *Gaiko to Bunka* [Diplomacy and Culture], Tokyo: ChuoKoron Shinha, 2011, pp. 87–92.

<sup>42</sup> The “Cool Japan Strategy” is a strategy through which Japan considers artefacts such as fashion, design, anime, film, and food as the “Japan the world wants”, in order to increase the advance of Japanese exports into overseas markets and the number of foreign tourists visiting Japan. Cool Japan is a Japanese cultural phenomena which incorporates anime, fashion, and food that are popular abroad (evening edition of *Japanese Economics* newspaper, 8 January, 2011).

and also that “cool power is just a source of *softpower*. The policy’s purpose, context, method and object make cool power soft power”.<sup>43</sup>

Thus *kawaii* could not be evaluated as a ‘tool’ of public diplomacy according to this position. In this domain, further research on how *kawaii* culture diffused in a ‘bottom-up’ way should be performed in comparison to its promotion in a ‘top-down’ way by the Japanese government as a public diplomacy ‘tool’.

The second observation about acculturated *kawaii* culture abroad in scientific research, is the way in which *kawaii* culture is considered and interpreted abroad. The main question is can *kawaii* be considered an ‘odourless’ form of culture that makes context irrelevant, or is it an ethnic/exotic culture that has taken root in a stereotype of Japan. Yomota devotes one chapter in his book, *An Essay on Kawaii*, to the situation of *kawaii* culture advancing abroad, and states then asks: “*kawaii* is Japan’s own aesthetic, and because it leads the world in using the globalised situation could this *kawaii* aesthetic be diffused to all of the world?” He also states then asks “*kawaii* could be a universal aesthetic for human beings; by chance this discourse on aesthetics has appeared in Japan; does Japan develop this type of cultural product?”<sup>44</sup>

As Yomota quoted, K. Iwabuchi went on to show that when Japanese cultural products aim to be exported to the global market, they should be odourless, creating a distance from the stereotypical images constructed by foreign countries.<sup>45</sup>

What is more, as previously mentioned, Japanese sociologist Shinji Miyadai discussed *kawaii* culture as one that makes context ‘irrelevant’<sup>46</sup>, stating his hypothesis that this central function of *kawaii* culture is globalised. Miyadai continued to show that since this function of *kawaii* is no longer available in Japanese society, the function has begun to be diffused.<sup>47</sup> However, we can find some questions about this hypothesis. (1) Even if Japanese popular culture has a role that makes social context irrelevant, the consumption of Japanese popular culture is based on national things that are Japanese.<sup>48</sup> (2) Japan proposes popular culture phenomena such as anime or games as new materials, that generate the transnational connection without a mobilisation that could be considered nationalism.<sup>49</sup> Here *kawaii* is not discussed from the point of view of exoticism or orientalism.

However, on the other hand, the acculturation of *kawaii* could be considered exoticism-orientalism by some nationalities such as the French, which is a hangover from the ‘Japonism’ at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in France.<sup>50</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup>-century

<sup>43</sup> Watanabe, *Gaiko to...*, pp. 87–92.

<sup>44</sup> Inuhiko Yomota, “*Kawaii*” *Ron* [Understanding “*Kawaii*”], Tokyo: Chikuma Shoten, 2006, p. 183.

<sup>45</sup> Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2002, p. 30.

<sup>46</sup> Miyadai, “*Kawaii* no...”, p. 208.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 245.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246.

<sup>50</sup> Kyoko Koma, “La représentation de la femme à travers la mode dans la presse française au début des XX<sup>e</sup> et XXI<sup>e</sup> siècles” [The Representation of Japanese Woman through Fashion in French Media at the Beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries] in *Japon pluriel 11* (on press).

novel *Madam Chrysanthemum*, the narrator states, “I really abuse the adjective ‘*petit*’ [‘little’ in English], I know it well, but what could I do? In describing the things of this country, I tended to use it 10 times in a line. Little, vapid, cute (in a negative sense), the moral and physical statures of Japan are in these three words”.<sup>51</sup> The narrator used the adjective ‘*mignon*’ (“cute” in English), as in, “Elles sont mignons (they are cute)”. As the French writer Michel Butor said, “Loti felt adult in a childish country...”. What’s more, as I commented earlier, S. Kinsella says that *kawaii* is a way of escaping from the restrictions governing Japanese youth. Even now, as Brian Moeran indicated with regards to images of Japan presented in British advertisements; Japanese people are often represented as children, women, or incomprehensible.<sup>52</sup>

But how could the process of the global diffusion of Japanese *kawaii* be examined? Should *kawaii* culture be examined as orientalism based on a Western look? Or should it be examined as a device that makes context ‘irrelevant’ in a global context, or as a culturally odourless artefact? Miyadai proposed investigating which type of people are in difficult situations in which they cannot advance without the utilisation of this function of *kawaii*, a situation “that makes context irrelevant”. As Hiroki Azuma and Miyadai mentioned, suggesting that even if the way of construction of identity or the generation of solidarity enables people to find that *otaku* culture is globalised, they could not always connect to national mobilisation.<sup>53</sup>

In any case, in examining the globalisation process of *kawaii*; the method of comparing the acculturation of *kawaii* culture in several countries outside Japan would be effective. As a case study, I will show the results of interviews I carried out on *kawaii* in France and Lithuania.<sup>54</sup> The reason that I chose these two countries as fieldwork subjects is that their comparison would be a good example, because both countries have their own different backgrounds concerning relations with Japan. France has a long and profound cultural relationship with Japan beginning with the first presentation of Japan at the Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1867, just after the opening of Japan to foreigners. In contrast, Lithuania is an Eastern European country celebrating the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the recovery of Japono-Baltic relations in 2011, 20 years after it achieved independence. This country did not experience the first ‘Japonism’. Thanks to the warm and sincere help of Associate Professor Jean-Michel Butel of the *Institute national des langues et cultures orientales* (INALCO), I was able to conduct a questionnaire survey on *kawaii* on January 28<sup>th</sup>, 2011, with the 247 students who attended his lecture on Japanese culture. The 247 students included 158 women and 89 men. About 90% of the students were between 17 and 22 years old. I asked the students a question: What does *kawaii* bring to your mind?

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<sup>51</sup> Pierre Loti, *Madame Chrysanthème* (Madam Chrysanthemum), Paris: Flammarion, p. 182.

<sup>52</sup> Moeran Brian, “The Orient Strikes Back”, *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 2006, pp. 77–112.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 240–246.

<sup>54</sup> Koma, “*Kawaii* in Europe...”, pp. 51–69.

1391 characters, people, or items were listed by the students in answer to this question. The 5 most frequent answers were as follows:

1. Hello Kitty (139 answers); 2. Fashion (84 answers): fashion associated with Japan, manga, dresses with lace or colourful fashion clothes for babies or children (30 answers), Lolita fashion (30 answers), ‘cosplay (costume play)’ (13 answers), accessories (10 answers); 3. Animals (61 answers): animals (25 answers), cats (20 answers), dogs (2 answers), rabbits (14 answers); 4. Small/little things or people (59 answers: little animal or girls; pink, small things, etc.); 5. Pink (55 answers).

These results show that *kawaii* artefacts reminded the respondents of Japanese manga characters or mascots such as ‘Hello Kitty’, and Japanese ‘marginal’ street fashion such as ‘Lolita’ or ‘cosplay’.

These results correspond to the explanation of *kawaii* in an encyclopaedia on Japanese culture for French teenagers, *kawaii trop mignon, le livre 100 pourcent Japon*, published in a French Edition by Larousse. In the summary presented on the cover of this book was the following text: “*Kawaii* mania will no longer be a secret to you. This book is for girls fascinated by Japan. This book, 100% Japanese, describes all events associated with these trends that come from the country of Hello Kitty: the fashion, the culture, the way of living”. Japan has been called, for a long time, by names such as “the land of the rising sun”, but this encyclopaedia explains not only the Japanese youth culture but also traditional Japanese and general daily culture, referring to Japan as “the country of Hello Kitty”. The Japanese traditions and general culture are reduced to the culture of the country of Hello Kitty. From these points, it could be said that the concept of *kawaii* is well-recognised as relating to Hello Kitty.

I would like to compare some Lithuanian cases in order to examine how much *kawaii* is accepted and known around the world. Lithuania is one of the European countries where the fewest Japanese people live. In comparison with France, which is one of the European countries where Japanese culture and popular culture have been traditionally most accepted, I will look at the reception of *kawaii* culture in Lithuania, to examine objectively the reception of *kawaii* in Europe. We conducted the same questionnaire survey (as we previously did at INALCO) in Lithuania at the Vytautas Magnus University, with 26 members of the Hashi Club for devotees of Japanese culture (the age range was from 16 to 23 years) on February 18, 2011. We also conducted the survey with 19 Lithuanian and 10 foreigners who were living/staying in Vilnius (age range from 19 to 20 years), and who were not especially interested in Japan on March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2011.<sup>55</sup> 22 of the 26 members of the Hashi Club already knew the meaning of ‘*kawaii*’ and responded with the word ‘cute’. *Kawaii* reminded them of, for example, animals (5 people), bears (3 people), anime (2 people), Hello Kitty (2 people), and ‘smile’ (2 people). 5 of the 19 young Lithuanians living in

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<sup>55</sup> The difference of the number of young people or students from France and Lithuania who are interested in Japan and Japanese culture, should limit the comparison of the research result to the same conditions.

Vilnius knew the term *kawaii*, but *kawaii* reminded them of bears and music, not of any concrete object or person as the survey did in France. What's more, nobody knew the name of Hello Kitty or her Japanese origin, even if they already knew the image of Hello Kitty from products such as sweets or stationery sold in some Lithuanian supermarkets. A Lithuanian commercial broadcasting corporation, LNK, broadcast a music program called "Žvaigždžių duetai" ('star duet'), on February 26, 2011, in which participants sang a foreign song. One Lithuanian man and woman sang a Japanese anime theme song, "Candy Candy", created by a Japanese cartoonist Yumiko Igarashi. However they disguised themselves as a samurai and a geisha, even though the anime had been disseminated in Lithuania and could be classified as being in the domain of Japanese popular culture, because of its characteristics. This presentation of a contemporary Japanese popular culture artefact through these deep-rooted traditional stereotypes, shows that the *kawaii* style, a representation of contemporary Japanese popular culture, is not yet known in Lithuania. These singers had to dress as a geisha and a samurai to make the TV audience easily understand that the song came from Japan; the traditional stereotypical image of the geisha and the samurai are an obvious sign of Japan, but using *kawaii* style would have made it difficult to evoke 'Japaneseness' for the TV audience. Certainly, *kawaii* is a famous term around the world. However, as we saw in the results of our Lithuanian questionnaire survey, answered by some Japanese culture devotees and some students who were not interested in Japan, nobody knew the name of Hello Kitty or her Japanese origin. This is in direct contrast with the large number of French students who chose Hello Kitty as the most *kawaii* 'thing'. However the Lithuanians already knew the image of Hello Kitty from products such as sweets or stationery sold in some Lithuanian supermarkets. This shows that, in a country such as Lithuania, *kawaii* could be considered an 'odourless' culture. Thus, whilst comparing foreign countries' acculturation with respect to Japanese popular culture disseminated around world, this could provide the key to examining the process of the globalisation of Japanese popular culture.

## Conclusion

As I stated, three possibilities for further *kawaii* studies can be proposed: (1) how could *kawaii* be defined as Japan's native or acculturated aesthetic? (2) How has modernist-orientated thinking constructed an opinion on *kawaii* as a feature of Japanese society that focuses on 'immaturity', and can this be extended? And (3), how is *kawaii* culture seen and interpreted as globalised culture/orientalism in each foreign country? Furthermore, it may be possible to propose how and which elements of Japanese societal background have generated such a culture. *Kawaii* cultural studies could be considered as important research that helps clarify Japanese culture and societal mechanisms and the acculturation of Japanese culture. And this could be related to identity construction through global communications, in foreign countries, from a point of view that has been liberated from Eurocentricism.

