

Japan's Pop Culture Broadens Its International Reach

Manga, anime, video games, and fashion for the young are just a few examples of Japan's pop culture that are now spreading across the globe, and international events revolving around these new trends have become venues for exchange between Japan and other countries. Japan Echo reports on this trend.

It was almost 30 years ago that a *shojo* (girls') manga titled *Candy Candy* took Japan by storm. This August, a scene from the pages of this story in which the title character, Candy, meets her beau, Anthony, was reenacted at the World Cosplay Summit 2009 in Nagoya. Candy appeared wrapped in the frilly pink garb of an aristocrat; Anthony wore a traditional Scottish kilt. Performing the role of Candy was Berenic Serrano, a university student from Spain. Serrano was chosen as the Spanish representative to WCS 2009 after winning a *cosplay* [short for "costume role-play"] contest at the fourteenth annual *Salón del Manga* in Barcelona, an event that continues to expand each year and drew over 60,000 people this year.

"It's been nine years since I started doing *cosplay*, and I really enjoy making and wearing the costumes of my favorite characters," says Serrano. "I'm a fan of more anime than I can count: *The Rose of Versailles*, *Cardcaptor Sakura*, *Sailor Moon*, *Lone Wolf and Cub*, *Nana*. . . . I learned about Japanese food, music, and trends through anime, and I love everything about Japanese culture. Japan is so exciting and fascinating!" *Cosplay* provides Serrano with the opportunity to assume the identity of her favor-



A large number of participants at the World Cosplay Summit in Nagoya were from foreign countries. © JJI

ite anime personas. This is far more interesting, she contends, than simply dressing up as a Hollywood character.

"Our costumes for the WCS were entirely handmade, and we spent over three hours a day rehearsing. I was nervous, but I'm happy we were able to perform just as well as in the practices." Serrano's group earned high marks from the judges, and their performance

wowed and deeply moved the audience. Their dynamic show earned them second place.

Transcending Borders

Serrano is certainly not the only foreigner with a passion for *cosplay*. Representatives from 15 countries, including Brazil, China, and the United States, took the stage at WCS 2009, an event aimed



The three *Kawaii* Ambassadors, from left to right, Yu Kimura, Misako Aoki, and Shizuka Fujioka. (Photo courtesy of Takamasa Sakurai)

at using manga and anime to facilitate international exchange through Japan's youth culture. *Cosplay* fans from around the world attended the summit in the handmade outfits of their favorite anime and manga characters. What is it about *cosplay* that they find so appealing?

"It's a chance to dress up and act like your favorite character," said one Italian participant. "*Cosplay* is like having your wildest fantasies come true. For a few hours you can become an entirely different person. It's an important part of my life."

One participant from Germany said that taking up *cosplay* has led to a very close friendship. "We met at a *cosplay* event; I can talk about anything with her. All our time together is spent working on our costumes and talking about Japanese animation."

Another from China noted, "Most girls like shopping or going to trendy bars, but I prefer dressing up as my favorite character. My friends tell me it's a waste of time

and money, but I think it nurtures creativity."

What each *cosplayer* has in common is a deep love of the events that allow them to share in the *cosplay* culture, and taking part in an event in Japan—the *cosplay* mecca—is something very special. A participant from Brazil summed up the feelings of many of those in attendance: "I want to express my gratitude to everyone in Japan. Thank you so much for giving us *cosplay*!"

Adding *Kawaii* to the Global Vocabulary

In February this year, Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs appointed the Trend Communicators of Japanese Pop Culture in the Field of Fashion, better known as the *Kawaii* (cute) Ambassadors, with the aim of deepening understanding of Japan through young people's fashion. This is an area with considerable overseas appeal. The three fashion envoys are Misako Aoki, representing Lolita-style

fashion; Yu Kimura, who sports the latest garments of Tokyo's trendy Harajuku district; and Shizuka Fujioka, embodying the schoolgirl-uniform fashion.

In July 2009 Aoki and Kimura appeared at the Japan Expo, an annual event held in Paris to showcase Japan's pop culture. What sort of reception awaited them in the world's fashion capital?

"I was surprised to see so many girls wearing Lolita-style outfits in Paris," says Aoki. "Lolita fashion is based on French Rococo-style gowns, which were arranged and remade into a brand-new, princess-like fashion. It's a style that incorporates lots of laces, ribbons, and frills—things that girls really have a fondness for. When I appeared at the Paris expo in my Lolita-themed clothing, the people exclaimed '*Kawaii!*' in Japanese. For Japanese girls, *kawaii* is an important part of our self-expression. I was really touched that so many people in a foreign country were using this word too, and it made me proud to be from Japan."

“I think that whatever their age, girls want to wear something cute, and Lolita fashion can make that wish come true. The experience at the expo made me realize that people in Paris share this desire.”

“On the journey over, I was a little concerned about how people in a foreign country would react to our outfits,” the Harajuku-styled Kimura confides of her feelings on attending the expo. “But when I got there, I saw so many young Parisian girls with adorably coordinated Harajuku-style clothing. It was really wonderful.”

According to one Harajuku fashion magazine editor, the look is characterized by the layering of articles in colorful and fashionable hues. The genre is credited with



The *Kawaii* Ambassadors pose with local participants at the Japan Expo held in July 2009. (Photo courtesy of Takamasa Sakurai)

spawning the pairing of loose-fitting one-piece dresses with pants and other layered styles.

“The appeal of Harajuku fashion is that it lets you express yourself in your own way by mixing

COORDINATED EFFORTS TO SHARE JAPANESE CULTURE

Kenjiro Monji, Director-General, Public Diplomacy Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The government appears to be putting a great deal of effort into disseminating Japan’s pop culture.

KENJIRO MONJI: In attempting to communicate Japanese culture to people in other countries, it’s only natural that these efforts incorporate both popular and traditional cultures. Anime, games, *cosplay*, fashion, and other aspects of Japanese pop culture have a broad following among young people overseas, and our efforts are eliciting a strong response.

This year MOFA presented the Third International Manga Award; the number of countries and regions from which we receive entries gets larger every year. We’ve also appointed the character Doraemon as Anime Ambassador. In fiscal 2008

we held nearly 120 screenings of *Doraemon* animated films in over 60 cities around the world, and costumed Doraemon characters paid visits to some of those cities. The response has been overwhelmingly positive.

The Japan Expo in Paris is also very popular. This year was the event’s tenth anniversary, and a record 165,000 people attended over four days. That’s an enormous number of Japanophiles. Besides pop culture, the expo also showcased various martial arts, origami, and video games and attracted considerable attention in Japan-related topics.

In other parts of the world, the *Salón del Manga* in Barcelona and the Comic-Con International in San Diego draw around 70,000 attendees each year, and there are many

other Japan-related events that attract 10,000 to 20,000 visitors.

The purpose of public diplomacy and cultural exchange is to deepen understanding of Japan and boost our country’s image abroad. Using pop culture as a gateway, my hope is to broaden people’s interests in Japanese culture as a whole and also in Japan itself.

How did you hit upon the idea of appointing the *Kawaii* Ambassadors?

MONJI: Before I attended last year’s Japan Expo I had anticipated seeing a large number of *cosplayers*, but what took me by surprise were the many people wearing fashions that were common among young, trendy Japanese women. When I spoke to them, they explained that they’d

and matching different motifs, including high fashion, street fashion, and secondhand clothes,” says Kimura. “Many people at the Paris expo told me that they felt such a flashy look was okay for events but not for everyday wear. But I think that since you only live once, I hope that everyone wears whatever suits their tastes.

“I often rework used garments into something new. This is something anyone can do with just a few alterations. Given the worldwide economic slump, I’d be really happy if this style would encourage greater recycling and closer consideration for the environment. I hope to continue doing what I can to increase people’s awareness of Japanese fashion.”

bought them on trips to Japan or through mail-order services. This made me think that if we made efforts to promote the concept of girls’ fashion overseas as the next wave of Japanese pop culture, it could generate a great deal of interest.

We initially focused on three different genres: Lolita, Harajuku, and school uniforms. The styles are very minutely defined, and each genre has its own legion of devotees. We’re considering adding more *Kawaii* Ambassadors if we can find suitable individuals representing other genres.

Many people have been pointing to the necessity of utilizing soft power in foreign policy.

MONJI: According to Joseph Nye, who developed this concept, soft power is defined as encompassing a broad range of factors, including culture, values, policies, and institutions.

Meanwhile, Fujioka, an exponent of the schoolgirl-uniform look, made an appearance at the *Kawaii Festa* held in Bangkok, Thailand, in March. Appearing “in uniform,” she offered tips on how to accentuate school uniforms. Thailand is a country where aspects of Japanese youth culture, such as anime and character-related goods, have been broadly embraced, and the popularity of Japanese school uniforms is spreading thanks to school-themed anime. Some schools are even modeling their uniforms after those in Japan.

Of all the possible fashion genres, why focus on that for young women? “From a global standpoint, interest in and enthusi-


asm for fashion is stronger among young women,” explains Takamasa Sakurai, the producer behind the *Kawaii* Ambassadors. “Particularly in the case of Japanese fashion, girls in foreign countries are the ones who exhibit a burning enthusiasm for this genre, so this is the demographic we chose to target. We’re also hoping to take our *kawaii* concept to Brazil, Italy, and many other countries around the world.

“Young Japanese men also have a very strong interest in fashion, especially those known as the ‘Harajuku boys’ who frequent this fashion district. I’d consider producing a male version of the *Kawaii* Ambassadors if guys overseas show an interest in such styles.”

Japan’s culture ranges from traditional to popular forms, such as anime and manga. As for values, I think this includes both traditional concepts like the spirit of *wa* [harmony] and coexisting peacefully with nature, as well as modes of thinking rooted in everyday life, for

example, *mottainai* [“What a waste!”] and *omotenashi no kokoro* [the spirit of hospitality].

I believe that Japan’s pacifist policies can also be construed as soft power, as can our tradition of *monozukuri* craftsmanship and technological know-how that have been cultivated over the course of our nation-building efforts.

It goes without saying that the wellspring of such soft power lies in the private sector, so any attempts to exercise this power at the national level should be premised on working closely with the private sector. At the same time, it is vital for different government agencies to cooperate with one another as well, which is why I think it was extremely significant that MOFA teamed up with the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry and the Japan National Tourism Agency to participate in this year’s Japan Expo. Such concerted efforts will prove an essential part of Japan’s future soft power strategy. 



Kenjiro Monji