

The Hello Kitty Craze in Singapore: A Cultural and Comparative Analysis

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The global popularization of Japanese cultural products is one of the most significant developments in the world's cultural landscape in recent years. Japanese popular culture has become an integral part of global culture. Its impact is particularly strong in Asia where Japanese popular culture can rival its American counterpart (Moeran 1996 and 2000). In the area of fancy merchandise, Japanese cartoon characters like Hello Kitty, Doraemon and Pikachu are as popular as those of Walt Disney's or Warner Brothers' characters in Asia, showing that globalization of popular culture does not necessarily imply Americanization and homogenization in an Asian context (Appadurai 1996; Tomlinson 1999).

Singapore is a consumption center of Japanese popular culture in Southeast Asia (Ng 2000 and Ng 2001). In early 2000, Hello Kitty created a nationwide craze in Singapore. No one seemed to understand why so many Singaporeans were enchanted by this little Japanese kitty toy. This article aims to provide an analysis of the Hello Kitty craze in Singapore from cultural and comparative perspectives. It consists of four parts. Parts One and Two trace the history of Hello Kitty in Japan and Singapore respectively and compare the reasons of its popularity in these two nations. Part Three discusses the Hello Kitty craze in Singapore in early 2000. Part Four situates the Hello Kitty craze in Singapore in the context of global popularization and

localization of Japanese popular culture. Since scholarly works on Hello Kitty basically do not exist, the data of this study was acquired mainly through personal experiences (as a participant and observer of the craze), interviews, newspapers, magazines and websites. Attempts have been made to situate this research within the current scholarship in Japanese studies and cultural studies.

Through a case study of the Hello Kitty craze in Singapore, this paper aims to deepen our understanding of the mechanism of global popularization of Japanese popular culture and the interplay of Japanization and localization. It discusses several questions regarding globalization of Japanese popular culture in the Singaporean context. First, whether Hello Kitty and other forms of Japanese merchandise are symbols of Japanese cultural imperialism or colonialism in Singapore and Asia? Do they change Singaporean perception of Japan and make Singaporeans embrace the “Japanese dreams”? Second, is Japanese popular culture challenging American popular culture as the dominant force in Singaporeans cultural industries and consumer culture? Will the popularization of Japanese cultural products like Hello Kitty cause Japanization in Asian popular culture? Third, who are the main forces behind the Japanese popular culture boom in Singapore in recent years? What are the relationships between the producers and consumers of Japanese popular culture? Do ethnicity and hybridity play a role in the globalization of Japanese popular culture?

Hello Kitty in Japan

Hello Kitty, along with Pikachu and Doraemon, are the most successful cartoon characters created in postwar Japan. Hello Kitty was created by Sanrio, a stationery and souvenir company in Japan in 1974 (Yang 1997; Schilling 1997). Debuting as a nameless character on a petite purse, it was an instant success and the purse sold like hot cakes. In 1975, Sanrio gave it the

name, Hello Kitty (or *Kitti-chan* in Japanese), and an identity as a London cat. Hello Kitty soon became the most popular Sanrio character, making its appearance in almost all kinds of merchandise under the sun. Undoubtedly, Hello Kitty has become one of the most marketable logos and cartoon characters in Japan. Although it has a considerable number of male fans, Hello Kitty is mainly a female subculture in Japan. It is probably the most popular cartoon character among Japanese females. To explain the popularity of Hello Kitty in Japan, we will look into a number of cultural, economic and psychological reasons behind the interest and consumption of Hello Kitty.

First, nostalgia plays an important role in making Hello Kitty a favorite character among young females as well as girls.¹ In the 1970s, Hello Kitty started as a little girls' sweetheart in Japan. In the 1980s and 1990s, these small girls became teenagers and young women, but many did not lose their interest in Hello Kitty. As a result, Hello Kitty is now beloved by all females from five to the thirty-something. Little girls and young females have different tastes and Sanrio has been very successful in catering for their specific psychological needs. While making new series for little girls, Sanrio has revived many old series, such as Hello Kitty with a ribbon in its left ear (1974-1991 models), sitting Hello Kitty (1974 model), and Hello Kitty with the Terry Bear (1985 model). For teenage girls, Sanrio found Hello Kitty a boy friend, Daniel. For young mothers, Sanrio launched a Kitty baby series in 1999. Due to declining birthrate in Japan, Sanrio has shifted its main target group from little girls to teenage schoolgirls and young women who are

1 For a socio-psychological analysis of nostalgia as a consumption factor in popular culture, see Davis 1979 and Kelly 1986. Critics believe that nostalgia was a major reason for the revival of Hello Kitty in Japan since the mid-1990s (*Focus Japan* 1998).

larger in number and have stronger purchasing power than girls. A study shows that the most compulsive buyers of fancy products like Hello Kitty are Japanese women in their late twenties and early thirties (Kinsella 1995).

Second, Japanese females like cute things and Hello Kitty is the “cutie queen”. The cutie style is indeed a characteristic and the selling point of Japanese popular culture. Having a big head, small black-dot eyes, yellow button nose, a red or pink ribbon (later flower) in its left ear, and no mouth, hands or feet, Hello Kitty is very sweet, cute, friendly and innocent in the eyes of young Japanese females.

The cute culture reached its peak in the 1980s, but is still very powerful in Japanese popular culture. Many young Japanese female icons have become unofficial spokeswomen for Hello Kitty. For instance, Hello Kitty is the trademark for the J-pop (a term, coined in the early 1990s, refers to Japanese popular music for youngsters) singer, Kahara Tomomi, who always carries Hello Kitty products and tells people that she is crazy about Hello Kitty. It is said that the trendy Tokyo high school girls and young working women, the so-called “Harajuku tribe”, “Shibuya tribe” and “Shinjuku tribe”, often carry Hello Kitty products with them. Young females want people to think that they are as cute and young as their Hello Kitty. In Japanese society, acting cute and innocent is a way to relax and escape from responsibilities. Hence, this youth subculture can be seen as a symbol of defiance against the rigid Japanese society. Consciously or unconsciously, young women carrying Hello Kitty is a statement of refusing to grow up and to take social and moral responsibilities in the adult world (Kinsella 1995).

Third, Hello Kitty has exotic appeal in Japan. Japanese young females like things exotic (especially Western). This is why they are crazy about young girls’ (*shojo*) comics about homosexual love in a Western setting (Buruma 1995; Schodt 1983). Likewise, Hello Kitty can take the kids and young females to the world of fantasy. Unlike Hello Kitty in Asia, Hello

Kitty in Japan represents a Western or dreamlike world. Sanrio gives Hello Kitty a Western identity not unlike an English third-grader who likes all trendy and sweet stuff, such as eating cheese cake, ice cream, apple pie, candy and pudding, playing tennis and badminton, and listening to music. Hello Kitty has a sweet family and many good friends. In a sense, Hello Kitty represents a Western fairy tale remade in Japan.² Hence, the majority of Hello Kitty series in Japan are in Western clothing in which we can hardly find any explicit Japanese flavor. Hello Kitty in kimono, the first Sanrio Asian design, only appeared in 1997. It was only a modest success in Japan. Most Japanese prefer Hello Kitty as a Western cat than a Japanese cat, thinking that having too strong Japanese flavor is not “cool” in popular culture. This explains why when McDonald’s launched the Japanese and Chinese Hello Kitty series in Japan in the summer of 2000, they received very poor responses.

Fourth, the merchandization of Hello Kitty makes it a decorative, useful and collectable item. It can be found in several thousand items of merchandise in Japan. About six hundred new items are introduced to the market each month. Started as a purse and stationery, Hello Kitty has now expanded into stationery, stickers, figurines, piggy banks, watches, clothes, bags, glasses, handkerchiefs, cutlery, cosmetics, lingerie, talismans, cakes, posters, puzzles, handphone cases, a Polaroid camera, a Sanyo rice cooker, toaster, and portable CD player, a Daihatsu mini car and Yamaha scooter. Some Japanese bank account books and credit cards also carry the Hello Kitty logo. It is also adopted by other forms of popular culture and consumer culture, such as video games, comics, animation, movies, songs, fashion,

2 It is believed that the design of Hello Kitty was influenced by Western cartoon characters. For a theoretical discussion of remaking American culture in Japan, see Tobin 1992.

photo stickers, theme parks and cafes. Sanrio sells Hello Kitty products through 127 directly managed stores and more than 3,000 affiliates in Japan. About ninety Japanese companies have acquired the licenses from Sanrio to use Hello Kitty or other Sanrio characters in their products. Hello Kitty is available everywhere in Japan from department stores to 100 yen shops.

These above-mentioned four factors make Hello Kitty a long-time favorite among Japanese females. Their order of importance varies from time to time. For instance, cutie and exotic appeal were very strong in the 1970s and 1980s, but declined in the 1990s, whereas nostalgia and merchandization became increasingly strong in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Hello Kitty in Singapore

Hello Kitty is a big business in Singapore. Imported to Singapore in 1976, two years after its debut in Japan, Hello Kitty was relatively popular among small girls from well-to-do families in Singapore in the 1980s, but its popularity declined in the early 1990s. Hello Kitty is making a strong comeback in recent years. The number of Hello Kitty shops and imported items has increased dramatically since 1998, following the revival of Hello Kitty in Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan in the late 1990s. Cosdel and Rubberband are the two licensed distributors of Hello Kitty and other Sanrio products in Singapore. Cosdel used to be the sole distributor of Sanrio products for a long time since the 1970s. Rubberband is a new competitor who acquired the license to distribute Sanrio products only a few years ago. These two archrivals distribute Hello Kitty merchandise to hundreds of retailing shops in Singapore. Cosdel is the distributor of Kalm (founded in the 1970s), Kitty & Friends Lifestyle Store (founded in 1998) and One.99 Shops (founded in 1997), whereas Rubberband is the distributor of Shiushiumonoya (founded in 1998), Lifestyle 1.99 (founded in 1998) and Seven Eleven (which has more than a hundred outlets). Besides these two authorized agents,

there are many parallel importers who import Hello Kitty from Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan or Thailand. For example, some department stores and shops (e.g., Kitty Collection, founded in 1998) buy Hello Kitty products directly from Japan (Lim 1999; Thang 1999).

Buyers have many choices. In the high-end market, they can buy latest Sanrio products shipped from Japan at Kalm, Kitty & Friends Lifestyle Store, Shiushiumonoya, Kitty Collection and the Sanrio corner in department stores. In the low-end market, they can buy outdated Sanrio Hello Kitty, licensed Hello Kitty and counterfeit Hello Kitty at very affordable prices.

Hello Kitty is a generally accepted logo in Singapore. Many local entertainers use Hello Kitty products in public. For instance, Fann Wong and Ann Kok are well-known Hello Kitty fans. Celebrities like Ivy Lee also confess their love for Hello Kitty (*I-Weekly* 1998). Some companies and organizations in Singapore make use of Hello Kitty to promote their business. In 1998, the Singapore Airlines successfully lured Japanese female tourists to Singapore by giving away exclusive and limited edition of Hello Kitty figurines. In 1999, Sogo organized a Hello Kitty Fair in its department stores, McDonald's sold a special edition of Hello Kitty to people who brought tickets to the exhibition of McDonald's toys at the National Museum, and Konica built a Hello Kitty Castle in the Suntec City. On the Christmas Eve of 1999, Takashimaya organized a Hello Kitty live show in the Takashimaya Square. Japanese companies in Singapore also use Hello Kitty in their products. For instance, Pokka puts the Hello Kitty logo in some of their drinks. Tokiwadô makes Hello Kitty *torayaki* (Japanese red-bean cake)

It is interesting to note that due to historical, cultural and social differences, the reasons for the popularity of Hello Kitty in Singapore are not the same as in Japan. The four major factors, which make Hello Kitty popular in Japan, play a less important role in Singapore. First, nostalgia plays a minor role, because not many Singaporeans were Hello Kitty fans in

the 1970s and 1980s. The Hello Kitty cartoon series was not screened on Singapore television until the late 1990s and it was not very popular. Singaporeans would find other Japanese cartoon characters, like Doraemon, Ultraman, and Candy Candy, more nostalgic than Hello Kitty. Hello Kitty fans in Singapore tend to be younger than their Japanese counterparts. The thirty-something in Singapore are not particularly crazy about Hello Kitty. Second, the cute culture is more appealing to ethnic Chinese in Singapore than the Malays or Indians due to cultural reasons. In Malay and Indian cultures, maturity, independence and responsibility are regarded as important virtues for young people. Tsuji Shintarô, the president of Sanrio, said: "American teenagers and young women are much more independent than their counterparts in Japan. They do not care for childish goods (*Forbes* 1987)." Like the Westerners, the Malays and Indians also find Hello Kitty too sweet and childish. Third, Hello Kitty has exotic appeal to both Japanese and Singaporeans, but it stands for different thing. Hello Kitty is an European cat to the Japanese, but a Japanese cat to Singaporeans. Many Singaporean Hello Kitty fans do not even know about the European background of Hello Kitty created by Sanrio. Asian series of Hello Kitty (in which Hello Kitty dresses in various Asian costumes) are extremely popular in Singapore, but are not well received in Japan. Fourth, the variety of Hello Kitty is limited in Singapore. A small portion of Hello Kitty products (mostly stationery, souvenir, utensils, tidbits and toys) have been imported from Sanrio. Only counterfeits are available for many Hello Kitty items.

If the above-mentioned four factors are not very significant in Singapore, then what are the main reasons behind the Hello Kitty boom in the late 1990s and 2000 in Singapore?

First, the Hello Kitty craze should be understood as a part of the popularization of Japanese popular culture in Asia. Japanese comics, animation, video games, J-pop, television dramas, sushi, karaoke, and photo-

sticker machines are getting very hot in Singapore, competing with and gradually replacing American popular culture as the main force in youth culture and consumer culture. Hello Kitty is a necessity for die-hard Japanese popular culture lovers (*harizu* in Chinese).³ Hello Kitty can be found in all kinds of Japanese popular culture. Without this Japanese popular culture boom in the background, Hello Kitty would not have been so popular.

Second, Hello Kitty has been internationalized. It has become one of the most recognizable cartoon characters in the world and was chosen by the United Nations twice as the Child Ambassador of UNICEF in 1983 and 1994 respectively. Sanrio set up subsidiaries in the United States in the 1970s and in Europe (Germany and Switzerland) and Latin America (Brazil) in the 1980s. In the 1990s, Sanrio finally launched its operation in East Asia by establishing its subsidiaries in Taiwan (since 1991), Hong Kong (since 1994), and South Korea (in the late 1990s). For those nations that do not have Sanrio subsidiaries, Sanrio appoints local companies as its agents and distributors. Hence, Hello Kitty are now available in most Asian nations. In the past, very few shops in Singapore carried Hello Kitty and people could only find it in Kalm and Japanese department stores. Now, Hello Kitty has penetrated different forms of consumption in Singapore.

Singapore is influenced by Hong Kong and Taiwan in the popularization of Japanese popular culture. Hello Kitty is one such example. The Hello Kitty business in Hong Kong and Taiwan is much larger than their

3 Hello Kitty usually occupies some pages in a number of handbooks or manuals for Japanese pop culture lovers published in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Books like *Kitty Fanclub* and *Hello Kitty 25 Anniversary Postcards* are very popular among Singapore Hello Kitty lovers. See *Lianhe zaobao* 2000.

counterparts in Singapore and Southeast Asia.⁴ Some Singapore importers acquire their Hello Kitty products, both genuine and counterfeit, from Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Third, the availability of cheap outdated, licensed and counterfeit Hello Kitty products plays a very important role in popularizing Hello Kitty in Singapore. Outdated Sanrio Hello Kitty products are sold at One.99 Shops, Lifestyle 1.99 and Seven Eleven. Many of these products were made in the early 1990s and some are imported from 100 yen shops in Japan. Several shops and companies in Singapore, like Singapore Airlines, Watsons, McDonald's and Singapore Telecom (SingTel), acquired the license from Sanrio to sell special series of Hello Kitty products made exclusively for them. These special series are usually inferior in quality, but much cheaper than Sanrio Hello Kitty products.

Ironically, counterfeit production is a very important factor in promoting Hello Kitty and other forms of Japanese popular culture in Singapore. There are many fake Hello Kitty products made in Thailand, Indonesia, China,

⁴ Sanrio offices in Hong Kong and Taiwan make advertisements and sponsor various activities to promote their products. For instance, they commissioned Taiwanese and Hong Kong singers to record Hello Kitty songs in Mandarin and Cantonese. Hong Kong has a Hello Kitty cafe in the busiest shopping district in Causeway Bay. Thousands of Hongkongers applied for the Hello Kitty Mastercard. Taiwan and Hong Kong also have Hello Kitty magazines (such as Kitty Goods Collection) and the Chinese edition of the Strawberry News Magazine, the official magazine of Sanrio. Latest Hello Kitty models come to Hong Kong and Taiwan at least a few months earlier than Singapore. In contrast, the promotion of Hello Kitty in Singapore is carried out by individual retailers and is very small, usually no more than a small advertisement in local newspapers.

Hong Kong or Korea sold in neighborhood stores, night markets and bazaars (*pasar malam*) in Singapore. Their prices are only about one-fifth of the original and they are very popular among students and low-income populations who cannot afford the original. There are more counterfeit Hello Kitty products than genuine Sanrio products in the Singapore market. Police raid shops every now and then. For instance, on 22 September 1999, the Singapore police raided four souvenir shops and confiscated five thousand counterfeit Hello Kitty products. However, the counterfeit business is getting larger and smarter.

Unlike most Asians, Japanese prefer originals. As Dentsu, Japan's largest advertising company, has identified, popular consumer products in Japan must be personal, high function, high quality, global and genuine (Brannen 1992). Hence, only Sanrio Hello Kitty products do well, and licensed and counterfeit products are few and unpopular in Japan. I have asked some Japanese residents in Singapore in January 2000 and Japanese friends in Tokyo and Osaka in June 2000 why they were not interested in buying the special Asian edition of Hello Kitty promoted by McDonald's (some Singaporeans called it "McKitty"), most replied that they only wanted Sanrio original Hello Kitty and many even considered McKitty as a counterfeit. They also found its designs very strange. Only Japanese children showed some interest in McKitty, but they were discouraged by their parents or elder brothers or sisters to buy. This basic difference in consumers' attitude shows that Japan and Singapore/Asia are two different kinds of consumer society.

The Hello Kitty Craze in Singapore in 2000

To many Singaporeans, the most unforgettable thing in the new millennium was neither the multi-million dollar millennium party organized by the Singapore government or their millennium resolutions, but the

unexpected Hello Kitty craze which heated up the city state for the first few weeks in 2000. McDonald's in Singapore launched six pairs of Hello Kitty with her boyfriend, Daniel, dressing in six different costumes. These pairs were made in Hong Kong factories with special permission from Sanrio. The quality was inferior to Sanrio products, but the price was very affordable. The special serial of Hello Kitty promoted by McDonald's became the most wanted thing in the new millennium. At the peak of its popularity, 300,000 Singaporeans or about 8% of the entire population, including children, adults, and old people, jammed all 114 McDonald's outlets in Singapore round the clock. This craze turned this "fine city" into a "war zone". Ugly human dramas, such as fights, vandalism, jumping queue, quarrels, dumping unwanted burgers and trash, became the foci of mass media coverage. McDonald's was under fire for creating chaos. It was criticized by the Consumers' Association of Singapore and the Federation of Merchants' Association. Even the government showed its concern. Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said: "Once in a while is alright, but we should not get too carried away. Even if you want the Kitty, there is no need to fight fiercely to try and get one (*Straits Times*, February 2000)." Some congressmen asked the people to cool down and McDonald's to solve the problem. McDonald's at first wanted to sell the last pair of McKitty at the National Stadium, but under official and public pressure, it finally decided that the final pair would not be sold in the first week of February. Instead anyone who ordered the set meal could get a coupon that could be redeemed for the pair in July 2000. The craze finally died down.

Like many other forms of Japanese popular culture in Singapore, the Hello Kitty craze was mainly a Chinese business. Very few Malays, Indians and foreigners joined the queue for McKitty. The Malays in Singapore only bought the Malay wedding pair because it came out during the Hari Raya (Malay New Year) period. There were more female buyers than males.

Males usually bought for their girlfriends rather than for their own collection. Most buyers were young people. Many joined the queue in groups with their CD players, snack and magazines like going to a party. Senior citizen did it for their children and grandchildren.

Hello Kitty was chosen by the *Lianhe zaobao* as the hottest topic in Singapore in January 2000. Both *Straits Times* and *Lianhe zaobao* received hundreds of letters from readers and published a large number of commentaries and reports. Most of these reports and commentaries were negative. They criticized the fanatic mass, Hello Kitty, McDonald's and later the mass media themselves for causing public disorders and inconveniences. This Hello Kitty craze was also reported by BBC and other international news agencies.

There is no single reason that can explain this craze of unprecedented scale in Singapore. The appeal of McKitty, the business strategy of McDonald's, the *kiasu* (scared to lose out) spirit of Singaporeans, the misjudgment of the mass, and the misinformation and sensational reports given by the mass media all played a role in creating this craze.

Special credit must be given to McDonald's aggressive marketing campaign. McDonald's and SingTel always compete as the largest patron of television commercials in Singapore. If the promoter were not McDonald's, the response would not have been so strong. McDonald's sold these specially-designed Hello Kitty pairs with its set meal. It was priced at \$4.50 for each doll, about four times cheaper than Sanrio Hello Kitty of the same size. The designs were very unique. Singapore was the first nation to launch this Hello Kitty series and thus people believed that it had collection and resale value. Many did not realize that Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia and Japan would launch a similar series later. One reader wrote to *Straits Times*: "Why are there so many silly and impressionable adults who fall for McDonald's marketing ploy and become part of the unthinking herd in the

mad stampede at the fast-food outlets (*Straits Times*, January 2000).” In June and July 2000, Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) used Pokemon soft toys to promote its set meals in Singapore but received lukewarm responses, showing that the promoter can make a big difference in the result of the campaign. If the promoter of Pokemon were McDonald’s, it would have created a Pokemon craze in Singapore.

The psychology of the mass changed three times during the month of McKitty craze. At first, they bought it for their own collection or for their loved ones. A reporter wrote: “The supporters depicted it as a heart-warming expression of love, mutual self-help and friendship. Many queued for their loved ones. Not everybody was driven by the ugly Singaporean syndrome (*Asiaweek*, 2000).” At the second stage, more people saw it as an investment. The mass media kept telling the people that their Hello Kitty pairs had a high resale value. For example, the report of a Singapore man who successfully sold a pair of McKitty to a Hong Kong collector at US\$50 or ten times higher than the original shocked the people. Most people bought extra pairs for resale. Many old people also joined the queue for their children or grandchildren who had to work or go to school. One critic remarked: “One reason must be greed. They actually believe the toys are valuable investments that will appreciate over time. Another is the inexplicable desire to have something which everyone else is having, regardless of whether it is of any use (*Straits Times*, January 2000).” In the last days, things went out of proportion. People queued up overnight out of the notorious “*kiasu*” mentality. Most buyers were not even Hello Kitty fans. Jumping queue, quarrels, fights and all kinds of ugly and crazy things stole the limelight.

The impact of the Hello Kitty craze in Singapore was strong. In the short term, the craze generated a negative perception of Hello Kitty. Many people blamed Hello Kitty for creating chaos and felt cheated when they

could not sell them. Temporarily, Hello Kitty has lost its magic in Singapore. However, in the long term, the craze is good for Hello Kitty, because it has raised the publicity of Hello Kitty among Singaporeans, making it a household name. Many Singapore companies jumped on the Hello Kitty bandwagon to promote their products. Fake McKitty pairs were found in the Chinese New Year market in February 2000. SingTel promoted a Hello Kitty pager and telephone. Puroland (Sanrio in-door theme park in suburban Tokyo, commonly referred to as "Hello Kitty Land" by Singaporeans and Asians) has become a must in the package tour for Singaporeans to visit Tokyo. As a matter of fact, more than 10% of visitors to the "Hello Kitty Land" are Asian tourists from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea and Singapore. A used car dealer gave away the Hello Kitty pair for its customers. In its summer 2000 campaign to lure Japanese tourists to Singapore, Singapore Airlines had a lucky draw to give away 1,000 pairs of specially designed Hello Kitty and Daniel in Singapore Airlines uniforms and 800 Seiko Hello Kitty pilot clocks to Japanese tourists who came to visit Singapore on Singapore Airlines. Hello Kitty also provided inspirations for creative works. Some people wrote songs, poems and prose writings and drew comics about the Hello Kitty craze in Singapore. The Singapore television (on Kid Central) also began to show the Hello Kitty animated series. Pirated video compact discs (VCDs) of Hello Kitty cartoons dubbed in English or Mandarin are everywhere.

In late February and March 2000, Singapore even spread this Hello Kitty fever across the border when McDonald's launched the McKitty campaign in Malaysia. Although its series was slightly different from that in Singapore, many Singaporeans went across the border to create a mini-Hello Kitty craze in Johor Bahru. Most customers were Singaporeans or Malaysians working in Singapore or buying for their Singapore friends. A manager of a McDonald's outlet in Johor Bahru said: "Most of them were Singaporeans

who decided to come early to get the dolls and rush back to work in the republic (*Straits Times*, 25 February 2000).” History repeated itself. Some people passed out; fights and quarrels broke out. Glass door was broken and some people got hurt.

Globalization and Localization of Hello Kitty

Some scholars see Donald Duck, Mickey Mouse or Rambo as the tools by the United States to spread the American ideology (Dorfman, 1975; Woolcott, 1995). Are Hello Kitty and other Japanese cute characters symbols of Japanese cultural imperialism or colonialism to promote Japanese merchandise and values as criticized by some politicians, educators and social critics in Southeast Asia (Bartu 1992)? The answer is yes and no. Compared with Japanese television dramas, fashions, movies, or J-pop, Japanese fancy merchandise like Hello Kitty is more subtle in conveying Japanese ideas and values. Most Singaporeans love Hello Kitty along with Winnie the Pooh, Mickey Mouse (both from the United States) and Miffy (from France) just because they are cute, nostalgic or other reasons and have never realized the ideologies behind these cute characters. Although Singaporeans know that Hello Kitty is from Japan, they do not find very strong Japanese flavor in it. They can neither understand more about Japanese society or culture nor get the idea of the “Japanese dreams” by buying Hello Kitty products. In this sense, Hello Kitty does not seem to be an ideal tool to spread Japanese culture. However, consciously or not, Japanese youth culture, such as the cutie and consumerism, penetrates the mind of the young people in Singapore. Unlike the old-generation Singaporeans who hold anti-Japanese sentiments due to their bitter memories of the Japanese occupation, Singaporean youths have a very positive image of Japan out of their passion for Japanese popular culture, associating Japan with the smiling Doraemon, sweet Hello Kitty, exciting Final Fantasy and fashion-

conscious Harajuku teenagers. They do not know or care less about Japanese war crimes and Japan-Singapore trade disputes. Hello Kitty has become an “unofficial” cultural diplomat (because it is not promoted or sponsored by the Japanese government) and a pioneer of Japanese economic and cultural expansion in Asia. Thus, in this sense, Hello Kitty also has its ideological implications.

More and more scholars question the wisdom of applying the concept of cultural imperialism to cultural studies in the age of globalization and transnational cultural exchange (Golding & Harris, 1997). Understanding Hello Kitty in terms of cultural imperialism is not very useful in the context of Asian popular culture. Hello Kitty can be remade to promote Asian values. For instance, many Singaporeans bought (counterfeit) electric Hello Kitty lanterns to celebrate the Chinese Ghost Festival and the Mid-Autumn Festival in 1999 and 2000. Hello Kitty mooncake was also popular. Asian businessmen make more profit than the Japanese from Hello Kitty and other Japanese characters. It seems that a more useful concept to examine the Hello Kitty phenomenon is hybridization. In terms of cartoon characters, Hello Kitty, Pokemon and Doraemon are now as popular as Mickey Mouse or Winnie the Pooh in Singapore. Interestingly enough, it was not Japanese fast-food chains like Mos Burger or Yoshinoya, but McDonald’s that created the Hello Kitty craze in Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Malaysia in recent years.⁵ The fact that a US franchise promoted the Asian series of a Japanese product shows the importance of cultural hybridization and localization in the globalization of cultural products and that the global popularization of cultural products tears down (or “deterritorize” as in Arjun Appadurai’s terminology) the national boundary in contemporary world

5 For a review of Hello Kitty craze in Hong Kong and Taiwan, see Ishii 2001.

(Robertson, 1990; Appadurai 1990). Undoubtedly, Hello Kitty is becoming a global product, but it is remade in different nations to suit the local taste.

Fancy characters are like Buddha with thousand faces. There are Hello Kitty in Korean and Malay costumes, Winnie the Pooh posted as Maneki Nenko (Japanese welcoming cat) and Mickey Mouse in traditional Chinese costume in the Asian market. This kind of localization or hybridization is very common in Asia and it enhances the charm of the products. The popularization of Japanese popular culture in Singapore does not necessarily imply the Japanization of Singapore popular culture (Chua 2000). Similarly, the globalization of Japanese popular culture does not always imply the Japanization of global culture.⁶ The making of Japanese popular culture like Hello Kitty as a global culture is achieved through interactions between Japan and the world (Robertson 1980 & 1995).

Sanrio pays more attention to the home and Western markets than the Asian market. The Asian market is largely a paradise of counterfeit Hello Kitty. Unlike Sony which is famous for applying the strategy of “global localization” (or “glocalization” as coined by Roland Robertson) to produce products specially for the Asian market, Sanrio cares less about the Asian market and is not interested in “Asianizing” Hello Kitty.⁷ In contrast, it made a special blue Hello Kitty series in the United States to make Hello Kitty look less childish. The global localization of Hello Kitty in Asia is promoted not by Sanrio, but by global franchises (like McDonald’s), regional corporations (like Singapore Airlines) and counterfeit businessmen. It seems

6 Many scholars have pointed out that globalization and hybridization often come together and that globalization of culture is not a one-way process and cultural products are hybridized in this process. See Pieterse, 1995.

7 For a discussion of global localization of Japanese mass culture in Asia, see Iwabuchi 1999 and Robertson 1995.

that in many cases Asian businessmen take the initiative in introducing and localising Japanese popular culture. Japanese cultural industries are very slow to respond. It is particularly true in the cartoon characters merchandise. Many Asian designs of Hello Kitty and other cartoon characters are created by smart and innovative counterfeit businessmen in Hong Kong, Thailand or Korea. For example, the Hello Kitty air sofa which is quite popular in Asia is indeed created and made in Hong Kong. Sanrio does not produce this item.⁸

It seems that the popularity of Hello Kitty will continue to grow in Singapore. Other Sanrio products (like Karoppi, My Melody, Little Twin Stars, and Badtz-Maru) and non-Sanrio Japanese characters (like Pokemon, Doraemon, Digimon, Sailormoon, Tare Panda, and Maneki Nenko) will also have a share in Singapore fancy merchandise market. The competition and interaction between Japanese characters and Western characters (like those of Walt Disney and Warner Brothers) will intensify in the age of globalization.

8 In my trip to Bali in July 2000, I was surprised to find many counterfeit Hello Kitty products (including McKitty) there made by Indonesian factories. Although their quality is very bad, some designs (such as Hello Kitty as a Muslim) are very creative.

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