

# Japan's Zoomorphic Urge

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One of the Japanese conduct books in my collection substitutes cats for humans in its illustrations.<sup>1</sup> For instance, in one drawing, an anthropomorphic cat giving a speech at a wedding reception makes the mistake of using the verb for cutting (*kiru*), and shocks the other feliform guests who are dressed in festive finery. Sometimes Japanese words are categorized as *imi kotoba*, language that should be avoided at weddings and other auspicious occasions. In this case, saying “to cut” might bring on the ruin of the marriage through magical association. What is interesting is that it is a cat, albeit one dressed in people’s clothing, using *imi kotoba*.

Having cats and other critters instruct or guide humans is not uncommon. Indeed, animals frequently appear as stand-ins for people in Japan. Humanoid animal characters are found in divination typologies, regional tourism campaigns, religious character goods, etiquette guides, and public service posters. This essay takes a closer look at the uses of the nonhuman as a form of contact with the cute and furry. Do animal characters in popular culture indicate more than a well-documented aesthetic preference for cuteness? Although the proliferation of animals as human substitutes denotes the adorable and cuddly, it is the way in which such a presentational code accomplishes other ends that is most fascinating. Using animal characters involves a degree of displacement that renders potentially dangerous or sensitive topics as safe and acceptable. I use the concept of displacement to mean the psychological mechanism that allows us to redirect attention and emotions away from areas thought to be indelicate or troublesome. As the example of the cat speech-giver used in the etiquette guide illustrates, animals defuse the preachy quality of authoritative

admonishments. Animals who step into human arenas also permit greater reader, audience, or consumer inclusion by erasing or abating traits such as ethnicity, gender, age or class from the imagery. The use of zoomorphism is readily apparent, often in front of us on a daily basis, yet we rarely notice it. Instead, the cuteness of the animal characters, rather than their roles as masked humans, has taken center stage.

### **Beyond the aesthetics of cute**

Non-human animals emerge as useful metaphors for humans, yet they may also encode the essence of cuteness, and it is this aesthetic load rather than the lesson or the ideology behind the image that often becomes the center of our attention. Countless scholars and critics of contemporary Japanese popular culture have investigated the preeminence of the cute (*kawaii*) aesthetic that is at play here, and certainly it has something to do with the abundance of animal characters. However, I think it is useful to separate our analysis of zoomorphic images as *vehicles* for cuteness from their other possible uses and possible utility in many areas of culture. Most scholars who have written about the ubiquity of cuteness see it as a postwar phenomenon, but animals assuming human facades or identities are found throughout the history of Japanese visual culture. This long record of using zoomorphic imaging asks for a deeper explanation than merely pointing to surface aesthetics.

Beyond serving as a display of contemporary cultural interest in all things *kawaii*, animals are put to work making visible very human attributes and activities, some of which might make us uneasy. For example, an internet dating service named Boo!Boo uses swimsuit wearing pigs in its magazine advertisements. In one we see an overexcited male pig holding a cell phone running along a beach in pursuit of a swimsuit clad female pig. Dislodged from their representation of anything from reality, human-acting animals are freed from the demands of the rational eye.<sup>2</sup> According to Yoshimi Shun'ya, *kawaii* consumption functions as a way to shut out "problematic reality from one's perception."<sup>3</sup> This explanation for the appeal of

cuteness does not explain the common use of zoomorphic animals in warning signs, manners guides, and public admonishments which do not shut out unpleasant realities, but rather discuss them head on through animal actors. This shift in looking at the reality of human life also masks the interests of those who employ such images in order to comment on or critique human foibles.

Other interpretations of the cute aesthetic have linked it to the rise of postwar affluence and female-driven economies.<sup>4</sup> Disregarding cute themes running through prewar girls' consumer culture, scholars point to the seeming explosion in the 1960s or 1970s of cute commodities as an expression of female consumer desires. However, another reason we need to be careful about confounding zoomorphism with the aesthetic of cuteness is that it may prevent us from considering other potential meanings and uses of the humanoid nonhuman. As in the case of Hello Kitty analyses, the spotlight is often on her cuteness, not her humanness. Yet, many representations of Kitty-chan show her doing very human things. For example, an etiquette book aimed at female office clerks has an image of her accompanying a list of "taboos when using chopsticks."<sup>5</sup> Hello Kitty is shown grabbing a morsel of food midair at the same time as her date. The drawing is not of an uncouth girl that we can laugh at, but of a national icon that makes us notice the behavior, and wonder if we ourselves have ever done something similar.

### **Zoomorphic images as a device for instruction**

The use of animals to illustrate human behavior is found throughout history, in Japan and elsewhere. In English literature we find many famous animal characters in children's tales, from Charles Perrault's Puss in Boots to Beatrix Potter's Peter Rabbit. The Cassius Coolidge series of paintings of canines engaged in human vices, created more than a hundred years ago, are still hugely popular. One of Coolidge's most famous posters, "A Friend in Need," shows dogs smoking cigars and

playing poker, and is now among the 100 top-selling art reproductions in the US.<sup>6</sup>

The potency of animals in tales and legends is entrenched in Japan as well. Scrolls with drawings and paintings of animals have long been pressed into service as instruction and Buddhist proselytization. Consider the two-volume picture scrolls known as the *Jūnirui kassen emaki* (*Battle of the Twelve Zodiac Animals*). According to Sarah Thompson, the scroll “makes clever use of the rich tradition of Japanese animal folklore to parody three established genres of serious narrative picture scrolls: poetry contests, war stories, and stories of religious enlightenment.”<sup>7</sup> It is a fifteenth-century story about the animals of the Chinese zodiac together with other non-Zodiac animals at a poetry contest and party at which a raccoon dog, *tanuki*, is publicly humiliated. The *tanuki* later seeks vengeance on the twelve official animals, but his rebellion against the established order does not end well. The scroll story covertly suggests that bucking authority will always end in disaster.

There are also numerous examples of animals used as substitutes for humans in popular woodblock prints. Rebecca Salter includes detailed reproductions of zoomorphic scenes and characters in her book on Japanese print culture. For example, the illustration entitled *Kōshi Bath* by Utagawa Kunisada III (1882) depicts mice visiting a public hot spring bathhouse. We see a fully clothed mouse family at the entrance where they pay the attendant. Other kimono-clad mice ascend to the dressing area, and finally “naked” mice are shown around the bath engaged in bathing and grooming activities.<sup>8</sup>

In Japanese literature we also find many stories about paramours and spouses who are really animals, such as foxes or snakes. In an analysis of this theme, Ria Koopmans-de Bruijn notes that “Humans are replaced within the narrative with nonhuman animals, in this case serpents, in order to permit the tale’s listeners to distance themselves more easily from the situation in question, thus allowing them to observe and to absorb its lessons with less resistance in an entertaining fashion.”<sup>9</sup> This wonderful insight can easily be extended to contemporary popular culture as well.

The use of zoomorphic images as a form of didactic instruction continues today. Animal icons not only encourage us to touch, look or buy, they are there to instruct us in decidedly human behaviors and characteristics. We find animal teachers in cookbooks, dictionaries, and in the delivery of other kinds of factual information. For example, an English-Japanese dictionary for young people uses a striped cat who wears glasses to illustrate correct English sentences.<sup>10</sup> A cookbook published by Kōdansha of Danish desert recipes has a drawing of a bear in a party hat sipping a smoothie.<sup>11</sup> A popular series of children's books uses a dog to teach Japanese culture.<sup>12</sup> The stories are about Shibawanko, a dog who lives with a kitty companion. The pictures instruct readers in "traditional" Japanese customs through illustrated activities, such as Shibawanko performing the tea ceremony or doing flower arrangement. Shibawanko also appears in magazines, calendars and Japanese study aids, and takes a touchable material form in toys, candy and cell phone straps.

Not to be overlooked is the potential for representing criticism that loses its sting if putatively about animals rather than humans. Not surprisingly, zoomorphic images are commonly seen in public service posters. In a collection of photographs of cute characters in Japan, the authors include many "working characters" found on street signs, at the post office, outside police stations, in pharmacy pamphlets, and elsewhere.<sup>13</sup> These animal characters caution politicians against accepting bribes and admonish bike riders not to park in unauthorized zones. An analysis that only treats them as further expressions of the cute aesthetic is missing one of their functions, which is to appeal to a wide variety of people. Female, male, old and young, the dressed-up bunny in the poster could be any of us. In an interview in which he muses about how he came to understand why comic representations are so appealing and so effective, Scott McCloud recalls asking himself: "Why was it that I could identify with something like Charlie Brown more than I could with a hyperrealist John Bolton painting?"<sup>14</sup> McCloud identified an important mechanism, one that he terms "iconic abstraction." He realized that as we move away from realism

in comics and other representations, it provides a way to introduce new meanings and allows for universal identification. Thus, in the case of Japanese zoomorphism, the iconic abstraction of using animals in a broad spectrum of media extends our thinking and vision to the unobservable everywoman and everyman.

Zoomorphic images can do the cultural work of instruction and admonishment that viewers might otherwise turn away from. Brian McVeigh has termed this use “authority cuteness,” a softening display of those in power so as not to appear intimidating.<sup>15</sup> Sabine Frühstück found a similar function in Self Defense Forces recruitment posters that feature cute dogs exclaiming “I love peace!”<sup>16</sup> Animals denote naturalness and a lack of manipulation. Sensitized to the hectoring of authoritative voices everywhere, from train station announcements to roaming *gomi* (trash) trucks, advice from a bunny or a kitty may be a little easier to stomach.

### **Zoomorphic images in other forms of popular culture**

In 1999, comic artist Kubo Kiriko created a novel personality classification system based on twelve animal types that were adorably illustrated in a book that sold 1.5 million copies in its first six weeks.<sup>17</sup> Her new zoomancy, which differs from the traditional borrowed Chinese zodiac, has unusual character types such as the lion, koala, and wolf. These animal types allow any and all viewers to see themselves and their friends as fitting the various assigned personality characterizations.

Other examples of zoomorphic characters are found in the divination goods and books boom. There are many animal divination schemas, such as Penguin Divination, White Bear Divination, and Panda Divination. In the Panda Divination system (figure 1), participants use their birth years and months to arrive at a number, which in turn is used to identify one of twelve Panda Types.<sup>18</sup> A few of the types, for example, are the Creative Panda, Proprietor Panda, Hero Panda, and Stablemaster Panda. For each one there are descriptions of positive and negative personality traits, advice on how to achieve happiness, and best panda partners. The pandas are also



Figure 1. Panda Divination

Priestess, Hanged Man, and so on. For example, the tarot set created by Bi Anjeri and illustrated by Umezawa Saki features puppies on all the cards (figure 2).<sup>19</sup> The Empress card shows a floating doggie wearing a light purple dress and a pink crown, and holding a pentagram-adorned wand, while the Queen of Pentacles is a dog wearing glasses, crowned with a purple tiara, clothed in a red and purple dress, and holding a yellow pentacle. Another new tarot deck uses cats, bunnies, alligators, and other animals.<sup>20</sup> The Empress is a brown bunny who is wearing a red cape, while the Emperor is a stern looking, enrobed cat who is seated on a throne. The device of substituting animals for the medieval European people who are

assigned lucky colors, fashion and lifestyle tips. The Creative Panda, for example, should select metallic and silver colors, while the Stablemaster Panda should stick with green.

An interesting trend in Japan is the creation of new tarot decks, which feature animals who take the place of the humans in scenes of the Major Arcana, cards intended to symbolize universal themes in the human experience. In place of people, we find animals in the roles of Magician, Hermit, High



Figure 2. Zoomorphic Tarot Queen of Wands

usually found in the most popular, traditional decks seen outside Japan, in essence de-ethnicizes the cards, allowing identification and insight.

The human is not simply replaced with an animal figure. The animal icons and characters themselves are subject to masking or disguise as something other than their original animal forms. People extend their love of and interest in animals in novel ways, such as making animal characters and icons do costume play as supernatural beings, divinities and goblins. Thus we find many Hello Kitty incarnations in which she wears the fake ears of the panda, a cow, or a *kappa* (water sprite). These images suggest that the viewers, as well, might mask themselves in a character and safely enter a dangerous or unexplored world. A few extended examples of kitty cosplay are worth exploring.

The Kabaya Food Corporation uses the Beckoning Cat, or *maneki neko*, as a theme for a line of crackers sold together with tiny cell phone straps. *Maneki neko*, a cat figurine with its paw raised as if welcoming one forward, is popular as a good luck charm and is commonly found at the entrance to shops. (The Beckoning Cat figure is said to have originated in the late Edo period, but actual evidence points to a more recent, Meiji invention.) In the cookie company's schema, consumers may buy *maneki neko* dressed up as different beings from Japanese folklore and religious history. The Beckoning Cat is outfitted as a *kappa*, Daruma (a round figurine of Bodhidharma), a badger, a fox, a frog, or one of the Seven Lucky Gods (*shichifukujin*), an eclectic group of seven deities who travel together on a treasure ship dis-



Figure 3. The Beckoning Cat and The Beckoning Cat doing costume play as Benzaiten

pensing happiness.<sup>21</sup> In one manifestation, the Beckoning Cat does *kosupure* (costume play) as the goddess Benzaiten. Thus we find the convoluted image of a Beckoning Cat dressed as goddess who is in turn a Japanese version of the Hindu deity Saraswatî (figure 3).

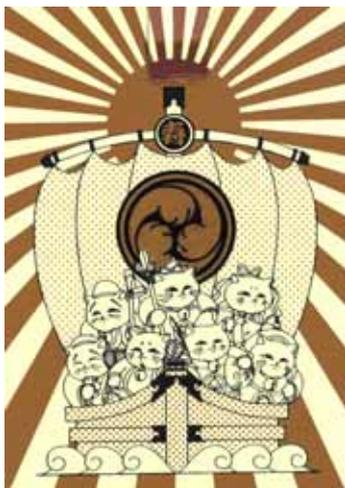


Figure 4. Namco Namja Town Seven Lucky Gods



Figure 5. Cat Benzaiten at Namco Namja Town

The game company Namco opened an indoor entertainment theme park in Ikebukuro named Namco Namja Town, and created a stable of cat mascot characters who are found throughout the complex and who adorn promotional goods. Namco also adopted the concept of the Seven Lucky Gods in feline form and often displays images of them on souvenirs, posters, and advertising (figure 4). Within the theme park there are also several statues of Benzaiten as a cat (figure 5).

Animal transvestites are found in stories about war and death, where they provide a type of camouflage. A popular anime in the 1990s was *Heisei tanuki gassen pompoko* (Heisei-era Badger Wars Pompoko), in which *tanuki* defend their territory against greedy human encroachment.<sup>22</sup> The *tanuki* sometimes seem very human-like in scenes in which they wear salarymen suits while guzzling beer. Maekawa Masami created the illustrations for the

manga *The 47 Black Cats Samurai Clash*.<sup>23</sup> The black cats are *ronin* (masterless samurai) from the Ako Incident of 1701-1703, a story about forty-seven loyal members of the samurai class who took revenge for the death of their lord. Immortalized in plays, film, novels, and manga, this version is creepily sanitized through the device of substituting black cats for the vindictive warriors. In the climax of the story, a cat retainer cuts off the head of the opponent, carrying it in a bucket and placing it on his master's grave. Not a pleasant image, to be sure, but somehow the gruesomeness of the scene is made less shocking when we see cats do it rather than people. Fans of the manga can also buy small figurines of all the 47 kitty *ronin*.

There is a similar example in a manga series that was later made into a globally consumed anime. Created by the writer

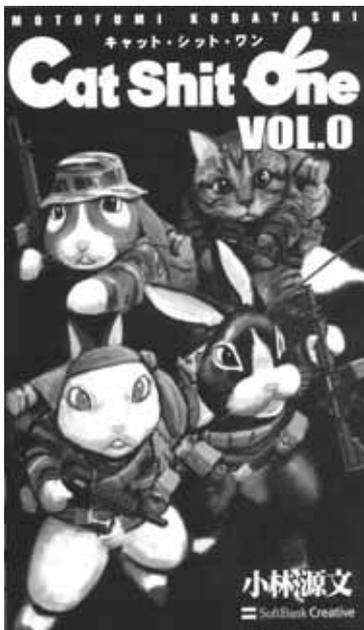


Figure 6. *Cat Shit One* by Kobayashi Motofumi

and illustrator Kobayashi Motofumi, it is a story about soldiers during the Vietnam War entitled *Cat Shit One* (figure 6).<sup>24</sup> Released in the U.S. as *Apocalypse Meow*, the narrative follows three American soldiers in a reconnaissance unit. Melding fiction and details about weapons and military uniforms, the series portrays the characters from different nations as types of animals: Americans are rabbits, Vietnamese are cats, the French are pigs, the Russians are bears, and the Koreans are dogs. (The posing of the Americans as rabbits is supposedly a pun

on the Japanese word *usagi*, rabbit, which can be romanized as USA GI.) Small kits for making the *Cat Shit One* figures may be purchased at comic conventions. Picturing Vietnam-

era soldiers as animals is somewhat disturbing, to say the least. It is difficult not to wonder what will be next—Kitty Comfort Women or Hello Kitty at the bombing of Hiroshima? Having imagined these possibilities, one notices how Kobayashi depicts Vietnamese sex workers in *Cat Shit One*. Whereas the figures representing soldiers are dressed in military garb, the prostitutes and exotic dancers in his drawings of sleazy nightclubs are “naked” cats with breasts who pole dance and entice customers. Reportedly, there was a kamikaze pilot version of Hello Kitty, one of a number of extensions of the icon that led Christine Yano to write, “The fact that anything, it seems, can be ‘Kitty-ed’ (that is, made cute) in Japan and elsewhere has uneasy ramifications, especially when extended to realms of history and politics.”<sup>25</sup>

Finally, the power of contemporary Japanese popular culture might partly arise from its materiality. Among the examples of zoomorphic imagery, there is often a quality of visual tactility about them that adds to their allure. Zoomorphic characters are frequently made into small figurines or fluffy objects. Both forms of tactility, the actual and metaphorical, are one of the more productive avenues into our comprehension of popular culture. Fay Zika has described the way pictures and other images might actually have a tactile quality that we tend to overlook, thinking them to be essentially visual.<sup>26</sup> Usually, tactility is difficult to convey in flat visual images, but perhaps a use of animals seems to tempt us closer to a tactile experience. Like the unreasonable urge to pet a raccoon or chipmunk, this visual tactility is a type of symbolism that draws in the viewer, enticing the imaginary stroking. Zoomorphic images beckon us to a moment of engagement and a virtual sensory experience.<sup>27</sup>

Images of human-like animals not only attract the viewer to hold or caress them, but also reveal a wish to insert distance between us and some troubling aspects of human behavior. Recalling the frequent juxtaposition of clothed and “naked” animals, we can link zoomorphism to a flirtation with the naughty or daring as well. The embedded nature of human relations makes it difficult to place ourselves in others’ shoes, so quasi humans release us from our webs of association. Zoomorphic

images likewise deflect our focus away from age, gender and ethnicity, inviting us to see ourselves in them. Rather than dismissing zoomorphism as another example of the bad taste of cutified female-driven consumer culture, we should ask what such substitutions of the human might be accomplishing beyond their surface aesthetic value.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Tanaka Toshiyuki, *Hatachi kara no manā* (Manners for After Age Twenty) (Tokyo: Shōbunsha, 1993), 131.

<sup>2</sup>I am ignoring YouTube videos of dogs riding bikes and piano-playing cats.

<sup>3</sup>Yoshimi Shun'ya, "Consuming 'America': From Symbol to System," in *Consumption in Asia: Lifestyles and Identities*, ed. Chua Beng-Huat, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 217.

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, Anne Allison, "Cuteness as Japan's Millennial Product," in Pikachu's *Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokemon*, ed. Joseph Tobin, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); and Sharon Kinsella, "Cuties in Japan," in *Women, Media, and Consumption in Japan*, ed. Lise Skov and Brian Moeran (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995).

<sup>5</sup>Mikasa Shobō, *Harōkitii no aisare manā 100* (100 Manners That Make Hello Kitty Loveable) (Tokyo: Mikasa Shobō, 2008), 29.

<sup>6</sup>Rankings of most popular posters are found at <http://www.velvetelvisart.com>.

<sup>7</sup>Sarah Thompson, *The War of the Twelve Animals (Jūnirui kassen emaki)*, PhD Dissertation, Columbia University, Art History, 1999.

<sup>8</sup>Rebecca Salter, *Japanese Popular Prints: From Votive Slips to Playing Cards* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006) 31. Another engrossing print in her collection is entitled *Cat's Variety Show* by Utagawa Yoshifuji, 38. In this one we are shown cats attending a performance at a playhouse.

<sup>9</sup>Ria Koopmans-de Bruijn "Fabled Liaisons: Serpentine Spouses in Japanese Folk-tales," in *Japanimals: History and*

- Culture in Japan's Animal Life*, ed. Gregory M. Pflugfelder and Brett L. Walker (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 2005), 82.
- <sup>10</sup>Benesse, *Challenge Dictionary, English-Japanese, Japanese-English* (Tokyo: Benesse, 1993).
- <sup>11</sup>Morten Heberg, *Dezāto sākasu (Desert Circus)* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2008).
- <sup>12</sup>Kawaura Yoshie, *Shibawanko no wa no kokoro (Shibawanko's Japanese Spirit)* (Tokyo: Hakusensha, 2004).
- <sup>13</sup>Matt Alt and Hiroko Yoda, *Hello, Please! Very Helpful Super Kawaii Characters from Japan* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2007).
- <sup>14</sup>Rob Vollmar, "Manga in Manhattan, Scott McCloud's Twelve Revolutions, and Comics' Perfect Storm," *World Literature Today* (September 2008), accessed online at [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_hb5270/is\\_5\\_82/ai\\_n29462438/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb5270/is_5_82/ai_n29462438/) See also Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993)
- <sup>15</sup>Brian J. McVeigh, *Wearing Ideology: State, Schooling and Self-Presentation in Japan* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2000), 150.
- <sup>16</sup>Sabine Frühstück, *Uneasy Warriors: Gender, Memory, and Popular Culture in the Japanese Army* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
- <sup>17</sup>Kubo Kiriko, *Dōbutsu uranai (Animal Divination)* (Tokyo: Shōgakusan, 1999).
- <sup>18</sup>Midori Mayu, *Panda uranai (Panda Divination)* (Tokyo: Orange Page Books, 2007).
- <sup>19</sup>Bi Anjeri (author) and Umezawa Saki (illustrator), *Anjeri no yasashii tarotto nykūmon: Tarotto kādo de uranu, asobu (Anjeri's Simple Tarot Manual: Divination and Fun with Tarot Cards)* (Tokyo: Interwork, 2004).
- <sup>20</sup>Kagami Ryuji (author) and Ikeda Akiko (illustrator), *Dayan no tarotto kādo (Dayan Tarot Cards)* (Tokyo: Hakusensha, 2005).

- <sup>21</sup>The idea of grouping these deities is not very old, and appears to have only begun a few hundred years ago. Three of the gods are from the Hindu pantheon of India, three are from the Chinese Taoist-Buddhist tradition, and one is native to Shinto.
- <sup>22</sup>Takahata Isao, director, *Heisei tanuki gassen pompoko* (*Heisei-era Badger Wars Pompoko*) (Tokyo: Studio Ghibli, 1994).
- <sup>23</sup>For more on this manga see John Tucker, “The Ako Vendetta in the Age of Hello Kitty,” paper presented at the Sothern Japan Seminar, Florida International University, 2009.
- <sup>24</sup>Kobayashi Motofumi, *Cat Shit One* (Tokyo: Softbank Publishing, 1998).
- <sup>25</sup>Christine R. Yano, “Wink on Pink: Interpreting Japanese Cute as It Grabs the Global Headlines,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Volume 68, Issue 03 (August 2009), 686.
- <sup>26</sup>Fay Zika, “Tactile Relief: Reconsidering Medium and Modality Specificity.” *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2005, 426-437.
- <sup>27</sup>The fact that so many of the human activities and actions are deflected onto cats in particular deserves more analysis, but space restrictions prohibit expanded discussion here.