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Pink Globalization: Hello Kitty's Trek across the Pacific

Christine R. Yano
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Author recounts the many lives and adoptions of Hello Kitty as a worldwide cultural phenomenon.

Pink Globalization follows the rise of Hello Kitty in both its early domestic evolution and its international expansion. Author Christine Yano compellingly recounts the progress from the brand's mid-seventies birth to its gradual permeation of "cute-culture" to become a predominant symbol of femininity avidly embraced by Japanese girls.

As Hello Kitty saturated the younger market, maker Sanrio cleverly reached out to adult Japanese women, making Kitty a mainstay of the formalized gifting culture and gaining a foothold in a multimillion-dollar segment of the economy. Sanrio's product genius placed the brand in many contexts that might strike a chord with young women. They actually gave Kitty a detailed biography (born in England) and even sent her out on a mission as an ambassador of happiness to the world.

The world, in turn, adopted Kitty as its own, and the company obliged by internationally licensing its blank visage for imprint on nearly any product imaginable, from backpacks to pens and even condoms.

Though there is an extensive amount of information covered in this progression, the narrative maintains its engaging tone, and episodes flow seamlessly together. Yet when it comes to Yano's interviews with a range of fans heavily steeped in Kitty culture, the reader might feel a disconnect between the scholarly tone of the earlier sections and the free-form nature of these anecdote-laden exchanges. In a quest to retain distance, the author may have missed chances to provide some truly telling insights, and a means to soften the transition between the academic elements at the beginning and the reportage which comprises the meaty middle of the book.

Yano also explores the darker side of Kitty and poses some disturbing questions: Is it yet another tasteless, homogenized object of desire without substance? Is it nothing more than a reinforcement of debasing female stereotypes? In doing so, some may feel Yano provides a surfeit of information and doesn't go quite far enough in her analysis.

Placing a fair amount emphasis on Kitty's role in the social evolution of Japan, Yano traces the development of the character in the context of other Japanese consumer media, including toys, manga, and anime. Kitty's early adopters, surprisingly, were scolded in the press as wayward, rebellious schoolgirls.

In the United States, Kitty would go on to reinvent herself as so many immigrants have done before. The icon was rapidly associated with many celebrities who provided publicity and propelled the brand to astronomical sales. Hello Kitty certainly will go on to live many more lives than just the fabled nine. The compelling mystique, however, will always remain somewhat elusive and slightly remote—just like her inspiration.
SEAMUS MULLARKEY (May 31, 2013)

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