

Has 'Hello Kitty' Shaped Taiwanese Society?

Crazes in pop culture are nothing new, in the west one only has to look at things like Beatle-mania or the craze surrounding Disney's *Frozen* to see similar examples. Yet these crazes haven't been able to capture quite as many demographics and aspects of society with such a lasting impact as Hello Kitty has in Taiwan. Simply put, Hello Kitty is everywhere in Taiwan. In this essay I will argue that the liminal space that modern Taiwanese society finds itself in has left Taiwanese culture and the people who consume it to rapidly craft an identity and Hello Kitty's mouthless, blank palette has filled this identity void. Hello Kitty and the kawaii culture she figureheads has shaped many different aspects of Taiwanese society, from the political realm to the commercial realm, all of which is underpinned by the idea that she has shaped ideological spheres.

To help garner a wide range of different views on Hello Kitty, I created a simple anonymous online survey and provided my contact details if any of the participants wanted to chat further. I sent this to my teachers at the Mandarin Training Centre, and interviewed 4 elderly people that live in my apartment block using the same questions in order to get views from slightly older people. The majority of the responses however came from a poster which was put up on the main campus of National Taiwan Normal University (NTNU) encouraging people to scan a QR code and complete the survey. Altogether, I received responses from 40 participants, among who 31 were female, 8 were male and 1 was non-binary.



Figure 1 The poster that was hung in NTNU to advertise my survey. Taken on 9/5/22

The story of Hello Kitty is a story of Japan, kawaii culture and Taiwan's rapid societal changes. Hello Kitty was created by Japanese merchandising company Sanrio in 1974 as a character to put on their line of products aimed at young girls such as school supplies and toothbrushes as part of a growing trend for cuteness or 'kawaii' culture. At first, Hello Kitty products could only be found in a few boutiques in Taiwan but Taiwan's improving

economic conditions in the 1980s made her into a more affordable product, and by the 1990s counterfeit products could be found in night markets and street vendors all across Taiwan (Ko 2003:175). By the end of the decade, Hello Kitty had firmly cemented herself as a cultural icon as evidenced by the fights that broke out over a McDonalds promotion offering a Hello Kitty stuffed toy with any meal purchase over 99 New Taiwan Dollars and the media sensation that this ignited (Lee 1999:56). She was the third most popular figure in Taiwan in 1999 according to a poll by Chinese Television Network, beating many celebrities (Ko 2003:176).



Figure 2 A Hello Kitty 711 in the Wanhua District of Taipei. Taken on 11/11/21

The story of Hello Kitty's McDonalds media frenzy is a telling sign of the kind of merchandising power that Hello Kitty has in Taiwan and thus on a very material level, it's undeniable that Hello Kitty has shaped Taiwanese society through her commercial success. Taiwan's most popular convenience store chain 711 will sporadically convert some of their stores around Taiwan into Hello Kitty pop up stores complete with Hello Kitty furnishings and merchandise. In 2016, the world's first Hello Kitty themed train took off in Taiwan (The Economist 2016). Taiwan's travel card system 'Easycard' sells a number of different Hello Kitty themed cards. Most strikingly

though is the number of Hello Kitty themed items found in night markets, clothes stores, high end department stores, vehicle stores and fast food chains (see appendix for a small collection of photos). 31 of the survey's participants mentioned Hello Kitty's merchandise when asked about Hello Kitty's impact on Taiwanese society. On the most fundamental level, Hello Kitty has therefore shaped Taiwanese society in so much as she created her own culture of buying Hello Kitty merchandise and products, driving consumers to her.

Of course, Hello Kitty was not the first cultural import from Japan that incorporated kawaii culture. However she has had the biggest impact and is a figurehead for kawaii culture. When speaking to the 4 elderly participants for my survey (who were all around before Hello Kitty was in Taiwan), I didn't tell them at first that my survey was specifically about Hello Kitty, and said it was just about kawaii culture. My first question to them was

‘who is the most famous kawaii culture character in Taiwan?’, to which all of them responded Hello Kitty. Hello Kitty has been described as the ‘mascot’ of Kawaii culture (Yano 2015). The aforementioned 1999 survey on popular figures in Taiwan that saw Hello Kitty ranked in third put her above any other fictional or kawaii character. In this way it would not be a misjudgement to attribute a large part of the impact of kawaii culture in Taiwan to Hello Kitty.



Figure 5 Fuli Bear.
Source: pxmart.com.tw

With this in mind, Kawaii culture has been appropriated by many different sector of Taiwanese society to different ends. For example, Taiwan’s largest supermarket chain PX-Mart launched a kawaii mascot called ‘Fuli Bear’ in 2015, whose plush toys and theme song now appear in all stores, reflecting the impact of kawaii culture on commercial industries in Taiwan. In the political realm kawaii culture has become a successful method of attracting political support. In the 1998 Taipei mayoral elections, the Democratic Progressive Party released dolls of candidate Chen Shui-Bian to great success. These dolls were then utilised again in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections and President Chen’s doll showed up during his presidency too, even appearing with him on the cover of America’s *TIME* magazine in 2001. Similarly, current President Tsai Ing Wen’s 2016 political campaign saw the birth of a kawaii



Figure 4 President Chen with his doll
Source:<http://content.time.com/time/covers/asia/0,16641,20010521,00.html>



Figure 3 President Tsai Ying Wen (pictured on the left). Source: <https://fb.watch/dhx2GKjiYH/>

cat-girl Tsai who has since followed her into her presidency. To this end, kawaii culture has been ‘appropriated by Taiwanese politicians as one of the significant methods for advancing democratisation’ (Chuang 2011). Taiwan is of course only a relatively new democracy, with the first direct presidential election being held in 1996. Kawaii culture has therefore shaped the nature of Taiwan’s emerging

democratic character thus in turn Hello Kitty has actually shaped the fabric of Taiwan's politics.

Hello Kitty has therefore affected Taiwan society in very observable, materialistic ways. In tandem to this, Hello Kitty has also brought conversations about ideas of Taiwanese identity and societal values to the foreground. While these are not the most obvious, tangible impacts of Hello Kitty, they are the deepest impacts because of the implications for modern Taiwanese society holistically.

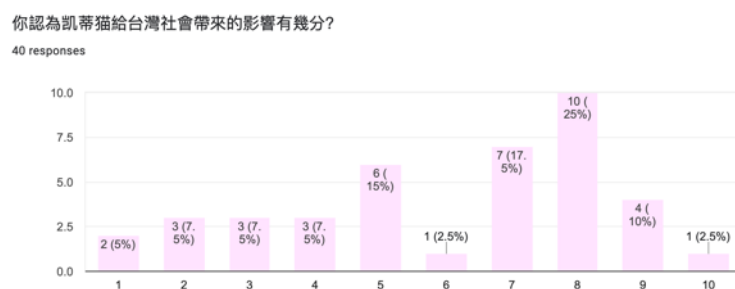


Figure 6 Responses to the question 'How much impact do you think Hello Kitty has had on Taiwanese society?'

The survey featured one quantitative question, asking participants to rate Hello Kitty's influence on Taiwanese society on a scale from 1 to 10. 29 of the participants rated her influence as a 5 or greater, leaving 11 participants choosing less than 5. However, all but 1 of these

participants who said she had a small influence then went on to talk about the sheer number of Hello Kitty products available in Taiwan when asked 'if she has had an impact, what areas as she impacted?'. This question, as with all the questions on the survey, was optional, so the fact that all of them (bar one) provided an answer for this question despite saying that Hello Kitty has had little to no impact on Taiwanese society suggests that they while they believe that Hello Kitty has had an effect on consumer products, they don't see a connect between this Hello Kitty consumerist craze and potential impacts on wider Taiwanese society.

A large number of Taiwanese columnists and cultural critics would certainly disagree with this viewpoint. Since Hello Kitty's launch in Taiwanese markets they've held nothing back in their criticism of her as a consumerist figure devoid of any artistic value, talking of her as an invader 'economically conquering Taiwan consumers' and 'culturally degrading Taiwan society' (Hsieh 1999:15). To these critics, Hello Kitty has certainly shaped Taiwanese society in that they believe the vapid consumerist culture she has

accelerated is a fermenter of cultural decline. One survey participant, a woman who said she was over the age of 60, picked up on this idea of cultural decline. When asked to rate Hello Kitty's impact on a ten point scale, she chose ten and when asked to expand on this impact she talked of how 'many people go out and queue up to buy Hello Kitty products, which impacts children's values'. On the meaning of kawaii culture, she said that 'Kawaii culture is just commercialisation'. While it's not clear what kind of social standing she is from, her exaggerated answers (eg choosing 10 on the scale) suggests she takes pleasure in criticising Hello Kitty and thus forming her own, anti-Kitty identity (in a similar way to how Hello Kitty's fans craft their identity around being a fan). Thus some fervently believe that the consumerism surrounding Hello Kitty has impacted Taiwan's cultural values, whereas some believe it's had no impact. Ultimately, this idea reflects how Hello Kitty has helped build a 'cultural distinction of the elite and popular' (Ko 2003:181). Despite the complaining of the cultural elite, they need popular figures like Hello Kitty in order to further their elite identity and therefore Hello Kitty has shaped Taiwanese society in that she has helped stratify this cultural distinction and developed both elite and popular culture.

Other conversations that Hello Kitty has brought to the foreground include the idea of Japanese influence over Taiwan and the colonial implications this carries. One participant, a woman of unknown age, said in the final remarks section that 'Taiwanese people have no culture to speak of, they just follow the fashions of other countries, especially Japan.' Cheng argues that Hello Kitty and kawaii culture's infiltration of Taiwan represents 'cultural invasion by remote control rather than physical occupation', an idea picked up by critics who argue Hello Kitty's Japanese roots and her takeover of Taiwanese society harkens back to a past era of Japan's colonial rule (Cheng 2015:418). The implication therefore is that that Hello Kitty has shaped Taiwanese society in so much as that she has re-established a form of Japanese control in society and that 'Taiwan remains colonised by Japan culturally, if not economically or politically' (Ko 2003:177). This has drawn opposing views too, with some arguing that 'rather than passively accepting this culture, Taiwan instead appropriates and domesticates it by incorporating local features' (Chuang 2011:2). The importance is not so much on whether Hello Kitty actually is or is not an colonial invader of Taiwan, but that fact that she has caused these conversations,

allowing those in Taiwanese society to reflect on Taiwan's relation to Japan both in the past and the present and its implications for Taiwanese identity.

For some, Hello Kitty therefore represents big questions about Taiwanese society and identity, however many people don't share in these worries of the 'anxious intelligentsia' (Ko 2003:176). Instead, what Hello Kitty represents for many adults is an escapism, and it's her childhood charm that attracts people to her. One participant who declined to provide an age but said she was 'much older than Hello Kitty' talked of how she thinks Hello Kitty is popular because she 'lives in a forest, bakes cookies, plays piano, and therefore allows modern people to escape from tension and pressure, and have a sanctuary to go to when they are unhappy.' When asked to talk about the meaning of 'kawaii culture', 6 people explicitly mentioned its 'healing (療癒 liáoyù)' properties, reflecting this idea of escapism. At the peak of Hello Kitty mania, The Taiwanese newspaper *United Daily* commented on how the spectacular popularity of Hello Kitty among career women could be related to 'their nostalgic teenage unsatisfied consumption desire, and a compensation for their lost youth' (Chi 1999:7). Critics want to project questions about societal values and colonialization onto Hello Kitty, others want to project their own happiness and relaxation onto her. In this way she seems to have impacted many different groups in society in different ways depending on what she represents to them.

All of these ideas reflect that fact that Hello Kitty is the blankest of canvasses. When I told my language teacher that I was doing a project on Hello Kitty's impact on Taiwanese society, she expressed to me that she knew Hello Kitty was extremely popular in society but was herself genuinely curious as to why she was so popular. This idea was reflected by others in the survey, with 8 people saying they don't understand why she's popular in Taiwan, even if they like Hello Kitty themselves, reflecting her inextricable grip on Taiwanese society. Part of this comes from the very confusion surrounding the mouthless cat-girl herself. 12 participants in the survey directly commented or questioned on her lack of mouth, despite no questions referring to her appearance, with one simply saying 'why doesn't she have a mouth?'. Some say that her lack of mouth makes her a great listener who will never gossip (Wang 1999). Some say that it represents Hello Kitty's lack of agency and expression as a woman and therefore 'damages gender politics' (Ko

2003:180). One survey respondent said that ‘she has no expression, which means she is calm and thoughtful. Children should also learn from her and not lose their temper’, imposing ideas and values onto Hello Kitty that directly contradict other criticisms lobbied against her degradation of values for children. Paradoxically, Hello Kitty herself is rather inoffensive and seemingly reflects very little yet the amount of different cultural values, questions of identity politics and debates projected onto Hello Kitty is astounding and highlights her deep integration into the very core of Taiwanese society.

Of course, Hello Kitty has also opened the door for many different other figures to enter into Taiwanese society. 14 survey participants in several different questions mentioned how Hello Kitty isn’t even the most popular kawaii figure in Taiwan anymore, with one participant saying that she’s now ‘quite old’. One great example provided was the ‘corner partners, a collection of characters released by Japanese company San-X in 2012 who sit in the corner and deal with identity crises, including a penguin that questions ‘Am I even a penguin?’. The popularity of these creatures, assimilated into Taiwan’s consumer culture with art installations and pop-up 711 stores, is a good of an example as any of the existential crisis at the core of Taiwanese identity politics. In this way, Hello Kitty reshaped (and continues to reshape) the role of childhood characters in wider Taiwanese society in that these characters can be used to reflect different societal ideas.



Figure 7 Corner friends and their personality descriptions. Source: <http://www.san-x.jp/characters/sumikko.html>

In conclusion, as Taiwan emerges from Japanese colonial rule, authoritarianism under Chiang Kai-Shek, rapid economic growth under the democratisation period and now faces ambiguous with relations with China and the wider world, it’s no wonder that Taiwanese cultural identity is chaotic at times. Examples such as Hello Kitty’s influence on Taiwan’s materialist culture as well as on Taiwan’s new-born democracy show that many different cultural aspects of modern Taiwanese society are still being shaped and she has been there to shape them. The wealth of opinions and conversation she has generated highlights a Taiwan that is finding its voice, and ultimately both these facets

(the material impact and the ideological impact) are interlinked as they both relate to modern Taiwanese cultural identity and its formation. Hello Kitty's mouthless, innocent blank face has come to represent so much in Taiwan and thus whether she's accelerated the development of a consumer culture, or driven debates on gender politics, colonialism and cultural degradation, it's undeniable that thanks to the conditions of the society she entered into, she has been able to shape Taiwanese society profoundly.

Appendix



A counterfeit bag from Flower Night Market in Tainan



Hello Kitty and Dear Daniel sat atop a TV set



Hello Kitty travel card



Hello Kitty shoes



Hello Kitty enjoying a coffee



A spread of Hello Kitty goods at a department store



Hello Kitty bin



Hello Kitty bike



Hello Kitty on a 'Sanrio Fan Club' truck

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