

Character(s) (Re)building

— The Cute, the Charitable, and the Controversial
Characters Rebuilding Post-3/11 Tōhoku —

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Abstract

In a context of dreary disaster recovery efforts in East Japan and Kumamoto city, where very little seems sacred, it is little wonder that *kyara moe*—the passionate consumption of manga and anime characters, as well as prefectural mascots (*yuru kyara*)—has compensated for the disintegration of belief systems. However, in an attempt to demonstrate the progressive potential of *yuru kyara* culture, this article examines the artificial yet adorable animals, which have employed social networks to promote their prefectures, as well as awareness about nuclear safety and sustainable energy. This article takes into consideration the primacy that zoomorphic and foodmorphic characters have over their humanoid counterparts in raising awareness about environmental issues. The online personae and activities of characters such as Chiba prefecture’s Chiba-kun and Funnasyi, Tokyo’s Zeronomikuma (anti-Abenomics bear), and Fukushima prefecture’s Kibitan will form the basis of the discussion, as well as characters, which in contrast, have fallen from grace since the incident.

Keywords: *Yuru kyara*, disaster recovery, political commentary.

Introduction

Postwar, postmodern, post-Bubble, post-disaster: perhaps Japan’s contemporary context of deflation, grave environmental concerns, and a declining birthrate reinforces cultural theorist Azuma Hiroki’s claim that in postmodern Japan, “grand narratives are dysfunctional; [and] ‘god’ and ‘society,’ too, must be fabricated from junk subculture” (2009, p.29). In the midst of loss or a climate in which nothing and no one seems sacred, perhaps it is

elements of this “junk subculture” such as *kyara moe* that can compensate for the disintegration of belief systems that Azuma describes. Stemming from *kyarakutā* (a Japanese loanword from the English term “character”) and although often confused with the general perception of a character, “*kyara*” refers to a character-like figure or image independent from a particular text. Thus *kyara moe* (with *moe*, referring to the Japanese verb *moeru* ‘to sprout’) can be described as a yearning towards or passionate unreciprocated devotion to a particular figure and possibly even *yuru kyara*. Although similar to a *kyarakutā*, *yuru kyara* itself refers to characters usually affiliated with a prefecture or municipality. *Yuru* essentially comes from the Japanese adjective *yurui* meaning ‘loose,’ ‘wobbly,’ or ‘slack’, and contrasts such characters with “more polished and better-known characters such as Hello Kitty” (Occhi, 2012, p.113).

So with their seemingly goofy and admirable nature, how do *yuru kyara* directly relate to Japan’s environmental, economic and political concerns? To frame the discussion, let us first turn to the topic of natural disasters. The Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011 did merely disrupt but perhaps utterly decimated many of Japan’s “grand narratives” such as safety and trust. According to Japan’s Ministry of Defense Ground Staff Office, there were over 23,000 casualties and over 387,000 people left homeless or forced to evacuate their homes after the magnitude 9.0 earthquake, which was followed by a tsunami and nuclear accident (2014, p.143). It was calamity, to say the least. In this light, rather than referring to the earthquake itself, ‘3/11’ will henceforth be used to refer to the sum of the three incidents (the earthquake and the aforementioned tsunami and nuclear accident). It has been argued that Japan “has such considerable experience with natural disasters that anticipation of, response to, recovering from, and planning to mitigate their effects have become a part of the ‘culture’ of living with the natural environment for most Japanese” (Sasaki and Yamakawa, 2004, p.164). Accepting this argument, it is perhaps unsurprising that, following 3/11, “cute”—as a culturally significant, yet clever consumer-oriented force—would be appropriated as a means of coping with the tragic situation as well as a marketing strategy. “Cute” (*kawaii*) is well-established as a key concept of post-mod-

ern Japanese pop culture. In fact, there is an entire area of research devoted to cute aesthetics in the *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture* (Intellect, 2016). Needless to say, both *kyara* and *yuru kyara* are representative of cute culture. However, the prevalence of *kyara* and *yuru kyara* in Japan is not a recent phenomenon. Whilst corporate mascots and *yuru kyara* had been appropriated long before 3/11, the full extent of cute as a critical element of “Cool Japan” was realized in a gross domestic project towards post-devastation happiness through the expansion of *yuru kyara*. Although some characters such as Tepco’s Denko-chan, the plutonium-promoting Pluto-kun, or Fukushima Industry Corporation’s controversial Fukuppy inevitably suffered, the power and popularity of others surged to the extent where they have become not only profitable, but progressive or politically radical.

In this light, by means of discourse analysis, this article essentially examines *yuru-kyara*-related content on social media and the Internet. It specifically focuses on three specific *yuru kyara* with regard to their social, economic and political impacts in post-3/11 Japan. Although an analysis of audience reception might allow for thorough longitudinal reception studies to be conducted, it is beyond the scope of this paper. As such, this paper will only employ discourse analysis as a means of investigation. In methodological terms, my review of recent research and theory surrounding *kyara* in the disciplinary realm of cute studies, Japanese studies and neoteny sets this paper in an interdisciplinary framework which considers the social, cultural and political implications of post-3/11 *yuru kyara* web activity. Although the 3/11 disaster spawned a considerable number of characters and campaigns to support the severely damaged areas in northeast Japan (such as Zunko Tōhoku, Monju-kun, or the Chinese Noodle Warriors who debuted at the 2013 Tokyo Ramen Show), this article takes into consideration the primacy wielded by three of Japan’s zoomorphic or much-beloved foodmorphic characters over their humanoid counterparts in the context of post 3/11 Japan, namely, Chiba Prefecture’s Funassyi, Tokyo’s Zeronomikuma, and Fukushima Prefecture’s Kibitan. These three characters will form the basis of the discussion, as well as several other colorful and controversial characters which have provided benefits, or conversely have benefited from, the after-

math of 3/11. First, I will present a brief review of the relevant theory and methodological approach in order to clarify and contextualize the prevalence and cultural significance of *kyara* in postwar, post-modern and post-3/11 Japan. This will be followed by a comparative analysis of the aforementioned artificial, yet adorable, zoomorphic mascots which have variously exploited the popularity of *yuru kyara*—be that for prefectural promotion, for pure profit, or as a vehicle for a specific eco-political agenda, respectively. Understandably, further longitudinal research might reveal the full extent of the social, economic and political potential of *yuru kyara* in post-3/11 Japan. However, for now, this discursive research will endeavour to enhance our current understanding of the *yuru kyara* phenomenon in relation to the arresting power of social media in marketing and promotion practices, as well as political commentary.

On *yuru kyara*, *kawaii*, and *kya*-munication

In 2012 Kumamon, a rosy-cheeked black bear and Kumamoto Prefecture's iconic *yuru kyara*, earned a staggering 29.3 billion yen in merchandise sales (Itō, 2013), while the iconic Australian airline, Qantas, along with its similarly rosy-red kangaroo symbol, recorded a loss of 244 million dollars in the same fiscal year. As trivial as “he” may appear or sound, what Kumamon had achieved for domestic tourism in Kyūshū could have effectively covered Australia's national airline's loss. The success of Kumamon epitomizes the extent of *yuru kyara* power on a commercial level in Japan, but what attributes of *yuru kyara* draw thousands, if not millions, of fans and consumers? In late 2004, illustrator and essayist Miura Jun was said to have coined the term “*yuru kyara*,” which according to him refers to:

- 1) characters which convey a strong message about a love or devotion to one's hometown/a specific local area;
- 2) characters which behave in a certain unstable and unique fashion;
- 3) characters who are lovable, loose, and thereby easily loved by many (Satō, 2013).

Similarly, in her work on Japanese *kyara* culture Debra J. Occhi considers *yuru kyara* as “symbols intended to invoke interest in, or desire for, an associated entity, location, or event,” adding, as aforementioned, that these prominent *kyara* are “*yurui* (‘loose,’ wobbly,’ or ‘slack’) in comparison to more polished and better known characters such as Hello Kitty” (2012, p. 113). Based on Occhi’s understanding of *yuru kyara*, they can also be seen as part of the related phenomenon known as *moe okoshi* or *otaku* tourism, whereby fans of particular characters or creative works make pilgrimages to locations associated to the characters or works they are devoted to. From prefectures to towns or power plants to prisons, *yuru kyara* are both pervasive and persuasive in contemporary Japanese life. Although the prevalence of *yuru kyara* might be considered more or less a recent phenomenon, Occhi suggests that the boom in *kyara* advertisements dates back to post-WWII Japan (2010, p.84). In any case, whether zoomorphic or anthropomorphic, such “*imēji kyarakutā*” (literally, ‘image characters’) or *yuru kyara* are largely cost-effective, can lend their images to any cause, and—perhaps more significantly—through their malleability they are timeless and, on account of their cute appeal, their popularity is widespread.

Indeed, it frequently seems that zoomorphic *kyara* have a broader appeal than that of their humanoid counterparts. Several cultural theorists and scientists alike have considered the relationship between animals and/or cute images and human affect. Based on Konrad Lorenz’s (1970) landmark notion of *Kindenschema*, whereby an overall juvenile appearance such as a small, round body, large head and eyes, combined with small facial features, together provoke affective reactions, recent findings from Nittono, Fukushima, Yano and Moriya (2012), and Golle, Lisibach, Mast and Lobmaier (2013) have confirmed that cute attributes not only trigger feelings of compassion and increase concentration, but this reaction to facially-associated cuteness is specifically based on a number of species of mammals. That is, a particular kind of cuteness which triggers greater affective responses in humans is said to be associated with specific pedomorphic characteristics, usually associated with dogs or tigers (2013, p.4). Furthermore, Nozawa Shunsuke reminds us in his work on “characterization” that while characters “often in-

volve anthropomorphism, that is, things turned into human form [...], some are zoomorphic” (2013, p. 6). Given these findings and arguments, it is little wonder that the vast majority of *kyara*, *imēji kyarakutā*, as well *yuru kyara*, are mammals or anthropomorphic mammals.

In addition to the prevalence of anthropomorphic and/or zoomorphic characters, as Laura Miller has observed, animals which “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” (2010, p. 70). Thus, with their ability to stimulate feelings of compassion, combined with their non-ethnic/gender/age/class-specific characteristics, animals or anthropomorphic characters have the potential to appeal to a diverse range of consumers. Furthermore, I argue that thanks to IT-enabled social platforms, such characters can effectively reach millions of people instantaneously and on a potentially profound, political level.

In a similar vein, several scholars in the field of *manga* studies and Japanese popular culture have considered the origins and affective implications of *kyara*. Most notable perhaps is Thomas Lamarre’s work on speciesism. In his article, “Neoteny and the Politics of Life” (2011), although largely considering the work of instrumental *manga* artist and animator Tezuka Osamu, Lamarre illustrates how twentieth-century animation in Japan was influenced by (and, in turn, arguably inspired) the works of Disney. Lamarre reminds us that neoteny, or juvenilization, “became a matter of fact in *manga* and *manga* films by the early 1930s, in Japan as elsewhere in the world of cartoons” (2011, p.125). He further argues that in postwar Japan, Tezuka pushed the limits of neoteny in characters, “enlarging the eyes and head, expanding the brain capsule and making the cheeks bulge—to the point that he is often credited with inaugurating a Japanese cute that was even cuter than Disney and company” (Lamarre 2011, p.125). Lamarre considers this shift from cute to neoteny as:

an attempt to grasp cute as a process and potential rather than as a set of formal features—as a quality or intensity rather than a measurable set of attributes. Neoteny implies a cuteness that is not simply cute. It

implies an evolutionary force or process that is nonlinear, nonteleological and immanent to the organism [...] [N]eoteny entails a surplus or excess that crosses species. (2011, p.126)

According to Lamarre, and reinforcing Miller's claim concerning the wide-reaching nature of anthropomorphic characters, the "pared-down design of *kyara*," allows it to both cross between different narrative worlds and "generate new worlds wherever its users see fit" (2011, p.129). In contrast to *kyarakutā* (character), the *kyara* to which Lamarre refers—ones which are fluid and unrestrained by particular features—are based on Itō Gō's work *Tezuka izu deddo* (2005). According to Itō, *kyara* precede, yet form a part of, *kyarakutā* (traditionally considered as the narrative figures within manga and anime) (2005, p.104). With their inherent *sonzaikan* (sense of existence), *kyara* both differ from orthodox *kyarakutā*, and trigger feelings of *moe* (2005, p.104). Itō's *kyara*, as Lamarre suggests, "takes on a life of its own. It imparts a feeling that it truly exists or actually lives" (2011, p.129). This "unprecedented liberation of character from narrative," Lamarre adds, is not only apparent in the growth of character franchises and character-based media mix, but has also attracted a great deal of theoretical interest (2011, pp.131-132). A key figure in contemporary manga studies, Jaqueline Berndt, has argued that *kyara*-centered productions "demonstrate an indifference [towards], if not refusal to participate in, the construction of meaning in a historical sense" (2008, p.299).

Evidently, manga and anime scholarship has contested the affectivity or wider implications of such fluid, neotenic and zoomorphic *kyara* and although such theorists have explored *kyara* largely in respect to anime and manga, I argue that their discussions hold relevance in contemporary discussions of *yuru kyara* culture. However, one aspect of *kyara* culture which tends to have been overlooked is the prevalence, phenomenal popularity and affective potential of foodmorphic characters (by which I henceforth indicate characters embodying any item of processed, packaged or organic food). From the much-loved children's animated series *Anpanman* (which features a cast of various baked breads and pastries as heroes and villains) to San-

rio's collection of "*tabe kyara*" (food-related characters) ranging from sushi toppings to Mt Fuji in the form of a wobbly pudding, the prevalence and popularity of anthropomorphic pastries and puddings is undeniable. As culinary historian Katarzyna Cwiertka has observed, "Food is a regular feature, if not the centrepiece, of visual entertainment in Japan [...as even] popular animated characters bear food-related names" (2005, p.416). Needless to say, regardless of the prevalence of food in popular culture, people do not generally ingest an item of food that they do not particularly like or find aesthetically pleasing. One need not look beyond the Chinese characters which form the Japanese word for delicious: 美味しい. The combination of 美 (beautiful) and 味 (taste) arguably reflects traditional Japanese values towards fine cuisine and aestheticism—that is, notions of beauty and taste are enmeshed and culturally ingrained in Japan. However, in a contemporary context in which *kawaii* 可愛い (cute)—and the significance of its literal reading (可=being able; 愛=to be loved)—is arguably the new manifestation of "beautiful," it is perhaps no surprise that the convergence of the cute and the culinary has gained currency in popular culture and everyday life.

In their aforementioned study on the "power of *kawaii*," Nittono, Fukushima, Yano and Moriya's research results revealed that baby and adult animal images did not differ in pleasantness ratings; and although images of pleasant foods were rated as less "cute," they were considered more pleasant as compared to the images of baby and adult animals (2012). Thus, one could suggest that the clever combination of cute animals or anthropomorphic characters with the pleasantness of food is a perfect recipe for commercial success in terms of affect, and it is perhaps this marketing strategy which has spawned a number of gastronomic gods in the guise of *yuru kyara*. From characters such as Iwate Prefecture's "*wanko kyōdai*" (wanko soba-noodle siblings) to Fukushima Prefecture's "*karē naru yakisobako*" (little miss *yakisoba*-turned-curry: a pun on the homophone "*karei naru*" (meaning "being beautiful ~")), there seems to be no limit to the creative and commercial potential of the quirky, the cute and the culinary characters to be found nationwide. Although, it will become more apparent by the end of the paper, I argue that essentially, the popularity and level of affect a

character potentially possesses is based largely on the following features: being either zoomorphic or foodmorphic in appearance; having a unique or strong background story which accounts for their appearance; and a well-established public profile, either physical or virtual (via social media or other instantaneous means of communication).

Methodology

As will be discussed in the following character profiles, while most characters have largely profited from their popularity, they have nonetheless contributed to the restoration of their own prefectures as well as other areas in Tōhoku. More significantly, though, perhaps the greatest effect of such characters is their ability (or at least potential) to boost the morale of and regain the confidence of citizens in severely damaged areas. To gauge the extent to which this can be achieved, I selected three *yuru kyara* directly or indirectly related to efforts to rebuild Tōhoku—two zoomorphic (Kibitan and Zeronomikuma), and one foodmorphic (Funassyi) characters. While Kibitan made his debut long before the 3/11 disaster, Zeronomikuma and Funassyi appeared within two years of the incident. The selection process of the three figures took into account their relation to rebuilding Tōhoku, their geographic vicinity to the severely affected areas, and their differences in terms of aims (official, commercial, and political). To elaborate, while Funassyi is not Chiba prefecture's official *yuru kyara*, it has proven to be more popular or representative of Chiba through its mass-marketing campaigns, commercially-oriented aims and its major media presence. Conversely, Fukushima prefecture's official *yuru kyara*, Kibitan, has a relatively low profile, but its aim has been to promote the prefecture and ensure the well-being of its citizens based on official prefectural plans and programs. In complete contrast, the Tokyo-based Zeronomikuma is neither an official nor a commercial *yuru kyara*. As an independent, mostly self-sponsored and non-profit *yuru kyara*, Zeronomikuma has blatant political aims in its hopes to abolish nuclear power and Abenomics, in order to ensure a sustainable and peaceful future for Japan in the wake of the disaster and controversial

changes to the Japanese constitution. By comparing the distinct aims and various promotional approaches of these three *yuru kyara*, my analyses of their respective online activities illustrates the extent to which they could directly or inadvertently assist the affected areas of Tōhoku. That is, whether restrained (by official prefectural boards, for instance), or profitable, or else politically radical, these three figures have contributed to rebuilding Tōhoku by various means, be they social or community-based, economic or political.

My approach, though content-based and dependent on online resources, such as social media posts, blogs, media reports and official websites, also involved ethnographic observations. On two particular occasions, I attended events involving Zeronomikuma (Solar Power Festival, March 29, 2014) and Funassyi (Sea Q Gurume Kānibaru, March 28, 2014). This enabled a tentative gauging of the scope of their popularity or following, and observation of their performance as *kyara*. Furthermore, being exposed to *yuru kyara* phenomena in my daily life in Tokyo, I observed media coverage of them on the national television broadcaster NHK and other free-to-air channels, as well as keeping track of train advertisements, billboards and *yuru kyara* products available on supermarket shelves and in convenience stores. Between December 2013 and July 2014, I can confirm that no convenience store I entered at any given point in time failed to stock any official *yuru kyara* goods or popular snack foods which borrowed the images of Kumamon or Funassyi. Even through casual observation in over six months of exposure to prime-time television, I noticed that quite a number of programs and advertisements featured Funassyi in the same vein as human *tarento* (popular media figures or celebrities), though I only recall seeing Kumamon once or twice and, not surprisingly, Zeronomikuma did not appear at all during the period of observation.

In spite of geographical and temporal limitations to my research, observation of online activities in a society of hyper-connectivity provided constant updates into the ongoing activities of *yuru kyara* as well as their particular styles of address and other dimensions of discourse; frequency of posting; and content. In terms of the temporal range, I attempted to access and examine data as far back as 2011. Since Zeronomikuma and Funassyi debuted

after 2011, I was limited to respective posts and data available thereafter. Furthermore, since content on official *yuru kyara* websites are filtered and perhaps more PR-oriented than personal or user-friendly for both users and search engines, I considered the use of social media networks as a critical and significant means of mass “*kya*-munication.” In contrast to the limitless data able to be posted on Facebook, Twitter, given its word limit and compressed images, seems to be Japan’s preferred bite-sized and thus comparatively digestible source of public and personal news updates, especially in light of the widespread use of smartphones, with their small screens. Furthermore, given Facebook’s relatively slow uptake in Japan—it having had to compete with its Japanese equivalent Mixi, or the somewhat slanderous “Channel 2 (*Ni channeru*)”—and Facebook’s restricted nature (since “friends” need to be requested and added on Facebook in order to gain access to another’s blog), Twitter’s simple click and “follow” function seems to be favored for PR via social media. A number of factors might account for Twitter’s popularity amongst social network users in Japan, but I argue that its simple, no-strings-attached, “scroll-and-swallow” system of data dissemination comprises much is part of its appeal for a seemingly sleep-deprived mobile society craving social interaction between commutes, classes and hours behind computer screens. In any case, while certain *yuru kyara*, such as Zeronomikuma employ both Facebook and Twitter, I nominated the latter as my primary source of data *kya*-munication due to its widespread use and accessibility. Facebook, blogs and official sites have nevertheless been taken into account to ensure a balance of official and social media-sourced information.

Kibitan and Twitter: Two Birds with One Tweet

In contrast to Funassyi and Zeronomikuma, which only debuted post 3/11, Kibitan has a much older pedigree/lineage stretching back to the 1990s. Coincidentally debuting in the same year as the 1995 Hanshin earthquake, Kibitan forms a part of a family of four narcissus flycatchers (*kibitaki*)—the others being Kibimama, Kibby and Kibimaru. Although designed initially for the “Fiftieth National Athletes Meet” held in Fukushima Prefecture in

1995 (*Fukushima Prefecture*, 2013), Kibitan became the official kyara for Fukushima Prefecture Local Production and Consumption in 2004 after several successful appearances at other events, such as the Fifteenth National Health Welfare Festival in Fukushima, 2002. Embodying values such as maintaining an active lifestyle and a well-balanced diet, Kibitan and his family even made a symbolic solar flight in 2010 in an event entitled “From Utsukushima to the Sun,” with the idea that the combined efforts of Fukushima’s citizens running and/or walking on the prefecture’s annual citizen’s day was synonymous with the characters’ flying as far as the sun.

It was only seven months after that “flight,” however, that disaster struck the prefecture, and the health and wellbeing of citizens became a critical concern. Not only was direct exposure to radiation a threat, but as a result of ongoing radiation leaks into the groundwater, the agricultural industry began to suffer. According to an investigation published in association with the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, “The radioactive emissions contaminated soil, seawater, and various natural resources, as well as food, drinking water, and other consumables—and necessitated environmental restoration and proper treatment of waste products before citizens could return to their homes” (Bricker, 2014, p.124). Although equipped with antennae to transmit word of the prosperity of the prefecture and its recent activities, Kibitan and his family members have had very little to report in the way of good news since 2011—especially since the 2013 passing in the Japanese parliament of the state secrecy bill, which could see whistle-blowers and journalists in Japan “facing long spells in prison for divulging and reporting state secrets, possibly including sensitive information about the Fukushima nuclear disaster” (McCurry, 2013). Nonetheless, despite the new risks involved in leaks on leaks, Kibitan and his antennae have established a means to communicate on a potentially global level. Kibitan started posting on Twitter in early 2013, soon achieving national as well as regional fame/notoriety with newspaper headlines such as “Mascot Bird Warns Kids of Radiation” (*The Japan Times*, 2013). Given the rise in popularity and sales of *yuru kyara* as both icons and merchandise in late 2011, not long after the earthquake, Kibitan’s web presence in 2013 is relatively timely. While the posts are written by an

anonymous author and the vast majority are self-promoting (since they concern Kibitan-focused promotional events such as broadcast media or public appearances), a number of posts nevertheless mention events which donate proceeds towards helping rebuild Fukushima or events which promote the sales of produce from Fukushima.

Among examples of such promotional activities, several notable posts concerned events such as one aimed at strengthening ties between the two prefectures of Saitama and Fukushima: “*Ganbarō! Fukushima; Tsunagarō! Saitama 2013*” (FromKibitan, 2013); an official Japan Agriculture event promoting purportedly safe and delicious fruit and vegetables from Fukushima (FromKibitan, 2013); and Kibitan’s visit to a nursery school in the severely-damaged Iwaki city to practise gymnastics with local children (FromKibitan, 2013). In spite of the promotional bias of Kibitan’s tweets, his predominantly parochial following (including other *yuru kyara* and Fukushima-based organisations) and the Twitter page’s direct correlation to the Kibitan official blog (<http://fromkibitan.blog.fc2.com/>), Kibitan nevertheless has the potential to stimulate greater public participation in events associated with “rebuilding” the prefecture. Rather than relying on traditional print media or local television broadcasts to spread word of events and efforts to support Fukushima prefecture, using Twitter is certainly a means to spread the message beyond the limits of its prefectural boundaries and local media. While central government has been criticized for sidelining efforts to “rebuild” Fukushima and “trying to achieve its own narrow political interests, such as restarting the nation’s powerful nuclear industry, or assuring the world that Tokyo is safe enough to host the Summer Olympics in 2020” (Fackler, 2015), perhaps part of the popularity of Kibitan is his continued uncompromised devotion to local issues, people and problems that the central government is perhaps avoiding. This is reflected quite aptly in his repetitive greetings on each post: “*Fukushima kara hajimeyō*” (Let’s start from Fukushima). The very nature of the short and sweet (and thus quintessentially *kawaii*) posts on Twitter makes it one of Japan’s leading social media networks and a means for local-based *kyara*, figures and organizations to reach citizens beyond their immediate prefecture about causes which will inevitably affect

them. Kibitan's social media presence and activities can be seen as part of a well-observed global trend towards traditionally less "empowered" entities and individuals using new media and technology such as social media to deliver their message to a wider audience, so-called "Twitteractivism." In particular, as an example of a *yuru kyara* using social media to convey its message more widely, it can also be framed as an example of *kyā*-munication, that is, a fictitious *kyarakutā* being used as a mouthpiece to promote a group or individual's particular social or political message.

Funabashi's Funassyi Puts the Fun Back into Fundraising

While radiation remains arguably the main concern for citizens of Fukushima prefecture, the immediate effects of the tsunami on the coast of nearby Chiba prefecture impacted the lives of thousands upon thousands of citizens whose homes, businesses and families were quite literally torn apart by the wall of water. In an attempt to stimulate the local economy and thereby restore affected communities and areas throughout Chiba prefecture, its official mascot, Chiba-kun, has employed Twitter both to announce his upcoming appearances at charity events and to report on ongoing efforts to restore the Tōhoku region. Whilst it may not sound remarkable in contrast to the number of followers of other Japanese "idols" or *tarento* on Twitter, Chiba-kun has nonetheless accumulated some 126,000 followers since his debut in late 2011. Yet, in contrast to Chiba prefecture's official mascot, which has not had much of an impact on popular consciousness, the unofficial *yuru kyara* from Chiba's Funabashi city, Funassyi, clean-swept the *Yuru kyara* Grand Prix of 2013 and has dominated Japanese media including prime-time television over the last year or more. Essentially a gender-ambiguous, hyperactive pear, as a wobbly and bubbly foodmorphic *yuru kyara*, Funassyi stands out from the standard fare of furry, adorable zoomorphic *yuru kyara*. Funassyi has been perhaps the most commercially successful *yuru kyara* of 2013 and 2014, lending its image severally to major mobile-phone carrier Softbank, confectionery maker Glico's popular snack "Pretz," and beverage manufacturer Asahi's soft drinks, among others. Although Funassyi keeps a

large proportion of its earnings, it has been both profitable and charitable through its popularity, by engaging, for example, in charity events such as the Yahoo! twenty-four-hour marathon in which it ran ten centimeters for every 1 yen that was donated, and a Tōhoku tour in which participating tourists travelled with Funassyi to Iwaki city, with a proportion of the proceeds going towards restoring damaged areas in Tōhoku. One of Funassyi's ongoing was selling "charity goods" online through its official goods website, from which the net proceeds went towards rebuilding the Tōhoku area (Funassyi Shop, 2013). If Funassyi's recent mainstream media presence and publicity stunts have been overwhelming, its online presence has been similarly, if not even more, pervasive and/or invasive. With over 1.43 million followers on Twitter (as of February 3, 2016), Funassyi's is trailblazing ahead of its contemporaries such as Kumamon (434,000 followers), Hello Kitty (202,000), AKB48 (172,000) and most certainly has at least twice as many followers than Prime Minister Abe Shinzō (570, 000). Although this figure only indicates how many Twitter users have subscribed to receive notifications from Funassyi's Twitter account, its number of followers in contrast to those of the aforementioned popular artists, characters and politicians signifies Funassyi's popular appeal and political potential.

What exactly is the attraction of this gender-ambiguous pear? Perhaps in contrast to other polished or official characters and public figures in Japanese popular culture, Funassyi's very unofficial status might partially account for its widespread popularity. To elaborate, as an unofficial *yuru kyara*, Funassyi is not obligated to serve as a role model or be in any way exemplary of fine or acceptable citizenship. Defending its status as an underdog in an interview Funassyi claimed, "I'm a one-pear act, a pear fairy with no agent. People saw me being rejected and started to show support for me. I still only charge about 1,000 pears an hour" (Vincent, 2015). *The Telegraph's* Alice Vincent adds, "While *yuru-kyara* are known for being quiet and slow-moving, Funassyi is loud and rambunctious, often spontaneously breaking into choruses of well-known rock songs. His most notable act to date is getting into a fight with Kumamon [...] on live TV" (Vincent, 2015). In this sense, Funassyi appeals to or reflects the uninhibited, the wild, and the careless—

the adventurous or escapist inner child in the childless, the child-like, and children, alike. In this vein, the great majority of Funassyi's Tweets have been playful, repetitive and self-promoting in nature. From *kaomoji* (emoji specifically resembling faces) to word play such as conjugating verb endings with the Japanese term for pear, "*nashi~*", Funassyi's use of repetition, original expressions and lexical minimalism ensures his followers see familiar faces and read familiar lines whenever they access his Twitter account, and thus requires a low level of literacy and cognitive load on the readers' part. The effect is minimum reader effort, yet maximum audience reach. Flooded with photos and news of promotional events and media appearances, Funassyi's official Twitter page is certainly easy to digest in terms of content, but the vast majority of posts still sound overwhelmingly commercial. Although the odd charity event is posted, such as Funassyi's aforementioned trip to Iwaki city (Funassyi, 2014) or upcoming events on Funassyi's official webpage (Terawarosu, 2014), the vast majority of posts are obviously self-promotional since they relate to the sales and promotion of its goods and merchandise. Most likely, this is a considered marketing strategy since a more serious tone in its posts would most certainly be out of character and possibly even deter a number of fans. In spite of this, where Funassyi fails to make profound political commentary—or to show sincere concern for the environment or the Tōhoku area—its financial clout certainly talks by pumping financial support into the affected prefectures' restoration efforts.

The reason that Funassyi's financial contribution is so significant pertains to the specific situation in the worst-affected areas in Tōhoku since 3/11. Specifically, it relates to the dire economic/market conditions caused by the nuclear element of the triple disaster. Prior to the nuclear accident at Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, the prefectures of Fukushima, Ibaraki etc. were the breadbasket of Japan and agricultural productivity was a—if not the—key component of local economic activity. For example, prior to the disaster in 2011, orchard crop volumes in Fukushima prefecture ranked second among all 47 prefectures of Japan for peaches, fourth for "*nashi*" pears, fifth for apples and twelfth for grapes. These four fruit items had a combined shipment of 72,000 tons in 2011 (Fujiwara, 2013). However,

since the disaster, sales have plummeted and regaining consumer trust has proven difficult in spite of Japan Agriculture's food health and safety reports to inform and reassure consumers about the levels of radiation in produce from the region. In spite of official prefectural events and campaigns to promote sales of fresh produce from Fukushima, Ibaraki and other affected areas famed for their rice, vegetables and regional specialties, Japanese consumers' ongoing scepticism concerning food safety has hampered any progress in boosting sales throughout Japan, and has thus affected financial support for the areas and related restoration efforts. This was reinforced by media reports claiming that "mounting demands from parents forced many municipalities, including Setagaya, to purchase radiation-measuring equipment to check school lunches" (Aoki, 2012). In fact, these far-from-promising circumstances were so severe that they have even impelled Fukushima Prefecture's Deputy Sales Promotion Chief to initiate sales in Southeast Asia, stating in a press report that: "We also hope Fukushima fruits can win a high reputation in Southeast Asia to offset the negative public image back in Japan" (Fujiwara, 2013).

The effectiveness of these actions is yet to be determined, but given the recent success of the sales of craft produced by Fukushima's local disabled community (Sekiya, 2014), perhaps "locally-produced" rather than local produce is the key to stimulating sales and, by consequence, support for the affected areas. Due to the associated radiation fears and risk, although campaigns promoting agricultural produce from Fukushima and other affected areas have proven far from fruitful, sales of craft, accessories, and character goods seem to have been more productive. In a similar vein to the above-mentioned sales of craft by Fukushima's local disabled community, the team behind Funassyi have tapped the sales potential of craft or character goods through instigating sales of hand-made character goods which are available on the aforementioned website. While some consumers simply refuse to purchase pears or other agricultural produce from Tōhoku region, they still might just buy into that pear-shaped character. Sales of hand-made Funassyi goods have thus played a significant role in rebuilding affected areas, restoring trust and faith of consumers and reinforcing the power of *kawaii*. Given

Funassyi's phenomenal popularity, perhaps a step from the commercial to the political could be enough to stimulate social change. However, with its commercial success and ongoing support from Nippon Television Network (NTV), when it comes to political commentary, neutrality is necessary to survive in the Japanese entertainment industry. For instance, when questioned about Japanese Prime Minister Abe's controversial plans to change Japan's pacifist constitution, Funassyi carefully avoided the subject in his comment: "Ooh no, I'm not getting into that! I'm for world peace" (Ripley, 2014). Thus, rather than criticizing the handling of the disaster on international media or the stigmatization of people and produce from Fukushima, Funassyi's diplomatic tendency to gloss over the ongoing problems in Tōhoku could be perceived as counter-productive. Funassyi could make a profound impact, by, for example, by addressing the problems with the current government's efforts to support Tōhoku or promoting a movement towards implementing sustainable "green" energy in Japan. However, perhaps such matters are best left to greener and more politically active parties.

Zeronomikuma: Abenomics Meets its Green, Furry Match

Of the Tweeting *yuru kyara* discussed thus far, Zeronomikuma is perhaps the most progressive in terms of his activities and posts on Twitter and Facebook. In particular, Zeronomikuma's unashamedly political intent is in marked contrast to Funassyi's unabashedly commercial content. According to his profile page, Zeronomikuma is a green, Alaskan polar bear now living in Toshima-ku, one of Tokyo's 23 wards. According to the profile on his Wordpress webpage, Zeronomikuma was born in February 2013, loves bananas, and is particularly good at calligraphy, playing piano, practising tea ceremony and dancing (Zeronomikuma, 2013). What is remarkable, however, is that he works part-time promoting his *genpatsu-zeronomics* (anti-nuclear power/anti-Abenomics) campaign and relies on the support of volunteers as his staff members or team. Although he has had little or no mainstream media coverage on television or radio, Zeronomikuma was nevertheless making headlines within six months of his emergence, appearing in

Asahi Shinbun's coverage of "*Datsu Genpatsu no Hi* (No Nukes Day)" on June 2, 2013, protesting against the state secrets law, or dancing at Shinjuku station with members of *Midori no Tō* (Japan's Green Party) in their "*Fukushima Wasurenaide*" (Don't Forget Fukushima) event posted on Facebook (Zeronomikuma, 2013).

Recent activity on Zeronomikuma's Twitter account includes photos from a no nukes rally in Mitaka city (January 30, 2016) and images of his campaign with local politician Igarashi Jin (known for his pacifist and environmentally conscious stance) a week earlier. In addition to raising awareness through online social networks, Zeronomikuma hosts and manages his own page on two major blog sites in Japan (namely, Seesaa and Wordpress) to reach those web users who are "anti-" social networks, *per se*. In comparison to Kibitan and Funassyi, Zeronomikuma stands out not only for its dedication to social, political and environmental issues, but also due to its relatively sophisticated overall message. For instance, rather than simply promoting local tourism (as does Kibitan) or the consumption of local products from areas severely affected by the disaster (as does Funassyi), Zeronomikuma encourages followers and citizens alike to be more environmentally and politically conscious with the hope of eliminating nuclear power and instigating change. Rather than lending his image arbitrarily to one cause or another for profit or commercial success (as does Funassyi), his image is essentially based on a consistent commitment to his "Genpatsu Zeronomics" cause which, according to his English plea is:

The Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Accident has exposed that nuclear power is in fact bad for the economy, and that we must confront economic bads that Japan's pro-nuclear policy has produced. Instead of relying on nuclear power, we propose to stimulate Japan's economy by promoting renewable energy and energy-saving technologies and creating jobs in this new, green industry. The goal of our campaign is to collect more than 100,000 signatures of endorsement for Genpatsu Zeronomics and submit them to Japan's prime minister. We are seeking signatures of endorsement from all over the world. (Zeronomikuma, 2013)

Furthermore, He relentlessly calls for public opinion with his “pabukome (public comments)” requests on Twitter and constant invitations to rallies and events. In 2013, Zeronomikuma reached his crowdsourcing target (106 % within two months) to sponsor his project of enlightening citizens, and especially the younger generation, about the concept of Genpatsu Zeronomics (Greenfunding, 2013). While this pales in comparison to Funassyi’s 220 million yen budget (notably only 9 % of Funassyi’s total revenue), it is still a considerable achievement, especially given the generally short-lived nature of trends or “*būmu*” in Japan. Perhaps Zeronomikuma’s small-scale, sustainable approach and modest pace of activities will prove more effective to reach citizens at a grass-roots level than the mass-marketed, flash-in-the-pan approach typically employed by *yuru kyara*. With minimal funding and maximum voluntary effort, Zeronomikuma’s on- and off-line activities, as well as his involvement in the “Green Tea Party” (a union of anti-nuclear power politicians), has kept the bear busy but has not hampered his dedication to the Zeronomics cause. Comparatively speaking, where Kibitan and Funassyi simplify or whitewash what is actually a very serious and complicated problem, Zeronomikuma challenges the status quo and extends the discussion from “*Ganbarō Nippon!*” to “Should we be using nuclear power at all”? Whilst he may not be everyone’s cup of (green) tea, this cute, yet politically conscious and committed, bear challenges the simplistic and superficial facets of both corporate mascots and *yuru kyara*.

Conclusion

Although Azuma has framed the worship of characters and the creation of gods through junk subculture in a somewhat negative light, perhaps the fascination or passionate devotion to *kyara*, as well as the recent surge in interest towards particular *yuru kyara*, need to be re-evaluated. For instance, if we consider *yuru kyara* in the same light as idols, newborns or pedomorphic animals, it might indeed indicate that the underlying function of these cute, cuddly, courageous, quirky, and sometimes queer characters is to offer hope and promise a bright future with their often simple and timeless qualities.

Where human figures have disappointed fans or failed to evoke feelings of compassion or adoration, *yuru kyara* possess the astounding potential to reach thousands (if not millions) of people from all walks of life due to their reliability, simplicity and ability to transform according to the needs of their followers. Moreover, unlike in the case of anime or *manga* characters, one need not follow the entire story of any particular *yuru kyara*. Since their background stories and beliefs are relatively simple, one may simply jump on the *yuru kyara* bandwagon, as it were, at any point in time. Cuddly, cute and comforting, *yuru kyara* have the potential to sedate, to stimulate, to move, or even to trigger a movement.

While I acknowledge that the appropriation of *yuru kyara* dates back to postwar Japan, what I have argued is that their recent proliferation, although seemingly commercial, has had a positive impact. Their efforts in a post-disaster context have functioned to strengthen communities and stimulate economic activity aimed towards assisting areas affected by the earthquake and tsunami disaster. In spite of the damage and loss caused by the events of 3/11, the growing presence and even worship of *yuru kyara* in Japan certainly shows that, regardless of Japan's ongoing misfortunes with nature, there is always a means to compensate for the damage when an overwhelming need to nurture is stimulated. In a culture swamped with corporate slogans in which the "power of dreams" and to "make" and "believe" incite consumption as well as compassion, sometimes all that is necessary is a little cuteness, a big concept, and/or a character with a face and a page as its stage. While *kyā*-munication's profitability is evident in the success of characters such as Kumamon and Funassyi, the extent to which *yuru kyara* might incite social change is yet to be fully explored and determined in a fragile environmental, economic and political climate in the era of Abenomics.

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