Japanese Culture Now

キャラクター Media Characters: A New Necessity of Daily Life

Photo: Hongo Jin

Kyarakuta (キャラクター), taken from the English word "character," is the general term for the human, animal, and other personae that appear in manga comics, animated television programs, movies, computer games, and other media. Manufacturers often use characters to sell products.

According to a survey of respondents ranging in age from seven to their sixties conducted in 2000 by the Bandai Character Laboratory, a toy research institute, the proportion of Japanese who owned character goods stood at 83.9 percent, and 87 percent responded that they had a favorite character. Just looking at men in their fifties and sixties, 54.7 percent owned some kind of character goods and 64 percent said they had a favorite character. Nowadays, media characters are popular among people of all ages, and there is nothing unusual in owning or using character goods.

The character goods market in Japan is enormous, at over 2 trillion yen per year. Characters from Japanese manga like *Pokémon* (ポケモン) and *Gundam* (*Gandamu* ガンダム) have grown in popularity not only in Asia but also in the United States in recent years, making the "character business" a big business not only in Japan but worldwide.

"Characters" Everywhere

Photo: Hongo Jin

Rarely will you go through a whole day without setting eyes on some sort of trademarked character. They adorn ballpoint pens, notebooks, and other stationary products, cosmetic accessories like hand-held mirrors and makeup pouches, dangle from mobile phone straps and backpacks, and turn up on T-shirts, and bicycle bumpers.

"Characters" are effective attention-getters; they can soften the image of something that seems dull and uninteresting and make approachable things that seem complicated or daunting. Many banks now offer customers bankbooks, cash cards, and other business items sporting media character designs in addition to plainer, more conventional designs. Some characters are also originally created expressly for marketing businesses, events, and products.

Politicians as "Characters"

The approval rate for the cabinet of Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichiro (小泉純一郎 こいずみじゅんいちろう), formed in April 2001, initially exceeded 80 percent, and some of its members were the talk of the television talk shows. Not only the prime minister enjoyed the media limelight: former foreign minister Tanaka Makiko (田中真紀子 たなかまきこ) was known as Makiko Daijin (マキコ大臣 [だいじん] "Minister Makiko") and the elderly finance minister, Shiokawa Masajuro (塩川正十郎 しおかわまさじゅうろう), was dubbed Shio-*jii* (塩 [しお] じい "Grandpa Shio"). Their style of speech, mannerisms, looks, and other characteristics unrelated to their caliber as politicians became the object of popular fascination, forming an extraordinary fad. For real-life politicians to be treated along the same lines as trademarked characters and treated like popular TV personalities was a provocative and unprecedented occurrence in Japan.

The Liberal Democratic Party itself, of which Prime Minister Koizumi is a member, entered into the trademark character business by creating the character "Shishiro" (シシロー Mr. Lion—a reference to the prime minister's wavy "mane" of hair; *shishi* means lion) to "market" Prime Minister Koizumi as "the lion-hearted" prime minister. Aside from selling Koizumi-character goods like T-shirts, mugs, hand towels, stickers, fans, mobile-phone straps, etc., for the purpose of party publicity, the Liberal Democratic Party even offered desktop backgrounds and computer games featuring the prime minister.

Photo: TJF

Mom and Dad Love Characters, Too

In Japan today, anime and manga are forms of entertainment anyone can enjoy, regardless of age. Men who were ten years old in 1963 when the animated TV program *Astro Boy* (*Tetsuwan Atomu* 鉄腕 [てつわん] アトム) was first broadcast turned forty-nine this year. Likewise, women who were ten years old in 1967 when the Rica-chan (リカちゃん) doll was first brought on the market are now forty-five. Nowadays, the greater part of society is made up of men and women who were raised on character goods featuring heroes and heroines from earlier TV shows that captured their imaginations as children. To dismiss anime and manga as somehow reserved for childhood is now considered old-fashioned. Superhero and animation series like *Ultraman* (*Urutoraman* ウルトラマン), *Masked Rider* (*Kamen Raida* 仮面 [かめん] ライダー), *Sazae-san* (サザエさん), and others, first aired 30 years ago, are now being broadcast in newly produced form, and it is not unusual to find two generations—children and their parents—enjoying them in front of the television each week.