

life & style

The busy lives of Japan's super furry creatures

Regional characters boost trade and tourism by mingling with the public

Daniel Krieger
SPECIAL TO THE JAPAN TIMES

When first-time visitors arrive in Japan, a few things they may notice right off the bat include the juxtaposition of the high-tech and the ancient, the unfailing politeness of locals, and a curious fixation with cuteness — to wit, all the cute mascots that promote regions, historic sites, local specialties and events, the police, you name it.

In recent years, these wildly imaginative mascots have exploded in popularity and profitability, bucking the downward trend of the manga and *anime* industries that have been declining for a decade. And, unlike multi-billion dollar stars such as Sanrio's Hello Kitty, this variety known as "yuru-kyara" — which means something along the lines of "cheesy but lovable characters" — earn their keep by drawing attention to a particular place, organization or idea despite, or because of, their lack of polish.

What's more, they can offer redemption to cash-strapped areas of the country in the form of a sweet furry savior.

It is this boom that twins Edward and John Harrison, both designers and

illustrators from England, sought to illuminate in their second book about Japan's general mascot craze. With vivid photos and amusingly quirky bios, "Fuzz & Fur," which came out earlier this year, catalogs some of the more intriguing personalities of this fertile scene.

Grouped by region — from Hokkaido all the way down to Okinawa — the characters truly are everywhere.

What makes yuru-kyara so irresistible to their fans is their disarming air of sweetness and innocence, bolstered by hammy performers who dress up in plush yuru-kyara costumes called "kigurumi" and interact with the public, deftly wielding their floppy charm.

"People can connect with these characters more because they're moving around and you can meet them and photograph them," said Edward Harrison in a recent phone interview.

He first noticed the trend of fur-suited mascots a few years ago when he went to Hikone Castle in Shiga Prefecture to see Hikonyan, a big white cat whose name combines the city name "Hikone" with "nyan," Japanese for "meow." Legend has it that Naotaka Ii, the daimyo who built the castle four centuries ago, was once saved by a white cat who steered him away from a lightning bolt. Since the



Cute force: Pipo-kun (left), The Tokyo Metropolitan Police Force mascot, has huge ears, large eyes and an antenna, which help him fight crime and maintain order. Right: Hikonyan (second from left) and his feline friends perform to their fans at the 2010 Kigurumi Summit in Hikone. Last year the festival featured 150 mascots from all parts of Japan. EDWARD HARRISON; COURTESY SOCIETY OF ORGANIZED YURU-CHARA ®



others to think they can get a piece of the action."

Following Hikonyan, who debuted in 2007 to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Hikone Castle and now makes four weekly

appearances before rapt crowds, a slew of local governments rolled out their own lovable mascots, often chosen out of thousands of submissions from the general public. And the competition among cities and prefectures to come up with the next superstar has led to a glut.

With the field now saturated, there could be well over 1,000 of these guys. Kobe City alone boasts 42 mascots who represent a wide range of campaigns, such as recycling, smoking manners and "friendliness" — which comes in the form of a smiley heart who encourages citizens to play nice.

But nowhere is the popularity of yuru-kyara more vividly on display than at the annual Kigurumi Summit — known as the Yuru-Chara ® Festival — held in Hikone. Seventy-five thousand fans attended the third festival this past October; nearly double that of the first one in 2008. Last year featured 150 characters, hailing from all over the country, who strutted their stuff for three days of sheer fuzzy mascot joy.

"These characters are a good opportunity for small cities in Japan to get people's attention," Shinsaku Arakawa, the director of the Society of Organized Yuru-Chara ®, wrote in an e-mail.

He explained that because so many Japanese people adore cute characters, regional governments are using mascots

to attract more visitors to off-the-beaten-path areas of the country in the hopes of cashing in on the celebrity character hitting it big. Hikonyan, the samurai cat, boosted visitation 60 percent and still brings in a steady flow of tourists who eagerly purchase all manner of related merchandise.

"Hikonyan is the king of yuru-kyara," Arakawa continued. "And our aim of the Summit is to give the other characters a chance to become better known through his popularity."

You would never have a super cuddly mascot for the U.S. Marine Corps.'

AUTHOR MATT ALT

All this might not have come about if it were not for Jun Miura, the godfather of the yuru-kyara world. He first drew attention to these below-the-radar creatures when he assembled them in his 2006 book, "Yuru-Chara ® no hon." Miura, who declined to be interviewed for this story, coined the term "yuru-kyara" and serves as an advisor to the Society of Organized Yuru-Chara ®, said Arakawa.

"Miura noticed that every single prefecture and lots of cities and neighborhood events have their own cute

characters that they use to promote themselves," said Matt Alt, coauthor of the 2007 "Hello, Please! Very Helpful Super Kawaii Characters From Japan," which plumbs the depths of Japan's cute character culture. "And whenever they had a special event, they would trot out these guys in the furry suits."

To distinguish them from purely commercial characters, such as the incomparable Mickey Mouse, Alt dubbed them "working characters" because, well, they've got a job to do. He chalks up their success in part up to their ability to transcend gender and age demographics.

"You would never have a super cuddly mascot for the U.S. Marine Corps," he said, but the Self-Defense Force in Japan has its very own Prince Pickles.

Likewise, the Tokyo police have

Pipo-kun, whose massive ears, large eyes and an antenna help him spot trouble.

Alt points out the irony that though initially created to draw attention to something besides themselves, "These once obscure regional mascot characters have been thrust into the limelight, becoming marketable characters in their own right."

And it is their unlikely journey from the periphery of Japanese culture to the mainstream that may one day give the likes of Hello Kitty a real run for her money.

"Fuzz and Fur" is published by Mark Batty Publisher, markbattypublisher.com; "Hello, Please! Very Helpful Super Kawaii Characters From Japan" is published by Chronicle Books, www.chroniclebooks.com

Introducing fuzzy friends: What do yuru kyara do on their days off?

Buruburu-kun is the mascot for the Wakaka Seikatsu Blueberry Eye vitamin supplement. In the ads, he promotes the health benefits of blueberries through dance and song. He likes to consume water and sunlight, and in his free time, he enjoys sports and dancing. <http://www.buruz.jp>

Kinta-kun, hailing from Kawanishi, Hyogo Prefecture, is based on a Japanese folklore hero, Kintaro, who grew up in the wild and developed superhuman strength that enabled him to pull trees out of the ground and wrestle bears. www.city.kawanishi.hyogo.jp/gyozaisei/kintaropro

Haba-tan, a phoenix who is the symbol of Kobe City's rebirth after the 1995 Great Hanshin Earthquake, serves as a mascot for sporting events, disaster readiness, eco-awareness and other campaigns for the common good. His hobby is dancing. http://web.pref.hyogo.jp/ac02/ac02_3_00000011.html

The Noppon Brothers were created in celebration of Tokyo Tower's 40th anniversary in 1998. The younger of the twins, who wears red, is cheerful and likes posing for pictures, while his older brother, in blue, is shy and likes shaking hands. www.tokyotower.co.jp/english

Sento-kun was created by the sculptor Satoshi Yabuuchi to celebrate Nara's 1300th anniversary in 2010. Though his design was criticized for being a bit unsettling, the media attention catapulted him to a level of fame second only to the great Hikone Hikonyan. www.1300.jp/sentokun_os/profile

Negiccho is a giant Japanese leek, Gifu Prefecture's specialty vegetable. He is energetic and honest and enjoys flying kites and fishing. (D.K.) www.town.ginan.gifu.jp/negicchonikki

All images are courtesy of Edward Harrison, coauthor of "Fuzz and Fur."

Not many Japanese get to work on a genuine sebiro

Paul McInnes
SPECIAL TO THE JAPAN TIMES

Though London's famous Savile Row faces a decline in bespoke suit demand, the inspiration of one of its more innovative tailors still manages to reach Japan.

For more than 200 years, tailors on Savile Row, a small street in London's Mayfair district, have been dressing czars, kings, Hollywood stars and even the occasional Japanese emperor. Savile Row is an elite, expensive and discreet association of craftsman who create bespoke garments, using only the best fabrics, for wealthy clients who pay upwards of £3,000 (\$4,860) for a simple suit.

In recent times, however, the very existence of the Row, as it is otherwise known, has been under threat. American chains such as Abercrombie & Fitch have moved into the street with the hope, albeit quite absurd, that it some of Savile Row's mystique and credibility would rub off on its commercial brand identity. If other fashion brands follow suit, rents would



Tailor made tutoring: Koichi Sugimoto (right) with Brian Pusey, one of his mentors at Richard James in Savile Row, London. COURTESY OF RICHARD JAMES

increase, and the tailors, who already live a perilous existence, could find themselves out of the street.

Savile Row also faces a lack of interest from the younger generation, mainly in terms of clients but also in staff. The average age of tailors on the Row is 55 with many much older. The few trainees who are studying there receive one-to-one instruction, with each tailor traditionally having its own trainee system. It's an intimate yet demanding atmosphere, with some apprentices taking five years to absorb just the elementary basics of the trade.

Following in the footsteps of designers

such as the late, great Alexander McQueen, who trained with Anderson & Sheppard, is 25-year-old Tokyo native Koichi Sugimoto. He is serving a one year apprenticeship with Richard James, a relative newcomer to Savile Row.

Located at No. 29, Richard James opened in 1992 and caused a stir by bringing contemporary tailoring and modern silhouettes to what many consider as a stuffy and old-fashioned men's club. It also has a licensing deal in Japan with Itochu.

Sugimoto, who was required to study English intensively before training under bespoke experts Ben Clarke and Brian Pusey, explained that he found the aesthetic differences between each of the Savile Row tailors particularly impressive.

"There are many tailoring houses on Savile Row and all houses have their own style," he said. "Some customers prefer a modern aesthetic (like Richard James) and others prefer classical. Every customer expects the quality of Savile



Following suit: Koichi Sugimoto's current training at Savile Row includes measuring clients, drafting patterns and cutting material for the Richard James tailors. COURTESY OF RICHARD JAMES

Row tailoring and the style of their favorite tailoring house. For bespoke, everything is for the customer and all houses do their best to make their customers happy."

He added that as a bespoke tailor, Richard James is unique in its appeal to a more diverse demographic. "Richard James has a mixture of traditional Savile Row tailoring and a modern visual. I believe that it is one of the most luxurious bespoke houses on Savile Row, but at the same time it is a fashion brand for modern gentlemen."

In an age of cheaply sourced, poorly made fast fashion versus overpriced high fashion, the legacy and history of Savile Row is worth preserving. The guaranteed quality and craftsmanship that has been passed down over centuries has changed

little over that time and is the Row's ultimate selling point. Tailors such as Richard James, Oswald Boateng and Norton & Sons' Patrick Grant are keen to maintain traditional English tailoring while creating modern looks and a forward-thinking approach to business.

Sugimoto said he hoped his professional and personal journey of discovery will inspire others to follow in his footsteps. "Savile Row is the most famous and historical place for men's fashion. And everyone who works in men's fashion wants to see it and be involved in it. Since I came here I've been realizing a lot of things about fashion every day (not only about bespoke). I think Savile Row is the best place for anyone in Japan who wants to be a tailor or a designer."

Breakup notifier takes facebook stalking to new levels

Hayley Tsukayama
Washington
THE WASHINGTON POST

A new app for Facebook will tell you when the Facebook friends you select have changed their relationship status on the social networking site.

Why? The tagline from the app's Web site pretty much says it all: "You like someone. They're in a relationship. Be the first to know when they're out of it."

The New York Daily News interviewed developer Dan Loewenherz who created the app as a joke after a conversation he had with his fiance and her mother. The two women were lamenting that the perfect man for his future sister-in-law was already in a relationship.

Loewenherz joked that there should be a way to alert them if the young man became single, and made the app in four hours.

The app had more than 100,000 users in under 24 hours, and now has more than 200,000 users.

Loewenherz has also made some tweaks to the program to let users search among their friends and limit notifications by gender.

"I think a lot of people out there think I'm some sort of weirdo Facebook stalker," Loewenherz told the paper. "But I made this mostly as a joke and like I said before, I'm just blown away how many people are using it."

This is excerpted from the Faster Forward high-tech blog at www.washingtonpost.com