



## Let the *Yuru-Chara* do the job: Japan's Mascot Character Frenzy and its Socioeconomic Implications

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**Abstract:** In the land of Hello Kitty and Doraemon where cute characters and manga/cartoon characters enjoy immense popularity among people of all ages, a new breed of mascot characters known as *Yuru-Chara* have emerged to unforeseen popularity. These characters are not primarily intended for commercial success. Instead, they are “employed” to promote local culture and/or products to boost local economies. They have become so popular that an increasing number of people, organizations and businesses are turning to them to promote public relations, tourism, campaigns and local products.  
**Keywords:** *Yuru-Chara*; mascot; tourism; economy; (re)vitalization.

[es] Dejád a los *Yuru-Chara* que hagan el trabajo: La fiebre de las mascotas japonesas y sus implicaciones socioeconómicas

**Resumen:** En la tierra de Hello Kitty y Doraemon donde los personajes monos y de *manga/anime* disfrutan de una inmensa popularidad entre gente de todas las edades, una nueva raza de personajes mascota conocidos como *Yuru-Chara* han surgido con un imprevisto éxito. Estos personajes no se han creado con una intención principal de éxito comercial. En vez de ello, son “empleados” para promover la cultura local así como sus productos para promover las economías locales. Han llegado a ser tan populares que un número cada vez mayor de gente, organizaciones y negocios están acudiendo a ellos para promover sus relaciones públicas, el turismo, campañas específicas de concienciación o productos regionales.

**Palabras clave:** *Yuru-Chara*; mascota; turismo; economía; (re)vitalización.

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### 1. Introduction

Japan is a wonderland of *kawaii* かわい い or “cute” designs. *Kawaii* is “‘an important aesthetic quality in post-war Japanese popular culture’ that is ‘characterized

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by childishness, vulnerability, smallness, innocence, and sweetness and is generally associated with young girls, although ‘cute’ taste now pervades much of mainstream Japanese fashion, advertising, graphic design and pop art.”<sup>2</sup> In Japan there exist characters that thrive on being *kawaii* and have been an indispensable part in Japanese culture and traditions. From depictions of animals used as motifs or caricatures in paintings and decorative art—such as in *kamon* 家紋 family crests [fig. 1-Left], the *Chōjū giga* 鳥獸戯画 scrolls<sup>3</sup> [fig. 1-Right], or kimono and *makie* 蒔絵 designs (*monyō* 文様)—to kitsch and quaint characters.



Fig. 1. Left: Animal motifs in Japanese family crest designs.

See: <http://家紋一覽.crest-japan.net/docs/dobutsu.html> [Consulta: 25/10/2016].

Right: Frolicking, personified animals in *Chōjū giga*. See: [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/25/Chouju\\_sumou.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/25/Chouju_sumou.jpg) [Consulta: 25/10/2016].

It is said that the tradition of deity-worshipping, the *yōkai* 妖怪 culture and the history of loving for small items like the *netsuke* 根付 paved way for the incomparable popular reception of characters in Japan<sup>5</sup>. Under this tradition of love for cute characters Japan has witnessed a surge of mascot characters known as *Yuru-Chara* ゆるキャラ, a term coined around 1999 by art critic Jun Miura<sup>6</sup>. This term derives from the Japanese words *yurui* ゆるい (literally meaning “lose” or “casual”, also translates to “fuzzy” or “floppy”) and *kyarakutā* キャラクター from the English word “character”. These characters are typically christened with cute-sounding names, often with suffixes *-ko* and *-rō* or diminutive suffixes *-chan* and *-kun*.

<sup>2</sup> TSUTSUI, William M. (2010): *Japanese Popular culture and globalization*. Ann Arbor, MI: Association for Asian Studies, p. 80.

<sup>3</sup> Or *Chōjū jimbutsu giga* 鳥獸人物戯画 (Scrolls of Frolicking Animals and Humans), National Treasure and property of Kōzanji 高山寺 temple in Kyoto. This is a set of four Heian period satire *emakimono* illustrated scrolls drawn in ink with no text.

<sup>4</sup> Japanese gold/silver lacquer work

<sup>5</sup> MIYATA, Rie 宮田理恵 (2009): “Harō Kitty ni miru kyarakutā bijinesu no gokui. Tayōna koraboto jūnanna de-zain senryakude shinichibawo kaitaku” [Puntos esenciales de los negocios de las mascotas como se ve en Hello Kitty. Abriendo nuevos mercados por medio de una estrategia de colaboraciones diversas y diseños flexibles]. En *Media Sabor*. 16/11/2009. [http://mediasabor.jp/2009/11/post\\_715.html](http://mediasabor.jp/2009/11/post_715.html) [Consulta: 25/10/2016]

<sup>6</sup> Born in 1958 in Kyoto. Debuted first as manga artist. Also the creator of the famous term *mai būmu* マイブーム, from ‘my boom’, meaning something one is currently enthusiastic about and obsessed with. MIURA, Jun (2016): *Miura Jun Weekly* みうらじゅん週間 [página WEB] Miura Jun, 2016. <http://miurajun.net/> [Consulta: 25-10-2016].

Since then new *Yuru-Chara* have appeared in profusion, while old characters have also been resurrected as a result of the *Yuru-Chara* boom. Miura himself even “foresees” that one day half of Japan’s population might be taken over by *Yuru-Chara*<sup>7</sup>. This growing trend has created a new pop culture of local mascot characters. While characters and mascots can be found around the globe, the degree of permeation into everyday life and the extent of population transcending age and gender make *Yuru-Chara* decisively unique. Japan is a land where such “cute” mascots can be and are used to represent what would normally be regarded as formal, serious, or solemn—such as the famed Hello Kitty and Dear Daniel appearing on JAPAN POST’S kabuki-themed stamps issued in June 2011<sup>8</sup> or the entire squad of mascot characters representing police departments around the nation to help make the police more approachable<sup>9</sup>. These mascot characters create a world between fantasy and reality and it is within this vast kingdom of floppy-looking characters and the tradition of deploying characters to represent serious matters that the *Yuru-Chara* species actively carry out their social duties. Harrison calls this phenomenon “another enigmatic, yet utterly captivating, aspect of contemporary Japanese visual culture”<sup>10</sup>.

This paper will examine how *Yuru-Chara* differ from other characters in Japan, the social elements that have facilitated them to gain unsurpassed popularity, and what economic implications they have on regional areas in Japan today.

## 2. Classifying *Yuru-Chara*

*Yuru-Chara* come from a long lineage of cute characters and mascots that have roam the land of *kawaii*. To better understand what *Yuru-Chara* are and how they differ from other characters, it is necessary to first classify characters and mascots in Japan. All characters can first be divided into two categories, one being those with a focus on commercial purposes and the other on promotional purposes.

### 2.1. Category I: Commercial characters

#### 2.1.1. Brand characters

As the name suggests, brand characters are created essentially with commercial profit in mind, the best example being Sanrio. Under the Sanrio brand the company has reaped great business success with many of its characters created for products to be used as gifts<sup>11</sup>, the most popular of which being Hello Kitty. While designed and marketed mostly in two-dimensional form, these characters sometimes appear as *kigurumi* きぐるみ (costumed mascot) to participate at events, such as to entertain

<sup>7</sup> MIURA, Jun (2009): *Zen-nihon yurukyara kōshiki gaidobukku*. Tokyo: Fusosha, p. 251.

<sup>8</sup> JAPAN POST 日本郵便 (2011): *Japan Post* [página WEB], 2016. “Sellos de Saludo. Emisión de Saludos Veraniegos” (*Gurītingu Kitte. Natsu no Gurītingu no Hakkō*) [http://www.post.japanpost.jp/kitte\\_hagaki/stamp/tokusyu/2011/h230622\\_t.html](http://www.post.japanpost.jp/kitte_hagaki/stamp/tokusyu/2011/h230622_t.html) [Consulta: 25/10/2016].

<sup>9</sup> DEPARTAMENTO DE POLICIA METROPOLITANO DE TOKIO 警視庁 (2016): *Departamento de Policia Metropolitana de Tokio* [página WEB], 2016. “La Ciudad de Pipo-kun” (*Piipo-kun no taun*) [http://www.keishicho.metro.tokyo.jp/about\\_mpd/shokai/pipo/](http://www.keishicho.metro.tokyo.jp/about_mpd/shokai/pipo/) [Consulta: 25/10/2016].

<sup>10</sup> HARRISON, E. & J. (2010): *Fuzz & Fur: Japan’s Costumed Characters*. New York: Mark Batty Publisher, back cover.

<sup>11</sup> SANRIO ONLINE STORE (2016): *Sanrio Corporation* [página WEB], 2016. “About Sanrio”. <https://www.sanrio.com/pages/about-sanrio> [Consulta: 25/10/2016].

visitors at Sanrio's own theme park Sanrio Puroland<sup>12</sup> in Tokyo or to stand along couples as they wed (the latter not being exclusive to Japan).

As the fundamental purpose of these characters is to sell products showcase the characters themselves, they are intentionally designed to look cute and stylish. Many of these characters are also given a pseudo human life. Hello Kitty, for instance, is supposed to be British and is presented as an adorable “person” who has a fun and desirably fantastic life. Such personification is the manifestation of *akogare* 憧れ—a mentality deeply rooted in the Japanese culture that has to do with longing, yearning and desire for one's ideals and fantasies. The human-like life given to these characters is also a fundamental element in *Yuru-Chara* mascots, as we will see later.

Another type of brand characters involves those designed to represent a company brand and to promote products. Known as *kigyō kyarakutā* 企業キャラクター (corporate characters), these characters generally appear in company logos but sometimes also appear as *kigurumi* or other forms. For instance, there is the famous Peko-chan [fig. 2-Left] who represents Fujiya<sup>13</sup>, a well-known confectionery chain store and restaurant in Japan, and Sato-chan who is the familiar face of Sato Pharmaceutical [fig. 2-Right]. Unlike Sanrio characters, these company characters mainly serve to represent a company, promote company campaigns and help advertise company products whose packaging may or may not be designed with these characters on them.



Fig. 2. Left: Peko-chan. See: <http://www.fujiya-peko.co.jp/pekoworld/profile/index.html> [25-10-2016]. Right: Sato-chan. See: <http://www.sato-seiyaku.co.jp/newsrelease/2010/100310.html> [Consulta: 25/10/2016].

### 2.1.2. Cartoon and anime characters

Cartoon and anime characters are characteristically designed as protagonists of stories that are often later used for related goods (such as stationery items and clothing). Popular characters are sometimes used also to promote events and campaigns, such as Pikachu and other Pokémon characters decorating ANA air-

<sup>12</sup> Opened on December 7, 1990. Located in Tama New Town, Tokyo.

<sup>13</sup> Founded in 1910 in Yokohama. Peko-chan became the company's character in the 1950s.

planes<sup>14</sup>. The difference between these and the brand characters described in 2.1.1. is that characters in this category are not primarily designed with adorning commercial products in mind—that comes later when the characters become popular and provide more lucrative market opportunities. Besides appearing in *kigurumi*, these characters are also popular for Cosplay コスプレー fans who dress up as their favourite characters.

### 2.1.3. Comic strips, manga and other illustrated/game characters

Following cartoon and anime characters comes the next type of similar characters: comics and manga characters. Similar to those described in 2.1.2., these are designed to tell stories in print, but often later become animated or turned into films, while often “come alive” as *kigurumi*. Merchandise also becomes available once these characters have gained substantial popularity. Like the other types of characters mentioned so far, characters in this category are also sometimes deployed to represent an official organization, campaign or mission, such as Doraemon being sent overseas as Japan’s *Anime Bunka Taishi* アニメ文化大使 (Ambassador for Anime Culture) (fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Doraemon appointed as the Ambassador for Anime Culture.

See: [http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/release/h20/3/rls\\_0319e.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/release/h20/3/rls_0319e.html) [Consulta: 25/10/2016].

## 2.2. Category II: Promotional characters

All characters described under Category I have strict commercial copyrights attached to them. The fundamental purpose of these characters is to sell products and promote commercial events, though they may sometimes be used for non-commercial purposes. Many of them, such as Sanrio, manga and anime characters have gone on to achieve worldwide fame and popularity. Such attributions of these characters generally differentiate them from *Yuru-Chara*. The primary purpose of Category II characters is to help promote a local region, community, or business. Although not

<sup>14</sup> ANA ALL NIPPON AIRWAYS (2016): *All Nippon Airways* [página WEB], 2016. [Plane’s] “Design”. <http://www.ana.co.jp/eng/flights/pokemonjet/design.html> [Consulta: 25/10/2016].



initially created for or as commercial products, once they become popular and have fulfilled their promotional roles, they are also generally turned into products to acquire more revenues for the region, community or business. Regardless, it is important to distinguish these characters as being designed with a promotional purpose rather than commercial one in mind.

### 2.2.1. Miscellaneous characters

The first category typically involves illustrated characters that are commonly seen in logos, posters, stickers, and leaflets at public places and shops. While some of them may have already become *Yuru-Chara*, they are generally one-off creations or with limited purpose and use, such as being featured in department store bargain sale advertisements, or door safety warning stickers on trains. These characters generally do not appear in *Cosplay* or *kigurumi* form.

### 2.2.2. *Gotōchi* ご当地 Characters

*Gotōchi* means “local(ized)” and *gotōchi* characters therefore are characters that symbolize a local town, city, prefecture or region. Before *Yuru-Chara* became a phenomenon, *gotōchi* characters already enjoyed popularity across Japan, often as souvenir characters, and they may be considered as the precedents of *Yuru-Chara*. They typically appear on merchandise, holding special objects or products of the local place they represent and they may include characters from Category I. Tourists travelling around Japan will often see souvenirs of well-known characters like Hello Kitty “dressed up” as a “local person”<sup>15</sup>. For instance, they may look like the Daibutsu 大仏 (Big Buddha) in Kamakura or as a *maiko* 舞妓 in Kyoto. The *gotōchi* concept has spread to many levels, with the Japanese burger chain MOS Burger also having come up with their own family of *gotōchi* characters called *Mossan* [fig. 4] in a bid to “cheer up Japan” after the March 11 earthquake, tsunami and nuclear plant disasters.

There are also characters born locally for the purpose of attracting visitors through promoting local culture, history and products. The localization does not stop at the national level, characters like Hello Kitty can be found localized in other countries as well. An interesting point to note here is that *gotōchi* characters are not necessarily *Yuru-Chara*, especially if they are already famous characters like Hello Kitty or Mickey Mouse, but *Yuru-Chara* are essentially *gotōchi* characters in nature.

<sup>15</sup> SANRIO CORPORATION (2016): あすなろ居WEB [página WEB], 2016. <http://gotochikitty.com/map/> [Consulta: 25/10/2016].



Fig. 4. MOS Burger's *Gotōchi Mossan* characters (paper placemat).  
Eddy Y. L. Chang, 2011. More information on MOS Burger's website, see:  
<http://www.mos.co.jp/enjoy/mossan/mossanzukan/> [Consulta: 25/10/2016].

### 2.2.3. *Yuru-Chara*

With Japan being a cradle for characters of all sorts and with extremely prolific creations of new characters the difference between *Yuru-Chara* and the rest can be rather vague at times, but Miura fundamentally differentiates *Yuru-Chara* as follows<sup>16</sup>:

1. It must convey a strong message of love for one's hometown or local region;
2. The character's movements or behaviour should be unique and unstable or awkward;
3. The character should be unsophisticated or laid-back (*yurui*) and lovable.

*Yuru-Chara* generally appears as costumed mascots that have their own personal profiles and are treated as celebrities. What distinguishes them from the other characters is the fact that they are perceived as if they were "real people" serving to promote products, events and causes. They write their own blogs, run errands and earnestly promote whatever they were created to promote for.

<sup>16</sup> ORICON NEWS (2009): "Entrevista a Miura Jun. 'Últimamente, ¿no me habrá vuelto yo mismo un *Yuru Kyara*?' (Saikin, ore jishinga *Yuru Kyarani Natteiru*?) En *Oricon News*. 27/11/2009 <http://www.oricon.co.jp/news/71089/full/> [Consulta: 25/10/2016].

### 3. The *Yuru-Chara* phenomenon

The *Yuru-Chara* phenomenon has led to an overwhelming proliferation of new characters, as well as the resurrection of has-been characters from storage. Being *gotōchi* characters in nature, their popularity is born out of *kyōdo-ai* 郷土愛—love for one’s hometown, region or prefecture. There is now a *Yuru-Chara* society organizing “summits” to invite current and new mascot members to participate in all-*Yuru-Chara* events and contests. The extent of the popularity of *Yuru-Chara* is such that they are often featured in local news(papers), while websites and books on *Yuru-Chara* have also sprung out, typically providing profiles of the characters and listing their “personal” interests, skills and favourite things.

*Yuru-Chara* play an important role in the promotion of local culture, products and so forth, often replacing actual people in the promotion of campaigns and events. While mascots and characters are not exclusive to Japan, *Yuru-Chara* are unique in the sense that they are commonly “employed” as role models and representatives in place of television personalities, celebrities or other famous figures. One could say that the Japanese subconsciously prefer using and seeing characters as spokespeople than real people.

As it is impossible to introduce and analyse all of the *Yuru-Chara*, this paper will look at a few of the most prominent or interesting “figures” in the *Yuru-Chara* community worthy of mentioning, in order to demonstrate their roles to provide a better understanding of their nature. This section will primarily deal with *Yuru-Chara* organizations and introduce three prominent characters.

#### 3.1. The Society of Organized *Yuru-Chara* ゆるキャラサミット協会 [fig. 5]

After the great success of the 1998 *kigurumi* event held in Hikone city (where one of the most popular *Yuru-Chara*, Hiko’nyan “was born” and “resides”), an official organization dedicated to these characters led to the establishment of the Society of Organized *Yuru-Chara* in 2009. The initial aim of the association was to help enhance regional economy and recognition, while sharing information and building a network of characters to help each other promote their own local areas. The first *kigurumi* event was an instant success and since then more and more characters have joined in the Society’s annual event.

This *kigurumi* event paved way for other similar events, including the annual event called *Yuru-Chara Matsuri*, the *Kigurumi Summit* in Hikone, or the *Yuru-Chara Cup* in Tottori (which ended with its tenth year in 2015). At these events, *Yuru-Chara* from around Japan gather to compete for their place as the most loved *gotōchi Yuru-Chara*. Through these events, more and more *Yuru-Chara* become recognized, and with that the local region and products represented by the characters get further exposure to achieve the fundamental aim of *machi-okoshi* 町おこし or *chiiki-shinkō* 地域振興, meaning the (re)vitalization of a city/town.





Fig. 5. The Society of Organized *Yuru-Chara* members.  
See: <http://kigurumisummit.org> [Consulta: 25/10/2016].

### 3.2. Hiko'nyan: superstar from Hikone [fig. 6]

One of the most popular *Yuru-Chara* is Hiko'nyan from Hikone in Shiga Prefecture. This *Yuru-Chara* was “born” in 2006 as part of the celebration for 400 years since the construction of Hikone Castle. The samurai warrior helmet worn by Hiko'nyan signifies the headwear of the clan that owned the castle. Hiko'nyan's name derives from *Hikone* and the word *nyan* which is the meowing of a cat in Japanese.

Hiko'nyan has become so popular that it is considered an inseparable part of Hikone city. It is registered as a local resident and has received an official domicile registration certificate. It is said that Hiko'nyan sparked off the *Yuru-Chara* boom, which saw the establishment of the annual *Yuru-Chara* Festival in Hikone in 2008 with a gathering of other *Yuru-Chara* from around Japan and some 46,000 people attending during the two-day event. Having become a symbol of Hikone city<sup>17</sup> and Shiga prefecture, Hiko'nyan became not only a local celebrity, but was even invited to a festival in Hawai'i by the mayor of Honolulu in June 2009<sup>18</sup>.



Fig. 6. Hiko'nyan from Hikone. Left, see: <http://www.city.hikone.shiga.jp/kikakushinkobu/150ht/trademark01.html> [Consulta: 25/10/2016].  
Centre, see: <http://plaza.rakuten.co.jp/2239minami/diary/201010260000/> [Consulta: 25/10/2016].  
Right, see: <http://www.hikone-400th.jp/blog/cat34/> [Consulta: 25/10/2016].

<sup>17</sup> RECCA Sha (2009): *Zenkoku 'gotōchi kyara' ga yoku wakaru hon: tanjō hiwa kara omoshiro episōdo made*. Tokyo: PHP, p. 174.

<sup>18</sup> ONO, Philbert (2009): Blog de Philbert Ono. “Photos of Hiko-nyan in Hawaii!!” 08/06/2009. <http://shiga-ken.com/blog/2009/06/photos-of-hiko-nyan-in-hawaii/> [Consulta: 25/10/2016].

### 3.3. Sentō-kun: Spokesperson for Nara [fig. 7]

Sentō-kun is another famous *Yuru-Chara* who became well known, but also much criticized for looking *kimoi* きもい or *kimochi warui* 気持ち悪い—meaning *unpleasant looking*. Named after the word *sentō* 遷都, meaning “relocation of the capital”, Sentō-kun was created to promote the 1300-year celebration of the relocation of Japan’s ancient capital to Heijōkyō 平城京 in Nara. Although the event ended in 2010, Sentō-kun went on to be actively involved in promoting Nara city, its history and culture.



Fig. 7. Sentō-kun from Nara.

Left: <http://nara-jp.net/14> [25-10-2016].

Centre: <http://news.walkerplus.com/2009/0114/7/photo00.html> [Consulta: 25/10/2016].

Right: <http://nara.keizai.biz/headline/358/> [Consulta: 25/10/2016].

### 3.4. Kumamon: Civil servant of Kumamoto Prefecture [fig. 8]

Regardless which *Yuru-Chara* is currently the most popular mascot, Kumamon has been the nation’s favourite for the past several years since being created in 2011. His popularity is attributed to the fact that there have been no other *Yuru-Chara* from the same region to compete with him. Kumamon was created to coincide with the opening of the Shinkansen bullet train line connecting Honshū and Kyūshū. His name comes from *kuma* of Kumamoto (which also means “bear”, hence the bear character) and *mon* meaning ‘person’ or ‘thing’. Like other *Yuru-Chara*, Kumamon has an important job to do, and that is the promotion of Kumamoto as the prefecture’s civil servant and to achieve this he has travelled to other regions and made appearance at various events nationwide. Kumamon’s popularity has also resulted in successful merchandising<sup>19</sup>, raking in a large amount of revenues for the prefecture.

<sup>19</sup> FUJII, Moeko (2013): “The Branding of Kumamon. The Bear that stole Japan’s heart”. En *The Wall Street Journal*. 28/06/2013. <http://blogs.wsj.com/japanrealtime/2013/06/28/the-branding-of-kumamon-the-bear-that-stole-japans-heart/> [Consulta: 25/10/2016].



Fig. 8. Kumamon from Kumamoto prefecture.

Left: <http://www.itmedia.co.jp/news/articles/1604/21/news105.html> [Consulta: 25/10/2016].

Right: <http://yoshikaka.blog.so-net.ne.jp/2016-05-03-1> [Consulta: 25/10/2016].

#### 4. The socio-cultural roles and daily lives of *Yuru-Chara*

*Yuru-Chara* “live” a life by mostly doing community and charity work by making public appearances like celebrities. As mentioned previously, many *Yuru-Chara* have their “personal” blog, which generally contains their profile, schedule of appearances and activities, official products and a history of their public relations work. The characters proved to be so popular with children and adults alike that *kigurumi* costumes, illustrations and other related rights-protected properties are also made available to people who wish to “employ” the characters for their own events or promotional activities. This indicates that, while maintaining their *gotōchi* status, they now accommodate other needs outside their own localised limitations.

*Yuru-Chara* do not just have a realistic profile and job, part of their public relations work involves them having a life. For instance, in fig. 7 we see Renka-chan from Kasuragi city in Nara prefecture “falling for” Sentō-kun and “baked” a cake for him for his second birthday in an attempt to win his heart and becomes his girlfriend. It is striking that this was reported in the Nara Keizai Shimbun business newspaper, an indication that *Yuru-Chara* are considered by people as social members in a world where the line between reality and fantasy is often unclear.

In Ōtsu city by Lake Biwa in Shiga prefecture adjacent to Kyoto prefecture we find Hikaru-kun who appears in the city’s official tourism promotional poster [fig. 9]. He is a young Heian period boy, representing the character Hikaru Genji from the famous novel *The Tale of Genji*. What makes *Yuru-Chara* unique and interesting, as exemplified here by Hikaru-kun’s appearance in the poster, is how a mascot is chosen over a real personality and featured as a real person to represent the city and promote tourism there. This has become a common *Yuru-Chara* feature and almost a prerequisite role of any *Yuru-Chara*.

Another example of non-human character assigned the important role of promoting an official event is Mayumarō, who was created for the promotion of the 26<sup>th</sup> national cultural event held in Kyoto in 2011<sup>20</sup>. Being typically Kyotoesque in appearance (*mayu* meaning silkworm cocoon), Mayumarō dons a typical Nishijin kimono made from silk. He has even appearance in a Kabuki play in March 2011, which marked the first in the history of *Yuru-Chara*. This is significant in that Mayumarō's performance with well-known kabuki actors on stage was publicized on Shōchiku's official kabuki website Kabuki-bito, along with a photograph showing Mayumarō posing with the cast and Kyoto prefectural governor [fig. 10], citing the casts' amazement in how well Mayumarō acted and that his future involvement is much anticipated<sup>21</sup>.

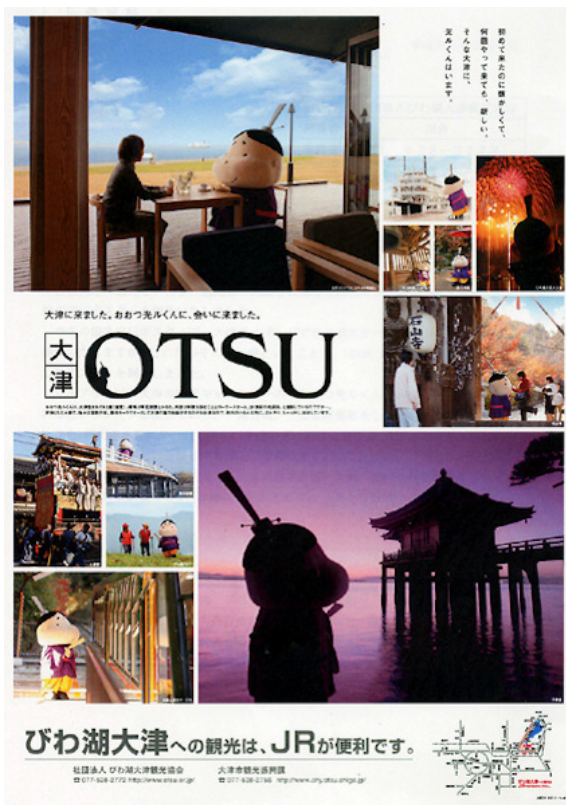


Fig. 9. Hikaru-kun from Ōtsu city. See: <http://www.shigahochi.co.jp/info.php?type=article&id=A0003879> [Consulta: 25/10/2016].

<sup>20</sup> 第26回国民文化祭京都2011.

<sup>21</sup> SHOCHIKU Co. Ltd. (2011): "iMayumaro debuta en el escenario del Teatro de Kabuki Minami-za de Kioto! [En la obra] *Hitori Tabi Gojūsan Tsugi*" (*Mayumaroga Kyōto·Minami-za no Butaini Tōjō* ~ *Sangatsu Hanagata Kabuki Hitori Tabi Gojūsan Tsugi*) En *Kabuki-bito* 歌舞伎美人 04/03/2011. [http://www.kabuki-bito.jp/news/2011/03/post\\_174.html](http://www.kabuki-bito.jp/news/2011/03/post_174.html) [Consulta: 25/10/2016].





Fig. 10. Left: Mayumarō from Kyoto city.

See: <https://twitter.com/kyotomayumaro> [Consulta: 25/10/2016].

Right: Mayumarō with kabuki actors.

See: [http://www.kabuki-bito.jp/news/2011/03/post\\_174.html](http://www.kabuki-bito.jp/news/2011/03/post_174.html) [Consulta: 25/10/2016].

## 5. The healing effect of *Yuru-Chara*

*Yuru-Chara* may look out of place, even often ridiculous, but it is undeniable that they possess special attributions that guarantee their popularity. The fact that these characters can be more persuasive in campaign promotions than real people indicates there is more than meets the eye. It is important to note that their daily activities often receive serious media coverage and that they have become a new breed of idols and celebrities.

*Yuru-Chara* are local representatives and heroes. They are often personified versions of local animals or plants, perhaps this hints at a tendency to swerve from any link to the real world. Since 2008 there has been a surge in the number of new characters and animal characters top the list<sup>22</sup>. *Yuru-Chara* are often preferred as representatives and “spokespeople” over real people as they do not disappoint and can be fully trusted as the society’s role-model citizens. They embody all the desirable moral values and attributions, because they never make human errors or have scandals<sup>23</sup>, such as due to an extramarital affair, drug abuse or any other socially unacceptable behaviour. Studies have indicated that the most prominent factor behind the *Yuru-Chara*’s success is the *iyashi* 癒し healing or relaxing effect these characters possess. In Japan *iyashi* is the emancipation from a stress-filled modern life and anything that can help relieve stress is often instantaneously labelled as an *iyashi* item and gain immediate popularity<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> RECCA Sha, *Zenkoku ‘gotōchi kyara’...*, *op. cit.* p. 266.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem.*

CROWD WORKS (2016): “¡No lo sabía! Los consumidores ¿qué tipo de mascotas buscan?” (*Shiranakatta! Shōhishawa donna kyarukutāwo motometeiru?*) <https://crowdworks.jp/lp/cl/competition/characters/articles/8046> [Consulta: 25/10/2016].



Results yielded from Bandai Character Research Institute Co., Ltd.'s survey in 2004<sup>25</sup> on the effects of characters on the Japanese reveal that the *iyashi* effect is a predominant factor in the popularity of characters including *Yuru-Chara*. For instance, according to the same survey, when asked what characters meant to them, 55.9% of respondents said characters and mascots “provide them with a calming effect”, 37.6% said characters and mascots “allowed them to become kinder”. 37% said they could “feel refreshed”, 32.5% said they “felt at ease”, 30.2% said they “felt less lonely”, and 30.1% said they could “escape from reality into their dream world”. It is worth mentioning that all these top the list of responses received. What this shows is that in a society like Japan where social edicts tend to lead to great stress and anxieties, characters and mascots can provide an escape from the harsh reality people must deal with on a daily basis. *Yuru-Chara* serve as a means of destressing and a source of much desired personal comfort within social settings. It is easy to see, then, how *Yuru-Chara* has easily become popular. Once they become popular, the ensuing effect is one of tourism and economy.

## 6. The economic effects of *Yuru-Chara*

In the case of a successful *Yuru-Chara*, a surge in the number of visitors to the region and revenues (from merchandising and through tourist visitation) generally ensues. For instance, according study published on Nikkei Style website<sup>26</sup>, Hiko'nyan attracted more than 200,000 visitors to Hikone and raked in 51 billion yen between 2007 and 2011 for the city. Kumamon on the other hand helped Kumamoto prefecture to earn 29.3 billion yen in 2012, an exponential increase from the 2.5-billion yen of the previous year. Imabari City's Barri-san helped to increase the city's revenues by 2.4 folds, while Ieyasu-kun from Hamamatsu City managed to bring more than 621 million yen from merchandising and more than 5,342 billion yen from tourist visitation.

It is undeniable that, regardless of how much actual economic effect a *Yuru-Chara* may have on the place it represents, the place in question will almost definitely gain more attention than ever before. For this reason, many municipalities and businesses turn to lost and forgotten mascots or create a new one in hopes that it will draw attention and lure visitors, which they expect will then lead to increased revenues. Such trend has been proven by *Yuru-Chara* like Hiko'nyan and Kumamon, whose odd charm has lured people from around Japan to either visit the local area they promote and purchase merchandise donning the faces of these mascots.

<sup>25</sup> NTT COM RESEARCH (2009): “Las mascotas ayudan a Japón” (*Kyarukutāga Nihonwo Sukū*) 26/01/2009. <http://research.nttcoms.com/database/data/000938/> [Consulta: 25/10/2016].

<sup>26</sup> NIKKEI STYLE (2012): “Se duplican los turistas como efecto de Hyko'nyan. Crece la fiebre regional por las mascotas” (*Hyko'nyan Kōkade Kankōkyaku Baizō. Go-tōchi Kyaraga Atsui*) En *Nikkei Style*. 12/12/2012. <http://style.nikkei.com/article/DGXDXO49301150X01C12A2TY1P01?channel=DF130120166043&style=1> [Consulta: 25/10/2016].

## 7. The side effects of *Yuru-Chara*

The wonderful world of *Yuru-Chara* is not immune from problems, however. Despite the generally positive trend of *Yuru-Chara*, sometimes a *Yuru-Chara* may fail to be effective in terms of the (re)vitalization of the local municipality or region it is assigned to promote. Such is the case of Shinjō-kun who gained great popularity in the 2016 *Yuru-Chara* competition but has yet to work his PR magic. Many people view him as useless at his given task, and he and Kumamon are pitted side by side as contrasting examples of success and failure in the *Yuru-Chara* business. Moreover, while the *Yuru-Chara* frenzy has propelled regional (re)vitalization or merchandise promotion, there is also the issue of the overflowing number of extremely floppy and superfluous mascots that looms over the happy mascot kingdom. Such mascots often fail to accentuate the local region or product features, and often create confusion rather than attract interest. Some officials have even begun considering culling these mascots or using them sparingly, since they are considered as “real” beings, one simply cannot just kill them off so easily.



Fig. 11. Characters and Mascots for the *Teotsunagō* (let's join hands) project.  
See: <http://www.teotsunago.com/> [Consulta: 25/10/2016].

## 8. Concluding remarks

*Yuru-Chara* play an important role today as they possess the power to promote and help educate people. And despite criticisms that this newly emerged pop culture is childish or absurd, *Yuru-Chara* have nevertheless proved that they can be more useful to the society than real people at times. In this sense, they are positive role models doing good deeds for the society. *Yuru-Chara* are not just characters and mascots, they have families, jobs and a busy social life. So far we have seen but only the very tip of the *Yuru-Chara* phenomenon iceberg, but it is safe to say that *Yuru-Chara* play an important socioeconomic role these days.

Following our examination of the *Yuru-Chara* phenomenon, certain questions will need to be answered, such as: Is this simply an extension of the idol and anime culture of Japan? Will it develop into something bigger, or would it simply fade away as time passes? Will they will be able to maintain their success and popularity to ensure continued growth in tourism and economically for regional (re)vitalization) in the long run? Regardless of these questions, it is certain that a successful *Yuru-Chara* will almost always lead to positive economic effects as desired by promoters, even if only temporarily.

The *Yuru-Chara* realm mirrors the Japanese society's need for a non-human contact and ways to deal with and solve social, political and environmental issues in the most comfortable way possible. These mascots can successfully fill the gaps left open by people who have failed to achieve the same aim. In the future we may see more characters involved in more social activities (not only for promoting tourism and local products) such as the *Teotsunagō* project to support people and help with the recovery of areas devastated by the Great East Japan Earthquake, the ensuing tsunamis and Fukushima disaster, for which well-known characters from around the world are united [fig. 11], or we may see more floppy-looking mascots wandering in the limbo. One thing for certain is that *Yuru-Chara* can generate positive social and economic effects.