Kawaii Culture – The Origins and Meaning of Cute in Japanese

Japan loves all things kawaii, it’s deeply ingrained in modern day living. But what is kawaii? And where did it come from? Read on to discover why kawaii is so much more than just a word.

The modern day word is derived from the Taisho Era (1912-1926) “kawayushi”, meaning embarrassed, pathetic, shy, vulnerable, lovable and small.

Kawaii became popular because of shojo illustrations. The first shojo illustrator was Yumeji Takehisa in 1914.

He mixed east with west, for example, he drew big round eyes and was the first to use the word “kawaii” when he described his “chiyogami” work.

In the 1970’s many female illustrators started to change the meaning of kawaii, and their anime characters were strong and adventurous. Kawaii meant that they didn’t have any bad character points, but were very confident.

Hello Kitty is perhaps the best known kawaii icon. Its creator, Sanrio, has kept her alive and kicking by changing the design annually, playing into the love of teens to keep looks fresh and new.

Kawaii handwriting is one of the few examples of kawaii culture. In 1974, girls started to write horizontal (instead of the usual vertical; Japanese script is often written vertically, read from right to left, up to down), with rounded, soft characters. It was a way to allow teens to express themselves through writing, something previously unheard of.
There are many sub-cultures of kawaii

**Kimo-Kawaii**: Creepy-cute. It’s cute with more than a hint of creepy. Think Kewpie dolls.

**Busu-Kawaii**: Ugly-cute. Sort of a contradiction, it plays more on the pity feelings often associated with kawaii.

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Q1 - Are there ....... people at all at the bus stop?

- some
- none
- any

Q2 - That's ...... reason to be rude all the time

- some
- no
- any

Q3 - I'd like ...... time off next week when I move house

- no
- any
- some

Q4 - There's ..... coffee left; could you get some while you're out?

- no
- some
- any
Q5 - I must get to the bank because I haven't got ...... money for the weekend
some
no
any
Q6 - Could I have ...... more tea, please?
no
some
any
Q7 - When we got to the cinema, there weren't ...... tickets left
some
no
any
Q8 - My car stopped because there was ...... petrol left
any
no
some
Q9 - The shop had ...... milk so we'll have to drink our coffee black
some
no
any
Q10 - ...... bus will take you to King's Cross so get on the first that comes along
Any
Some
No
Q11 - She's worried because she has got ...... interviews next week and they always make her nervous
some
no
any
Q12 - ...... newspapers support the Government, but most don't
No
Any
Some
Q13 - You shouldn't take ...... medicine without reading the information first
some
any
no
Q14 - I'll have to get my TV fixed as I've been having ...... problems with it
any
no
some
Q15 - ...... smoke without a fire
Some
No
Any
Q16 - I can't find ...... of the cassettes I want to hear, not one of them
no
some
any