

**Hello Kitty and the Identity Politics in Taiwan**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper analyzes the controversy surrounding Hello Kitty, a popular Japanese animation cat figure in Taiwan. The analysis aims to understand the cultural meanings of Hello Kitty, and how these meanings, along with the figure itself, are consumed.*

*Situated in current Taiwanese cultural context, the Hello Kitty controversy consists of at least three axes:*

- 1. the cultural distinction of the elite and the popular;*
- 2. the colonial question of the self and the other; and,*
- 3. the feminist interrogation on the gender issue of cultural consumption.*

*In this paper, some aspects of cultural theories are applied to examining the social dialogues about Hello Kitty and the discursive formations that underlie these differences. The theoretical framework is based on the post-structuralist analyses on signs and languages. This paper argues that Hello Kitty is a sign whose meaning has been liquidated and evacuated from the figure itself. The so-called Hello Kitty Mania reveals a heated process through which different social groups debate for their rationales and fight for their cultural leadership.*

*This paper concludes that consumption does not necessarily lead to identity. The phenomenon of cultural consumption requires further investigation rather than a mere binary criticism. What the intellectuals should be concerned with is not how ardent the people's desire to consume is, but rather, how everyone, including the critics, participates in the struggle over meanings.*

*It is ultimately because consumption is founded on a lack that it is irrepressible.*

Baudrillard(1988:25)

## **The Story**

Hello Kitty is a well-known animated cat figure from Japan. In the summer of 1999, the McDonald's launched a promotional campaign: the Hello Kitty Meal Package. Total amount of 250,000 sets of stuffed Hello Kitties were to be given away with any meal purchase plus \$99 NT dollars. However, this campaign caught media attention not by the bargain it offered, but by the fight for the bargain. The Hello Kitty Meal Package were so popular that the people had to wait in line for hours. Eventually the Kitties were out of stock, and those who waited to purchase this celebrated stuff animal since early morning complained and inadvertently got into

a nasty fight. This war Hello Kitty made its presence in the evening news of several television channels, which eventually accelerated into the so-called “Hello Kitty Mania” in Taiwan.

In the end of 1999, Chunghwa Telecom Co. got on the bandwagon and launched a series of “Hello Kitty Phonecard.” The entire stock of 50,000 cards were sold out in five minutes after the counter windows were open. Meanwhile, Twinhead Computer introduced a special edition of notebook with a Hello Kitty on its pink cover. Apple Computer also promoted a strawberry-colored iMac with a set of Hello Kitty stationary gift. Yue-Loong Automobile even had a Hello Kitty limited edition of March. Makoto Bank issued Hello Kitty credit cards. Furthermore, according to a poll by Chinese Television Network, Hello Kitty was rated the number three most figure person in Taiwan in the year of 1999. Early in the year 2000, McDonald’s launched another joint venture with Hello Kitty, “the Love for Millennium Meal Package,” 450,000 sets of Hello Kitty to be purchased with any meal option. Again, it caused heated discussions.

The Hello Kitty Mania in Taiwan reached its peak in the McDonald’s group fight event. It then drew attention from the intellectuals, and another cultural fight broke out. Intellectuals with different points of view criticized the mania, mourning for the dead political social movements being substituted by absurd group fight over commodities. The phenomenon that Japanese commodities swept local consumers became a serious cultural concern, and the sensitive issue of cultural “Japanization” prevailed in the debate.

Japanese cultural commodities have quite a long history in Taiwan. Japanese animation products have been pirated in local markets for decades. Hello Kitty, along with other figures such as Doraemon, Chibimaruko, Tare Panda, or Detective Conan, are influential trends in children’s and teenagers’ markets. These animation figures are as ubiquitous as Mickey Mouse in the U.S. Moreover, Japanese drama series has attracted a fairly large audience since the government removed the restriction against Japanese dramas. Three national television stations air Japanese drama series regularly; some of the series even occupy primetime slots.

In addition, at least four Japanese-speaking cable channels can be viewed through cable subscription, including NHK (Nippon Hoso Kaishia) and JET (Japanese Entertainment TV), both founded by Japanese capital. Other cable channels such as Star TV and TVBS-G strategically air Japanese drama series and are always the winners in rating.

Popular cultural commodities from Japan, such as TV dramas, animation figures, and their by-products caught more general attention, mostly criticisms, than any other cultural products. The critiques focused on various topics, from as macro as identity crises under globalization to as micro as the decline of new generation's cultural taste. Since the satellite channels successfully gained their local audience in the early 90s, some scholars have proposed ban on foreign channels, while others advocated for *laissez-faire* on communication so as to participate in the international community. No consensus was reached. However, the global system is already formed, and global culture almost equals popular culture, no binary discourse of imperialism vs. free market economy can explain the transnational production/consumption, distribution/exchange of commodities, and the cultural question that comes with the economic change. Having experienced colonialism, totalitarianism, and now being part of the global capitalist mode of production, Taiwan's cultural spectrum is more complicated than nationalism or populism can cover. Historically or economically speaking, the craze for Japanese cultural commodities no longer follows a local/global binary reductionist formula.

Regarding Hello Kitty, this paper attempts to carve out a space of cultural theory amongst the discourse of cultural imperialism, as well to avoid the determinist discussion of political economy. In other words, structural analyses on the relations and modes of production are not the foci here. The pivotal concerns of this paper are: as a cultural commodity, what meaning does Hello Kitty convey? How are these meanings consumed? Where is Hello Kitty positioned in the cultural structure? Why is that position controversial? Finally, what is the controversy all about, anyway?

The theoretical framework of this paper is grounded on three related theories: the post-

structuralist semiotics, the cultural studies' discussions on resistance, and Foucaultian theory on discursive power. By this framework I aim to examine the relationship between consumption and cultural identity under the trend of globalization. Most criticisms against Hello Kitty Mania tend to equate consumption with identity, especially those who fear for Japanese cultural imperialism nearly always conflate consuming Japanese product with identifying Japanese culture. Therefore, they easily come to a frightening conclusion that Taiwan is still culturally colonized by Japan, if not in terms of economy or politics. However, with that very same logic and revert it, we will soon arrive at another overtly optimistic conclusion: if we can get people to consume as many local cultural commodities, then we can identify more with local culture and be rid of the danger of cultural colonization. Cultural salvation such as this is of course too simplified, because the question of cultural identity can not be answered by consumption tendency. A peculiar argument about the cultural Japanization in Taiwan always takes quantity as the ultimate indicator of culture. However, the fact is, even for the so-called "Jap maniacs," who would purchase just about anything from Japan, can consume nothing other than the idea of Japan in his or her own terms. That is to say, the entire Japanese cultural commodity fashion, in the late 90s' Taiwan, has consumed the idea of Japan made up by the consumers themselves. "Japan," the idea, has been commodified, merchandised, marketed, purchased, always in danger of being consumed or devoured. Fortunately or not, Jap maniacs can never purchase enough goods to identify with Japan, for each purchase relentlessly casts the idea of Japan further from him or herself.

The main concept of this paper is: consumption is a social practice, yet there is no natural equation between consumption and cultural identity. Consumption can be a formation process of political meanings, a process in which political meanings are formed through struggles and disagreements; the process has to be understood in social contexts. To put it in Baudrillard's words: "consumption is an active mode of relations (not only to objects, but to the collective and to the world), a systematic mode of activity and a global response on which our whole

cultural system is founded. ....Consumption, in as far as it is meaningful, is *a systematic act of the manipulation of signs.*" (1988:21-22) By tracing out the ways signs are arranged, the meaning of consumption can therefore be revealed.

### **Sign and Meaning**

Walter Benjamin raises a challenging concept in the article "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," where he states that "mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual.... the total functional of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice--politics."(Benjamin, 1968:224) On the relationship between the mass and art, Benjamin here provokes two concepts. First, the politics practiced by the masses is a sense of universal equality of things which extracts art from its uniqueness by means of reproduction. Second, the greatly increased number of mass participants has changed the mode of participation: the works are appropriated by use and perception, that is, by touch and sight. The cult value of the work of art therefore recedes, while the value of exhibit is left up to the public--the absent-minded examiner (Benjamin, 1968:240).

The "aura" of the work of art, the symptomatic process in which the authenticity and originality of the work is symbolized, Benjamin points out, is a distance that the elite strive to preserve and the mass attempt to overcome. The technology of mechanical reproduction has caused the decay of the aura; the ritual distance is therefore diminished by the massive quantity. Consequently, the work of art being deprived of its aura and becoming a collective experience of the mass inevitably creates a crisis for the elite. The crisis is no less a fear for the rise of the mass than for the ardent mass reproduction of the work of art.

Even the all-time critical leader of the Frankfurt School can't abandon the elitist attitude what is at stake is the culture. The Frankfurt School considers the art in its pure form should not be associated neither with mass production nor the secular realm. The mechanical

reproduction gives way to cultural industry and, subsequently, takes away the critical content of the culture. The Frankfurt School's key concept of cultural industry criticizes the systematic commodification and fetishization of culture and art in modern industrial society. They lament for the work of art losing its uniqueness and the critical distance from life. Once the art being made into a consumer product, it is detached from its authentic creation and becomes part of the ideological reproduction. In other words, the Frankfurt School thinks that, if art would eventually be compromised to the realm of reality, that of social relations and production, it would lose its critical possibility of resistance.

The Frankfurt School's idealist utopian position is followed by many intellectuals in Taiwan who always whole-heartedly embrace any criticism against anything popular or mass produced. Quantity is always the ultimate fear of the elite. Easy statements made to condemn ideology or fetishism may or may not follow the left-wing criticism against capitalist mode of production and mass society. The alternative perspective of emancipation of art proposed by Benjamin has hardly been discussed, despite or because of the possible disturbance his point may have caused. The political meaning of art, the mass, and mechanical reproduction rarely raises any challenge from local intellectuals. To take the Hello Kitty mania as an example, in most critiques the public is taken as the crowd without social action, and is thought to be lacking any independent thoughts and subjectivity. In other words, the Hello Kitty fans are depicted as having false consciousness and being incapable of making sense about their social positions, let alone forming alliance or resistance.

Hello Kitty almost challenged most of the intellectuals in Taiwan, with its unexpected popularity as opposed to the surprisingly simple-minded academic discussions. This Japanese cat figure has no expression nor mouth, yet it is said to represent the loss of Taiwanese consciousness and national identity. Even if not to accuse the cat in the name of nation, with most Kitty fans female adults in addition to teenage girls, Hello Kitty is still guilty of destroying feminists' decades of advocacy on gender politics, for the Kitty style calls for an

animated girlish look. The cat always wears pink or sky blue colors, and these childishly cute colors upset the theorists as much as they are adored by Kitty fans.

Indeed, it is hard to face the victory of an ex-colonizer's cultural products. It is even more so since the local cultural elite can not comprehend why such a mechanically reproduced formulated logo could sweep the market. Kitty fans crave more mouthless, cat-faced products, and advertisers reproduce more Kitty faces on their products. The Hello Kitty franchised product line provides almost everything to cover a Kitty fan's daily life: stationary, clothes, accessories, toilette papers, instant noodles, shampoo, utensils, stereos, toasters, even hi-tech products like motorcycles, mobile phones, cameras, computers, and cars. Even some feminine napkins have the Kitty face printed on them. A Kitty fan can live a Kitty life.

A simple cat face changes the consumer behavior, revamps the marketing strategy, impacts the popular culture, and nearly paralyses cultural criticism. The Hello Kitty design is minimal; it has little character and even less the story plots around it. Although TV animation and theatrical drama shows for children are developed for Kitty fans (even defining Hello Kitty as a French cat), most consumers do not follow the story closely. Furthermore, when printed on products, Hello Kitty hardly appears with any obvious action or contexts; its usual pose is standing, and the graphic emphasis its dress. Most of the times Hello Kitty is alone on the products. In rare occasions, Hello Kitty would be accompanied by Daniel, Kitty's supposed boyfriend, yet there is very slight physical difference between Kitty and Daniel, except that, as a couple, Daniel is always the one in blue and Kitty in pink with a red ribbon on her head.

An interesting differentiating rule genders Kitty and Daniel, that is, by their dresses and colors. In Hello Kitty fandom, color is the most intriguing gender codes. However, without Daniel, Kitty alone is always considered female, even in blue pants. Variations of dress codes therefore dominate the Kitty image. This game of endless fashion show might come from the Barbie tradition. The commercially successful but culturally notorious McDonald's Hello Kitty Meal Package basically plays with sets of Kitty dresses and the tricks of naming, such as

Love of Kyoto (in Japanese kimono), or Love of Seoul (in Korean traditional dress).

Nevertheless, Hello Kitty has no expressions nor mouth. Mouthless is Kitty's crucial mark (or the mark that is not there, the un-mark). The lack of an facial organ arouses an uncanny feeling of repressed incompleteness. Mouth, the ultimate symbol that defines personal character, is an organ that governs in/out relationship of the interior corporeal self and the exterior other. Without a mouth one can not devour nor vomit, not swallow nor speak. A mouthless face bears an even more significant sign for something that is uncommonly at lack. This explicit speechless and actionless character of Kitty worries some intellectuals. They think that the empty face represents the infantization of the Kitty fans, that a mouthless cat represents the dull and docile femininity that always remains silent, and that soft pink and blue colors stereotype female as fragile and weak. Therefore, identifying with Hello Kitty (despite of whatever leads to this conclusion) would one way or another hinder gender politics. Defending themselves, the Kitty fans claim that Hello Kitty is popular for exactly the same reason--it has no mouth. Without a mouth, Kitty is indeed the best listener and will never gossip, which makes it the best friend to tell secrets to. Moreover, Kitty fans object that these anti-Kitty criticisms uncover the condescending attitude of the elite who refuse to understand "normal" people's everyday reality. The fans think that they have been discriminated by the intellectuals.

In addition to these, two other political perspectives are derived from the above arguments and oppose to each other. One claims that the popularity of Hello Kitty proves that Taiwan's democratization is successful, because individuals are free to make decisions for his or her own happiness and no longer need to fight for human rights on the streets. The other criticizes the new generation's political apathy, because China remains a threat to the Taiwan Strait, and no one should place anything prior to this public affair, let alone an animation figure. Fighting over such a meaningless material shows the new generation's irresponsible attitude.

Accordingly, a third argument takes a more profound Frankfurt School intellectual

stance, alerting the commodifying mechanism behind Hello Kitty might have rationalized the *irrational* consumption which in turn reproduces capitalist apparatus. Made to represent a simulated happy life, Hello Kitty does not guarantee any satisfaction but is actually a trap of material slavery. All these debates and rationalization (also de-rationalization) lead to a possible doubt; that the intensive discussions and the seemingly urgent cultural war are about something else, something that is even more crucial than capitalist apparatus. Obviously Hello Kitty the animation cat is not the prime reason.

Indeed, we have witnessed the production process of a sign. Baudrillard says it well: “In order to become object of consumption, the object must become sign.” (Baudrillard, 1988:22) Consumption according to this notion is no longer a material practice, but a “virtual totality of all objects and messages presently constituted in a more or less coherent discourse.” (ibid.) Baudrillard’s point is clear; that which can be consumed is never the object, not in its substance nor in its form, but the meaning that it bears, which is obtained through its signification process. The objects that we (are unable to) consume entails an abstract and systematic relation from which the meanings of the objects are manifested. Hello Kitty is a sign; it is constantly made into a sign. It silences us as if we were the mouthless ones; we can not penetrate the meaning it has brought forth. To put it another way, Hello Kitty is a mechanically reproduced sign. With its astonishing quantity and meaning-ful poverty, we are frightened in front of the abyss of a sign. It requires tremendous labor to fill it with meanings, yet the void rapidly consumes whatever meaning we attempt to enrich it. Therefore, we are shocked to discover ourselves participating in a production process of sign, and the unconquerable void is there to remain.

We fear Hello Kitty, because it at unawares reveals to us the endless circulation of capitalism, through which a fetishist is always determined to fail futilely. Kitty fans can not consume all the Kitties. As a fan, the desire always linger, for no one can actually possess Hello Kitty--the cat that is no longer a cat, but is made into an elusive sign by the fans

themselves. "If it was that which is naively taken to be, an absorption, a devouring, then we should achieve saturation. If it was a function of the order of needs, we should achieve satisfaction. But we know that this is not the case: we want more and more." (Baudrillard, 1988: 24-25) Such is the infinity and impotence of consumption--the never ending craving, the unreachable possession, and the desire with no limits.

Therefore, shall there be any cultural crisis taking place in the consumption of Hello Kitty, mass consumption is not the cause, nor is the mechanically reproduced design of the cat figure. The crisis lies in the jammed meaning-making mechanism in our culture. We tend to dichotomize and place undefined objects under the either/or logic, in so doing we consume repeatedly the already-there binary discourses. These binary discourses are: 1. the cultural distinction of the elite and the popular; 2. the colonial question of the Self and the Other; and, 3. the feminist interrogation on the gender issue of cultural consumption. Hello Kitty is just another sign being appropriated in these systematic relations. It is never the materiality of Hello Kitty that we love to consume, nor the use value of the Kitty commodities; it is its difference within the entire system of meanings that is consumed. In other words, each binary position defines itself through its relation to Hello Kitty, that is, differentiates itself in relation to their opposition. Hello Kitty's cultural meanings and its relation and difference to the other object-signs are thus activated.

The British cultural study theories may provide a way out of this binerism dead end and help us rethink the Hello Kitty phenomenon. Combining French semiotics with critical thinkings on social structure, the British cultural theories have brought the question of culture beyond the debate of relations of production and the fetishism of consumption. Culture, in whatever form it is understood, is not a superstructure determined by the infrastructure of production. Cultural study theories don't place economy before culture or ideology, but view their relationships as relative autonomy. Furthermore, as the theories address, in various forms of culture, different meanings are produced, consumed, disseminated, and circulated by

different social groups; no meanings are naturally contained in signs and languages. Cultural studies aim to explore the possibility of culture that exceeds economical mechanism, and the meanings that possess resistance and subversive power. In cultural studies, culture is thought to be the site at which social interests and power politics intersect, and that cultural struggle is as vital as any other form of political struggles.

Roland Barthes (Barthes, 1992) suggests that the diachronic dimension of languages, the conditions that make the meanings of signs change, could provide more insights in the field of critical analyses of social relations and structure. In Barthes's view, myth conveys simple and straightforward meanings, yet myth's logic of operation disguises itself in common senses; it is obscure and it naturalizes social relations into meaning system. Exploring myth's operation and how that operation changes over time, as well the forces that make it so, can reveal, therefore make possible the critical engagement between sign and the social.

To be a Kitty fan obviously consists an identity through consumption. Yet the mass produced and consumed cat figure does not embody any meaning in and of itself. As semiotics would suggest, a sign consists of the signifier and the signified. The signifier is an object that conveys, and the signified the conveyed abstract concept. The signified concept has to be understood within the whole meaning system (the social) to make sense. Hello Kitty's face is a signifier, but our meaning system can neither place it in a proper place nor arrange a proper signified. Its face is alienated from all contexts, so the meaning we attach to it does not look natural. However, the infinite mechanism of consumption does not wait; it has been activated, Hello Kitty thus conveys all these confusions as its meanings. It opens up a noisy void, where it so obviously means nothing yet everything, and no one can fully explain the production process of its meanings. It is such a pure sign that it requires laborious manifestation; it devours everything, be it nationalism, gender politics, or cultural distinction.

The binary meanings that Hello Kitty conveys appear to be straightforward, but also disputable. Despite of the criticisms, Hello Kitty does not bear any traces of plots. Hello Kitty

is non-contextual. Unless we accuse that it anthropomorphizes and aestheticizes the gendering process, we hardly find any charges immediately connected to it. Only within the larger discourses does it begin to make sense. Even the strongest accusation of cultural imperialism of Japan, the ex-colonizer, does not sustain the doubt that Hello Kitty does not necessarily pollute us with Japanese culture. Quite ironically, Hello Kitty rarely appears in anything Japanese except the Love of Kyoto pair in McDonald's Meal Package. Furthermore, most of the profits don't necessarily contribute to its Japanese franchise, the Sanrio Company, because the ubiquitous counterfeits are made by local factories. The equivocal meanings and ambiguous positions of Hello Kitty upset us. To put it more accurately, the poverty of meaning and the impossibility to fix it onto a stable relation upset us. We start to debate on its definition, and it starts to mean something.

Consequently, once again, we frightenedly realize that we indeed reside in an age of mechanical reproduction. Whether or not is Hello Kitty the work of art, we are all part of the mass. Instead of liberating itself from the aura of hierarchy of art, Hello Kitty has become a fetish symbol itself. However, we have learned to survive the mass production and reproduction; we breathe it and consume it, while struggling not to be consumed by it. The mechanically reproduced face of Hello Kitty permeates daily life; it has brought to us, face to face, the nightmare made up by ourselves. Nevertheless, it has revealed the relationship of meaning and object of our system, as well the embarrassing endeavor we set to chase meaning like a dog does its tail. Quantity is phenomenal, and mass participants lead to the change of participation, "the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction. Everyday the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction." (Benjamin, 1968:223) The mass is enticed to chase something through consumption, and consumption is a frustrated desire because totality can never be morally rational.

Thus, the Kitty consumption and fandom along with the prevailing argument that Hello Kitty is a cultural symptom of our society, might need more detailed diagnosis to claim the illness. One thing, though, is clear: that it challenges the always condescending elite, and a cultural war for differentiation and distinction.

### **Mimesis, Difference, and Identity**

The well-known cultural distinction theory elaborated by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1984) suggests that the distinction of taste is constituted to legitimize and secure the social distinction of classes. Bourdieu thinks that the accumulation and circulation of cultural capital in a society operate according to the hierarchy of classes. That is, an activity or product being judged as refined or profane corresponds to a social hierarchy of consumers. Consumption in his view is a stage of the process of communication, an act of deciphering, decoding the social logic of differentiation. “A work of art only has meaning and interest for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is decoded.” (Bourdieu, 1984:2) For Bourdieu, it is not the aesthetic but the social that defines the taste. In fact, he doesn't think there is any aesthetic standard independent of the social system. The aesthetic and taste standard are historically and socially reproduced. No cultural form and art that essentially belong to any social class does not rely on the categorization and definition of the social system. Further, the social system constructs their cultural differences through the social acts and cultural practices--the so-called habitus and taste.

The reason why Hello Kitty is considered to be a low and vulgar popular culture is derived from its mass production and low price--two of the most traditional and hierarchical standards of judgment in cultural consumption. Mass production reads common and no rarity. Low price allows general consumption and leaves no ritualistic aura in the goods. With these two conditions, Hello Kitty is inevitably categorized as low culture. The more popular it is, the lower cultural strata it goes. Despite that some franchised stores claim to sell the originally

copyrighted Hello Kitty and mark up their labeled prices, the overwhelming Kitty mania can not evade criticisms, and Kitty products are liquidated into the night market vendor stands. The night market is not only a space from which the high culture differentiate itself, but it is also an arena where the low culture fight against that distinction.

The counterfeits are the main reason that makes Hello Kitty a low culture. The difficulty to tell whether a Hello Kitty stuffed animal is authentic or not simply destroys the value of the real. The uniqueness vanishes and the so-called “originality” has also vaporized amongst the “real counterfeits.” This is exactly the character of cultural product in the age of mechanical reproduction. However, the uniqueness and originality is a consumption myth in capitalist mode of production. The “original” has become sacred and untouchable under the manipulation of commercialization, and the labeled high price guards that valuable status, thus indirectly maintains the operation of system of production. The original high price mostly comes from the meanings that it is attached to, although sometimes the counterfeits’ quality and production skill is of no difference from the original. The only difference that distinguishes the original and the counterfeit is the merchandising system--the places where they are sold. This difference is enough to cause chaos in the distinction of taste. That is, if taken away the merchandising area, the original and the counterfeit will lose their difference, the only difference for us to judge is the price, not the taste.

Yet, the relationship between production and consumption is tight, capitalist mode of production still manipulates the cultural commodities as consumable symbols. Chain stores and night markets sell Hello Kitty products and in one way or another support the economy system-- that is, production and consumption, exchange and circulation. However, the alterity caused by the simulation industry and the meaning in this alterity far exceed the economical value of these counterfeit products. Furthermore, the simulation of a cultural commodity, the alterity doesn’t only occur in the value system of the commodity, but also in the meaning system wherein the commodity is a sign.

Hello Kitty was released after W.W.II in Japan and has always been very popular. In Taiwan, it was expensive in the early days and could only be found in a few boutiques. Not until the 80s were the economical conditions of Taiwan able to afford Hello Kitty; in many department stores Hello Kitty became a popular commodity. In the 90s, counterfeits of Hello Kitty could be spotted in night markets and vendor stands. At first Hello Kitty targeted at the teenage girl market, only in recent years did its consumer age move onward to mid-aged females. Amongst the animation cartoon figures' products, Hello Kitty is the only one that successfully developed a mid-aged female market.

As many critiques have stated, the uncommon popularity of Hello Kitty among career women could be related to their nostalgic teenage unsatisfied consumption desire, and a compensation for their lost youth. Some critiques explain that the Hello Kitty fans are unhappy about their repressed spiritual life in the patriarchal system, thereby redirect their dissatisfaction towards Hello Kitty as resistance. Yet, more criticism consider that Hello Kitty is a Japanese cultural invasion, for it not only economically takes advantage from consumers, but also culturally degrades our popular culture. These critiques read the Hello Kitty fandom as symptoms of cultural Japanization, loss of feminist consciousness, or the fall of gender relations. Placing Hello Kitty in such a determinist position, these critiques actually take the same stance as the Kitty fans. Their overt condemnation against Hello Kitty contrasts their stance to discriminate against it, and contrarily recognize Hello Kitty's cultural significance and importance. The fans see their (always unfulfilled) satisfaction and teenage memories in Kitty's face, whereas the critiques see the repression of patriarchy and Japanese flag. These two readings both decode different meanings from Hello Kitty, only that their reading contexts are different, their judgment for cultural tastes different, the social capital they rely on different, and rationales different. Within all differences, the social discourses of cultural distinction intersect, and secure the elite/popular boundary. The difference is consumed. Consumption, indeed, is the crucial part of social distinction, it is at once the method and

battlefield.

However, alterity occurs; it generates through the mechanical reproduction. Mass counterfeits blur the distinction and endlessly reproduce that distinction to a status of impossible to consume. The order of signs through which the meaning is produced therefore recedes, and the signified end (satisfaction or saturation) disappears. If the idea of the mass ever causes any crisis for the elite, it is this mighty power that poses a threat--everything could be dragged from high culture to the low, the secular and the vulgar through mass production. Neither the Kitty fans or the Kitty haters could not penetrate the ultimate meaning of Hello Kitty, because the meaning has dispersed into enormous everyday objects in the endless circulation and reproduction. The meaning has become discursive in details of reality; it can only be seen in everyday practices.

Post-colonial theories address the question of mimesis and imitation of the colonized and turn the colonized status away from the victim position. Michael Taussig (Taussig, 1993) analyses the relationship between colonial mimesis and alterity. He suggests that, while the colonized imitates the colonizer, the colonizer becomes a gazed and imitated object, and the colonized a subject that gazes and takes action. The action of mimesis itself is a re-reading and interpretation of the colonizer by the colonized. Homi K. Bhabha (Bhabha, 1990) also theorizes the colonized's mimicry of the colonizer. He states that it is a feelingless movement of the subject without any interior belief. A slippage between representation and performance emerges at the point of imitation, a colonial mimicry--the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Bhabha claims that colonialism is full of discrepancies and contradictories; it is not coherent and consistent. Consequently, colonial culture doesn't always take the upper hand, and the traditionally defined power relation can be altered.

In regard of the colonial question, in addition to its economical and political domination, the colonizer's cultural influence is also the focus of post-colonial debates. How to uproot the residue of colonizer's culture is always one of the most urgent considerations in the de-

colonization movement. Hello Kitty is viewed as the unforgivable Japanization symbol, because it is given as a position almost identical to a colonizer's culture. Taiwan's colonized past is reinvoked in the Hello Kitty industry, and the ubiquitous Japanese cultural products repeatedly pick the sensible wound of the nationalists--the economical dependency on Japan is bad enough, but cultural dependency causes nationalists even more anxiety.

Yet, imitation and consumption do not equal cultural identity, and cultural commodity doesn't include culture as a whole. Hello Kitty is not Japan, nor is it a mouthless teenage girl. Hello Kitty has no mouth doesn't necessarily mean that consumers don't have anything to say about it; Hello Kitty doesn't (and is unable to ) advocate a silent submission. The pink color of Hello Kitty has been forcefully interpreted with gender politics. Reading as such takes culture as a stable entity that can be removed or replaced, or even corrected. Willful reading of culture and one-dimensional thinking can not and should not consist of the ground for critiques, analyses, and social action. In order to explore the relationship of popular culture and consumption, and their social meanings, we have to look at the formation process of culture.

In terms of culture and meaning, Stuart Hall suggests that the "struggle over meanings" is a social struggle in language and ideology. " Ideological terms and elements do not necessarily belong in the definitive way to classes.... Different social interests or forces might conduct an ideological struggle to disarticulate a signifier from one, preferred or dominant meaning-system, and rearticulate it within another, different chain of connotations" (Hall, 1982:80)

Hall's theory of "no necessary class belongingness" and "articulation" are insights drawn from Gramsci's work and developed by Laclau. For Hall, struggle is not merely a question of class, one of the ultimate social goals that he aims to change, but also of race and gender issues. Hall thinks that the class/race/gender ideologies might seem natural, but they are actually accomplished through certain social relations. These social relations and ideologies are hegemonic, because they are secured by cultural leadership, by the ruling bloc that manipulate and "win over the active, spontaneous consent of those classes and groups who are

subordinated within it.” (Hall, 1982:85) In other words, for an ideology to sustain itself, different social groups would have to fight for their ruling position so as to make their way of life the dominant one.

Foucault(1990) holds a similar point on discourse and power. In Foucault’s theorization of discourse, the ways in which a society narrates, guards its order of things, and defines the speakable and unspeakable, according to the ways its discursive power operates. In Foucaultian theory, society only permits those discourses that do not challenge the existing power structure, and the operation of discourse tends to maintain the present power relations. Different discourses compete for the power to define the Norm and the Other.

The Hello Kitty mania is a cultural discourse through which different social groups debate for their superiority on taste and legitimacy; each attempts to exclude and repel the other. On the one hand, Hello Kitty is a commodity of capitalist mode of production, but that doesn’t indicate the Kitty fans are alienated and obscure colonized objects. On the other hand, the Kitty fans protest that the popular culture is discriminatory, yet these consumers are not cultural victims, nor are they the poor in cultural strata. In this war of consumption, no one is marginalized; no one is the colonized. Both the critiques and the fans occupy the mainstream hegemonic position of Taiwanese contemporary culture.

Be this a war, it is a war of cultural leadership--a battle over the hierarchy between commodified popular culture and elitism. Social classification is the means, the process, and the outcome. No failure awaits in the cease of war (shall it ever cease), because both sides have already agreed upon the preceding mainstream rule: the elite culture defines itself in opposition to the popular; and the popular, with its mass quantity, firmly claims its share. Both sides consume Hello Kitty, in differentiating ways.

Consumption is one of the many ways through which identity is constructed. Popular cultural commodities are not the only way to identify. The cultural significance of a particular commodity is not based on its revenue figures. What a commodity means to the society has to

be scrutinized through its location in everyday practice. In other words, the value and meaning of a commodity is determined by the consumers, not pre-determined by the system. Culture, after all, is a dynamic process in which the meaning of everyday life is accumulated and practiced. The meaning of an object is not assembled on the production line or completed in the advertising package; not is it finished after the monetary exchange. For an object to mean something, it has to enter our lives, enter our relationships, being used, interpreted, articulated, through touch, sight, and spoken words. Only then does it become part of the culture, be it idealist or immoral entertainment.

### **Conclusion**

Hello Kitty has different roles: the popular culture, the night market counterfeit, the conspicuous consumption, the residue of colonialism, the elite and mass distinction, the sabotage of gender politics. Hello Kitty doesn't invent new cultural identity or meaning. The fact is, the latent social politics and relationships, antagonistic or not, seize Hello Kitty as their vehicle to surface. Various meanings are attached onto the object-sign Hello Kitty and thus consumed.

This is an age of mechanical reproduction, identical counterfeits cram the market. As we dispute the irrationality of consumption, consumption subverts itself with another even greater irrationality. Material supplement is never in danger of scarcity. The lack upon which consumption is founded is not of material, but of meaning. Hello Kitty's crisis is not that of identity, but the debates about the identity and the contexts from which it derives. These debates intersect with and overthrow each other for cultural legitimacy and leadership. Social dialogues as such could have been heterogeneous and polysemic, but in contemporary Taiwan, social positions are trapped in binary opposition criticisms, either elite or popular, either colonized or autonomous, either patriarchal or liberating.

Consumption is one of the most familiar daily practices and social rules. It is the

mechanism upon which our culture system is founded; it is the desire for object-sign that drives us; it is also the gap through which meaning could be released. There can be mobile positions and plural meanings in consumption. Hello Kitty, too, is one of the infinite signs in our life; it is one of the commodities that we consume. The accusation that the Kitty fans are shallow fetishist remains the most favorite criticism. However, with that same logic, how could we ever overlook the other consumption of signs? Could there be non-fetishist consumption? When all the commodities are god-like and their relationship to production have been cut off, could there be alternative ways of consumption? If consumption of sign is to be condemned, could we come up with a better position to argue that there is a purely material consumption, which is more morally acceptable than the signs? Shall this be all about desire, could there be an exit, or outlet?

The crisis could be that the mainstream culture is identical to a drive-through culture, where we conveniently order, pay, take and go. Be it meanings or objects, we eventually resolve each consumption through easy payments.

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