

# THE POWER OF CUTENESS

FEMALE INFANTILIZATION IN URBAN TAIWAN

Tzu-i Chuang

University of Washington, Department of Anthropology

---

*This paper explores the semantic richness and ambiguity of the very concept of cuteness. What does it mean to be cute, or ke'ai in Mandarin Chinese? Are there different ways of being cute? How is cuteness understood by the actors and perceived by the observers? The word ke'ai incorporates a multitude of meaning and is presently going through a process of redefinition in Taiwan. It appears that as a style and manner, cuteness in Taiwan is slowly shifting from unconsciously embodied "habitus" to a kind of performance. In other words, whereas in the past cute behaviors conformed closely to the social expectations of women and were second nature, in recent years similar behaviors are often displayed with a certain level of playfulness or even cynicism due to growing awareness among Taiwanese women of the social implications of acting cute. This paper traces the shifting social meaning of cuteness and try to posit it in relation to the entrenched gender ideology and the prospect of emancipation.*

---

Since the 1980s there has been a growing obsession among Taiwanese women with the aesthetics of cuteness. Everywhere on the streets, one sees fashionably dressed women talking on brightly colored cell phones with fluffy stuffed-animals dangling from the bottom. They carry credit cards that feature cartoon figures and, every now and then, exclaim in giggly unison "hao ke'ai oh!" (Oh...so cute!) over their friend's new handbag or a store window display. The cuteness craze began to spark public discussions in the summer of 1999, when McDonalds in Taiwan started offering stuffed dolls of Hello Kitty at reduced price for their customers. The campaign immediately boosted McDonalds's business and sent enormous crowds, mostly women and children, to the fast food restaurants all over the island. Fearing that the discounted Hello Kitty dolls would soon sell out, people in the cities lined up for entry into McDonalds even before daybreak.<sup>1</sup> As most analysts of the phenomenon have observed, the penchant for cuteness represents more than just a consumer fad. It reveals a new and widespread mode of subjectivity manifested in many women's speech, bodily comportment, and their conceptions of the self and gender relations.

In this paper I will explore the semantic richness and ambiguity of the very concept of cuteness. What does it mean to be cute, or ke'ai in Mandarin Chinese? Are there different ways of being cute? How is cuteness understood by the actors and perceived by the observers? I contend that the word ke'ai incorporates a

multitude of meaning and is presently going through some subversive re-definitions in Taiwan. It appears that as a style and manner, cuteness in Taiwan is slowly shifting from unconsciously embodied "habitus" to a kind of "performance." In other words, whereas in the past cute behaviors conformed closely to the social expectations of women and were exhibited as second nature, in recent years similar behaviors are often displayed with a certain level of playfulness or even cynicism due to growing awareness among Taiwanese women of the social implications of acting cute. This paper will trace the shifting social meaning of cuteness and try to posit it in relation to the entrenched gender ideology and the prospect of emancipation. My data are drawn from sources of popular culture, including TV programs, advertisements, pop music and newspaper critiques, from participant observation of everyday life over many years, and from interviews I conducted with a dozen young men and women in their 20s or early 30s.

### *Cuteness as Habitus: Toward a Conventional Definition*

The Chinese word ke'ai, usually translated as cute or cuteness, literally means "lovable" or "adorable." In general understanding, ke'ai is embodied in a person, animal or small object that arouses feelings of pity, tenderness, and a desire to take care of it.<sup>2</sup> Linguistic anthropologist Catherine Farris describes the word ke'ai as one among many vocabularies that are covertly marked as feminine. She explains that, although commonly defined as

“adorable” or “lovable,” *ke'ai* in fact has a broader descriptive range than the English gloss, and

It basically seems to be appropriate to describe anything that is diminutive, the relative size alone apparently taking on endearing connotations. All children can be described as *ke'ai*, as well as small animals and insects, and also inanimate objects. While children of both sexes are often described as *ke'ai*, at some time in early adolescence the term becomes covertly marked for reference to females, and boys are no longer described this way. In contrast, young unmarried women are often described as *ke'ai*, and, indeed, consciously strive to elicit such a response by their dress and deportment.<sup>3</sup>

As can be derived from the above definitions, two qualities—femininity and weakness—are essential to cuteness. This definition is further sustained by an interview with Mr. Wu, a 29-year-old electrical engineer who, when asked if he would be attracted to a woman who does not seem particularly cute, replied that he honestly could not think of any such woman. Women, according to Wu, are born to be cute (*nuren tiansheng jiushi ke'ai de*), and especially so when they are “vulnerable and in need of you” (*cuiruo, xuyao ni de shibo*). In terms of his criteria for selecting a spouse, Wu said that she would have to be considerate (*titie*), docile (*tinghua*) and pretty. His idea of relationships can be best captured by one question that he asked rhetorically: “Aren't women meant to be coddled and pampered?”

As Farris points out, cuteness is believed by many to be intrinsic to the female sex and so expected of all women, especially of those who are at an age for courtship and marriage. Such a high regard for cuteness and apparent vulnerability is effectively and imperceptibly inculcated in the individual by insignificant aspects of everyday life, in bodily comportment, or in myriad ways of seeing things and talking about them. In other words, the cute styles and manners constitute what Bourdieu calls “habitus,” that is, a composite of social identity and dispositions that reflects and naturalizes the asymmetrical social conditions. It is integral to the body and so operates on an unconscious, instinctual basis.<sup>4</sup>

Farris' study of language and sex role acquisition provides a good example of how cuteness as a habitus is transmitted and manifested.<sup>5</sup> Based on her fieldwork conducted in a kindergarten in Taipei during the 1980s, Farris describes that little girls were encouraged to talk and behave in a particularly endearing,

vulnerable, and accordingly “cute” manner from an early age. Such behaviors persist into adulthood and may even intensify at periods of courtship, as exemplified by the female kindergarten teachers and other women Farris encountered in daily life. Native speakers understand such behavior as *sajiao*, which has two related meanings: (1) “to show pettiness, as a spoiled child,” and (2) “to pretend to be angry or displeased, as a coquettish young woman.”<sup>6</sup> Elaborating further on the definition, *sajiao* can be referred to as “a communication style that spoiled children of both sexes, and young (particularly unmarried) women engage in when they want to get their way from an unwilling parent/boyfriend/husband.”<sup>7</sup> The *sajiao* style of communication is most noticeable at the level of voice quality, tempo and pitch, for while the standard man's voice is inclined toward the low and heavy, thick and strong, the “standard woman's voice” observed by social linguists often tends toward “the young and immature, warm and respectful, sometimes having bashful overtones or even a petulant air.”<sup>8</sup> Moreover, to accentuate these feminine attributes, women tend to nasalize their utterances and to prolong the sentence final particles, such as *ma*, *ah*, *la*, *oh*, and *eh*, resulting in a distinctively whiny sound that is decoded by native speakers as the *sajiao* tone of voice. A typical example is the ubiquitous exclamation: “*hao ke'ai ooohhh!*” (Oh, it's so cute!)

Another important feature of the *sajiao* speech can be identified in the reduplication of monosyllabic words. In the case of adjectives, reduplication has the semantic effect of intensifying and making more vivid of the original meaning. Thus “*da*” for big becomes “*dada de*” while “*xiang*” for fragrant turns into “*xiangxiang de*”. Reduplicating nouns, on the other hand, has the effect of endowing the addressed object a diminutive quality. For example, instead of referring to a dog as “*gou*,” many women prefer to say “*gou gou*,” and similarly, “*che*” for car becomes “*che che*,” while “*chi fan*” (to eat rice) becomes “*chi fan fan*.” The practice of constantly reduplicating words is a typical feature of how a mother would talk to her baby child. Yet curiously, this baby talk has become a common way of speaking among many adult Taiwanese women in their daily life. Men, on the other hand, would be mocked as sissys if they exhibit traits of infantilized speech, except in the cases when they deliberately affect such a speech to remind a woman of her minor status, to tease her, or to show paternal protection over her.<sup>9</sup>

I have singled out the *sajiao* style of speech as an example of infantilized femininity because it is by far the most widespread and taken-for-granted aspect of cuteness in Taiwan. While all of the young women I talked to were aware of the girlish fashion that dominates the market in recent years, and some even profess to dislike it, most were surprised to realize that they themselves also shared the features of baby talk. The *sajiao* style of speech thus conforms closely to the idea of habitus, which is marked by a long and slow process of acquisition and a lack of awareness in its execution.

### *The Political Economy of Cuteness*

The prevalence of infantilized speech indicates that girlish fashion is not so much a transient phenomenon as a contemporary expression of a much older and entrenched cultural logic. In fact, the growing obsession with cuteness may be inferred as a reenactment of the Confucian ideal, in which women must always be humble, yielding and reverential in relation to men.<sup>10</sup> Since the early 1900s, such an ideal is embodied in the nationally celebrated image of *xianqi liangmu*, meaning “good wife and virtuous mother.” The discourse of *xianqi liangmu* preached the importance of women’s education in the belief that educated women make better wives and mothers, better housekeepers and citizens. Thus the major purpose of educating women was to enable them to teach and rear children more effectively instead of helping them pursue self-fulfillment. This ideal was carried over to the Kuomintang (KMT) regime in Taiwan, and a recent example of its application can be found in a government decision regarding holiday scheduling.<sup>11</sup> In 1996, the March 8<sup>th</sup> “International Women’s Day,” which has been a national holiday since the Republican period, was canceled due to the new policy to switch from a six day to five-day workweek. The holiday that celebrates women’s struggle for equality, justice, and peace was nominally merged with “Children’s Day,” which falls on April 4<sup>th</sup>. The newly created holiday was thus declared to be *fu you jie*, that is, Women and Children’s Day. This symbolic action carried out by the state has three-fold significance: it at once denies the importance of feminist movements, re-situates women in the family, and ultimately identifies women’s social status with that of children.

Yet despite persistent emphasis on women’s domestic role, rapid economic growth and women’s increased participation in

wage labor during the last twenty years have rendered the housewife image practically obsolete. Recent sociological studies reveal that nowadays young women in Taiwan tend not to view work as a transitional stage between school and marriage; on the contrary, they expressed a strong will to continue work after getting married for reasons of personal preference, economic necessity, and the social expectation for them to engage in wage labor. As one young mother said in an interview:

I actually don’t mind quitting my job and being a full-time mother. I think it’s important to spend time with my daughter before she turns three. But the fact is, these days there is hardly anyone who quits upon childbearing. If women leave it is usually for a better job, not for giving birth. I’ve seen one woman who used giving birth as the reason to quit — but three months later I found her in another bank. If you quit, your coworkers may wonder: Why? What’s wrong? Why are you quitting a job if nothing is really wrong? It’s as if quitting a job because of giving birth is not acceptable.<sup>12</sup>

Such high expectation for women to engage in wage labor may be a result of the political and economic developments during the last two decades, which have substantially elevated women’s educational level and opened up new job opportunities. Specifically, Taiwan’s many small and medium-sized family businesses provide relatively hospitable organizational culture to married women, since “the degree of formalization in job titles is low and promotional trajectories are short in these firms, and employers’ need for labor sometimes makes them amenable to allowing working mothers to have slightly more flexible schedules.”<sup>13</sup> Also, feminist organizations led by the Awakening Foundation have in recent years pushed to eliminate the “single-and-no-pregnancy” rule, which was a customary regulation that discriminated against married women and especially mothers in many private enterprises. Another recent improvement concerning women’s working conditions is the revision of Labor Standard Laws so as to extend its protection over hitherto unregulated sectors where women are employed in great numbers, such as service industry and banking.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, studies have shown that today, most young and unmarried working women among the urban middle class no longer remit salary to their parents, as women a generation ago were expected to do.<sup>15</sup> As a result, young working women nowadays benefit more directly from their labor and have

acquired autonomy in deciding how to dispose of their income.<sup>16</sup> With the money they earn, they can save to buy an apartment for themselves or in conjunction with their husbands once married. They can also purchase fashionable clothing, makeup, and other consumer items. The appeal of consumer culture is then another important factor that encourages women to stay in the work force and dismiss the domestic lifestyle of a good wife and virtuous mother.

The fact that these days many women are individually competent and do not need to depend on men for a living have inadvertently thrown the patriarchal structure off balance. For one thing, the cultural dictate that “men rule the outside, women rule the inside” (*nan zhu wai, nu zhu nei*) no longer strictly applies, and with it men have lost the rationale to demand women’s dependence and subordination. It is here that cuteness takes on its significance, for it is a key feature that can be enabled and intensified to maintain the equilibrium of the pre-established power relations. In other words, as objectively women are becoming the social equivalents of men and consequently pose a threat to the hierarchical social order, an effective way to deflect confrontations is for women to take the symbolic gesture of acting like children.

For example, Ms. Lu, a 26-year-old sales representative in a medical care products company, explained to me that it is necessary for a female employee like her to act a little cute at work. “It is like a lubricant” she said, “it helps us get along with people better and makes things easier.” In her opinion, a woman who does not know how to *sajiao* or act cute would be disadvantaged at work, because people would think that she has a personality problem. She said that in a work place like hers where the majority of employees are male, women are obliged to soften up the atmosphere by releasing some girlish charm. She modified this point by saying that there is however, a limit in being cute and girlish; that is, inasmuch as one can assume the behaviors of a little girl in social interactions, she must nevertheless be responsible and dedicated to work. Following that comment, Lu complained that some of her new female colleagues, who just graduated from college, made exactly the mistake of not knowing where the limit is. “It is as if they confuse daily life with work. I mean, it is fine that they act a little petty and spoiled at home, but not at work. They need to learn the correct work attitude (*zhengquede gongzuo taidu*).” I find Lu’s

comment especially revealing. On the one hand, it shows that she accepts girlish behaviors as women’s attitude in daily life; on the other, it implies that even the “correct work attitude” for women must consist of a cute façade.

While many women may share Lu’s experience of having to act cute at work, it is less likely to apply to women of managerial standing or any positions of power, since an infantilized femininity at work may seriously undermine their authority. Yet even then, my impressions are that professional maturity does not necessarily preclude girlish behaviors when the woman is off work and thus removed from her position of power. I once saw Ms. Chu, a young female politician who was then a member of the Taipei City Council, on a TV entertainment show. While on TV news and politics related programs, Chu always appeared articulate and confident, in this show she shrieked, giggled, and pouted just like a spoiled child. Surprising as it may have been to the audience, her performance was probably a measured choice given the nature of the program and her pursuit for popularity. By behaving this way, she imparted the message that despite her social ambitions, she is deep down a sweet little girl who poses no threat to the male-dominated society. The childish behaviors thus in a way strengthen her position as a female politician, just as the female employees secure their jobs by acting cute.

### *Cuteness as Performance*

In relation to the stereotypical representation of femininity, it is essential to examine the aspect of female agency. For this purpose, I quote a few words from Li Ang, a female Taiwanese writer who is best known for her sexually explicit language and literary exploration of feminist themes. She once answered to a question in an ingeniously designed self-interview:

Q: How do you feel about being a woman?

A: I am very content being a woman, which includes the privileges of acting pettishly and being forgiven for small faults. I think I am a successful woman in the sense that I am completely independent and yet not threatening. Have you read some of my previous interviews, which said that I was sometimes like a kid?<sup>17</sup>

With these words, Li touches upon the crucial point of what it means to be a cute woman in Taiwan. First of all, her answer shows that the phenomenon of infantilization involves a wide of array

of women to the extent that it may even apply to a progressive female writer. Second, her contentment with being a woman and the “privileges” it entails reveal that cuteness, or infantilized femininity, may be considered positive by women and strategically employed by many as a useful tool in social dealings.

As more and more women self-consciously utilize a cute manner for their own benefit, it seems no longer appropriate to view cuteness as simply part of a habitus that reproduces hierarchical relations. What becomes excluded in this conceptually reproductive cycle is the shifting socio-historical circumstances which may create slippages between the habitus and reality, and as a result generate ambivalence, conflicting consciousness, and reflexivity in the subjects. I believe the trend of cuteness in Taiwan testifies precisely to this process; that is, it is slowly extricating itself from unaware conformism and entering into conscious maneuvering and self-redefinition.<sup>18</sup>

The growing awareness of cuteness and its social implications can be further illustrated by an episode of a popular TV variety show, in which the host asked the female guests: “What do you think is the most necessary talent or skill for a modern woman?” (*ni renwei shenme shi xiandai nuxing zuixu jübei de caineng?*) The young women unanimously agreed upon the answer: *zhuang ke'ai*, which means: to pretend to be cute. Regardless of the flippancy with which they answered the question, the response shows that these women were in fact quite reflexive of their own situation. A close reading of the question and answer reveals some interesting nuances. First of all, the fact that acting cute is considered “modern” tells the relative novelty of it. Second, the “necessity” of it implies certain social pressure and risks in not having such a skill. Third, the word “*zhuang*” (to pretend) denotes the artificiality of the cuteness and a sense of cynicism toward such an image. In other words, the women know that cuteness does not come naturally with their age, yet nonetheless they choose to fake it. And finally, the word “talent” indicates that, just like the writer Li Ang, these young women see advantages associated with being cute and thus felt positive about the idea of infantilizing themselves despite the ambivalence.

A similar point of view is well spelled out in a recently released pop song. Entitled Nanren (Men), the song written and performed by Fan Xiaoxuan (a.k.a. Mavis Fan)<sup>19</sup> describes a woman’s playful seduction of men:

寬闊的肩膀	With broad shoulders
一雙結實有毛的腿	and a pair of muscular, hairy legs,
讓我真是又愛又怕	they are charming and intimidating.
男人真是性感 卻像笨蛋	Men are so sexy, but also stupid.
掌控在我手心	Control is in my hands.
那真是好玩	It really is fun.
隨便撒個嬌 然後說他什麼都棒	Just sajjiao a little, and then say
就以爲自己是老大	he is great in every way, he will really believe
	he is the boss.
傻的像個小孩 卻很可愛	Foolish like a child, and so cute
怎能叫我不愛	How could I not love him?
我開始一步一步一步一步接近你	I start to approach you step by step
我想要慢慢慢慢慢慢慢慢控制你	I want to control you little by little.
我要順服你	Whether I should be obedient
還是要刁你	or difficult with you,
全都要看我的心情	all depends on my mood.
我開始一口一口吃掉你	I am going to eat you bite after bite
想把你裝進裝進裝進裝進我愛裏	wishing to entrap you with my love
我要你全部 就給我全部	I want all of you, so give me all of you
誰叫你遇到了woman.	for you have met a woman. <sup>20</sup>

The song cunningly infuses a new power dynamic into the stereotypical gender interaction. While the woman employs every trait of a cute and dependent little girl, she sees herself as a predator and the one in charge; the man, by contrast, is portrayed as a child who is gullible and naive despite his adult physique. It seems to suggest that the woman is willing to play the conventional game only because she knows how much smarter and dominant she really is than the man. In other words, it is the woman who patronizes the man and not the other way round. She may have to feign cuteness, but that is only in order to stoop to the level of the other sex, which is genuinely childish and cute. The use of the English word *woman* also warrants some attention, especially since the Chinese word for it, *nuren*, could otherwise perfectly fit into the space without disrupting the rhyme. As Stanlaw points out in his discussion of Japanese female pop singers/songwriters, the use of English words in songs provides “an additional and different symbolic vocabulary with which to express their thoughts and feelings,” and “a rhetorical power that was unknown to them previously, and that is suited for the growing power and stature that women are gaining in Japanese society.”<sup>21</sup> Seen in this light, the word *woman* may be taken as a symbol of the new gender awareness, which, though cloaked in the same girlish self-presentation, actually signals a different breed of womankind

in Taiwan. In addition, the pronunciation of *woman* is almost identical to the Chinese word *us* (*wo men*), and so the evocation of it as a pun in the phrase ‘for you have met “a woman/us”’ instantly creates a feeling of solidarity: it is us, the smart and powerful women, verses them, the silly though adorable men.

One may argue that this kind of awareness is after all predicated upon the same patriarchal structure, and so in the end still serves to reproduce the asymmetrical gender relations. While the overall picture at present does seem to support this point of view, the subtle changes in women’s perceptions of their social position constitute nevertheless a subversive potential. For one thing, the sheer awareness of the power and artificiality of cuteness has called into question the absolute authority of the patriarchal system; thus instead of blindly complying with the implicit rule, many women have now adopted a cynical stance toward it. In this respect, what we perceive as cuteness nowadays is often a performance or parody of it; it is actively ‘dialogized’ and ‘double voiced’ in the sense that the sounding of a second voice, one that embodies a different point of view to what is apparently said, is part of the project of the utterance.<sup>22</sup> In contrast to Bourdieu’s theory, which sees all social actions as part of the habitus and thus crucial only to the formation and reproduction of the subject, cuteness as self-aware performance or parody can incorporate ongoing political contestation and reformulation of female subjectivity.<sup>23</sup> The meaning of cuteness itself is going through some transformation in this process. The conventional association of cuteness with vulnerability seems to be slowly wearing out. If at one point professional women used cuteness unconsciously and apologetically to temper the threat they posed toward men, they now tend to view it as an asset, not an excuse. The large number of powerful women acting cute is alone capable of challenging the conception that cuteness is a feature of the weak. Take the media celebrity Chen Wen-chien (a.k.a. Sisy Chen) for example. As a newly elected legislator and a popular socio-political commentator who appears daily on her TV show, Chen is well admired and respected for her knowledge, eloquence, and shrewd insights on both domestic and international affairs. Aside from being an intellectual powerhouse, Chen is noted for her extremely soft, *sajiao* tone of voice and a penchant for frilly dresses. The title of her talk show—*Wen-chien xiaomeida* (Wen-chien, the big little sister)—captures the image she seeks to convey. The word

*xiaomeida* is a play on the popular neologism *dageda*, which means literally “big brother big” and refers to gangsters or powerful male individuals. The second *big*, added to the common expression, *big brother*, functions as an annotation that stresses the mightiness of the big brother. Similarly, Chen’s self-appointed title *xiaomeida*, meaning literally “little sister big”, emphasizes the power she has as a non-threatening female. By fusing two opposite concepts in one word, it implies that there is indeed no contradiction between the little and the big. Rather than saying “I am smart and powerful, but don’t worry, I am also cute,” Chen imparts the confident message that “I am cute, and I am smart and powerful.”

The frequent occurrence of cute demeanor among strong female characters also leads to gradual disassociation of cuteness with its gender marker, for once the connotation of weakness and immaturity is expended with, cuteness becomes a hot property sought after by both sexes. Taiwan’s current president Chen Shui-bian, for example, is an avid personifier of cuteness. While still the mayor of Taipei, Chen, who prefers voters to call him by the endearing nickname A-bian, often attended festivals and charity events in costumes, such as that of Superman, Santa Claus, and Peter Pan. The popular reaction to it was generally positive. I have heard comments both on newspapers and in conversations that Chen’s willingness to personify fairy tale characters reveals a pure and loving heart, and, in short, makes him much more endearing and accessible to the public. In his effective presidential campaign in 2000, Chen’s promoters designed a series of merchandise that features a boyish cartoon figure called *A-bian wawa* (A-bian doll). The icon became so popular that even today related merchandises are available for sale online. Judging from Chen’s electoral success, the various attempts to present him as a cute person have not diminished his masculinity and strength. If anything, it has only boosted his popularity and further neutralizes the gendered dimension of cuteness.

### Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to define cuteness in terms of the role it plays in negotiating gender relations. I argue that cuteness initially took on significance among Taiwanese females as an apologetic response to, and as a means to procure, the elevation of their own socio-economic status during the last two decades. While at first such a trend functioned effectively in maintaining the gender order

and was largely taken for granted, many women soon discovered the “advantages” entailed and learned to perform cuteness for their immediate benefits. This eager adoption of infantilized femininity, along with an explosion of commercial interest in cute objects intended for women and children, lead to two divergent scenarios upon which my analysis of gender relations are based. First among them is the reinforcement of an already entrenched patriarchal order, in which women must always be, or appear to be, less able and mature than men. The second scenario allows for a more positive reading of the present situation; that is, it sees the possibility of a backlash initiated by non other than the cute-acting women themselves.

While in no way do I mean to present the re-accentuated understanding and performance of cuteness as planned resistance, I do believe that in the long run it could transform the discourse and practice of gender relations. In Castells’s discussion of social movements, family, and sexuality in the information age, he notes that very often social movements that were not characterized by feminist consciousness contributed forcefully to bringing greater gender equality and accelerating the demise of patriarchy. This kind of “practical feminism,” which often rallies around issues of abuse and exploitation of women, is “the widest and deepest stream of women’s struggles in today’s world, particularly in the developing world, but also among working class women and community organizations in industrialized countries.”<sup>24</sup> In conjunction with Castells’ observation, I propose that we reconsider the apparently negative force of cuteness as yet another practical though non-organizational movement that disrupts patriarchy. Japan offers a good example in this respect. As of 2001, more than half of Japanese women were still single by 30, compared with about 37 percent of American women. Seeing that there is little prospect to be promoted on the job and having no desire to take up the heavy duty of a Japanese mother and wife, these so-called “parasite singles” continue to live with their parents and stick to their “pink collar” jobs, while pursuing a single life of high style and carefree consumption.<sup>25</sup> With an increasing number of women deferring marriage, Japan’s birthrate is in drastic decline, and the conventional solution of promoting domesticity and increasing child subsidies is not helping. As Mitsuoko Shimomu, a pioneering female journalist said in an interview, “I don’t regret the decline in birthrate. I think it’s a good thing. The Parasites

have *unintentionally created an interesting movement*. Politicians now have to beg women to have babies. Unless they create a society where women feel comfortable having children and working, Japan will be destroyed in a matter of 50 or 100 years. And child subsidies aren’t going to do it. Only equality is.”

The case in Taiwan is quite similar, although Taiwanese women are already in a more advantageous position than their Japanese counterparts. Statistical studies have shown that Taiwan exhibits significantly greater gender equality than Japan in all areas of comparison, including educational attainment, labor participation, and wages.<sup>26</sup> The cuteness trend and avid consumption among Taiwanese women are thus not so much a compensation for the lack of power as an *affirmation of power*. With ongoing socio-economic changes plus increasingly powerful and gender-neutral presentations of cuteness, some unintended transformations regarding gender relations will most likely follow.

## Endnotes

- 1 Ke Yu-fen, "Kaidi mao de xiaofei weiji," (The Hello Kitty Consumer Crisis) *Zhongguo Shibao* (China Times), February 2, 2000.
- 2 The meaning and usage of *ke'ai* is very close to the Japanese word *kawaii*. For a detail discussion of *kawaii* and the "cult of cuteness" in Japan, see Brian McVeigh, *Wearing Ideology: State, Schooling and Self-Presentation in Japan*. (NY: Berg Publishers, 2000).
- 3 Catherine S. Farris, "Gender and Grammar in Chinese, with Implications for Language Universals," *Modern China*, vol. 14 no. 3 (1988), 299. The observation of such behaviors as being "conscious" does not necessarily contradict my point that until recently, cuteness was more of a habitus or second nature for most women. Indeed, although women consciously strived to elicit comments on their being cute, the very desire to be seen as so was largely unquestioned and taken for granted.
- 4 Pierre Bourdieu *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).
- 5 Catherine S. Farris, "Language and Sex Role Acquisition in a Taiwanese Kindergarten: A Semiotic Analysis," (University of Washington: PhD Dissertation, 1988).
- 6 Farris, "Gender and Grammar in Chinese, with Implications for Language Universals," 301.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 302. The *sajiao* style of communication is also common in homosexual interactions. As Antonia Chao noted, Taiwanese lesbians are categorized by two mutually exclusive sexual roles: "T," which comes from the English word "tomboy, and "Po," which literally means "wife," and "T's wife in this case. While "Ts" play the dominant role in a relationship and often act in a macho manner, "Pos" tend to *sajiao* excessively and often giggle to the point of absurdity. Interestingly, although "Ts" work hard at exaggerating their "manhood" and virility, they are often seen by straight, "real" men as kids whose unorthodox sexual identity is only a sign of social immaturity.
- 8 Farris, "Language and Sex Role Acquisition in a Taiwanese Kindergarten: A Semiotic Analysis," 113.
- 9 Farris discovered that men at times also utilize the *sajiao* pattern of communication to obtain favor from their girlfriends or wives. In such situations, Farris suggests that men could be evoking their childhood experience of mother-son relationship. To do so, however, men must first make women dependent on them in the public arena, so that in the private settings they can indulge in a childlike dependency on women.
- 10 Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment: Oral and Textual Histories*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999).
- 11 Diamond, Norma, 1975. "Women Under Kuomintang Rule: Variations on the Feminine Mystique," *Modern China*, vol.1, no.1 (1975), 3-45.
- 12 Yu Wei-hsin, "Family Demands, Gender Attitudes, and Married Women's Labor Force Participation: Comparing Japan and Taiwan," in Mary Brinton, ed., *Women's Working Lives in East Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 70-95.
- 13 Mary Brinton, "Married Women's Labor in East Asian Economy," in Mary Brinton ed., *Women's Working Lives in East Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 33.
- 14 Anita Huang, "Women Wronged" *Free China Review*, vol. 47, no. 2 (1997), 4-17.
- 15 Nidhi Mehotra and William L. Parish, "Daughters, Parents, and Globalization: The Case of Taiwan," in Mary Brinton ed., *Women's Working Lives in East Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 298-322.
- 16 Many of these young female professionals choose to live with parents until they get married. Such an arrangement on the one hand enhances the women's spending power, since they do not have to pay rent, but on the other, it also undermines their autonomy, since an unmarried daughter in a family is not usually treated as a full adult.
- 17 Li Ang, "Protest of a Woman Author against Reckless Accusation: Another Self-Interview, This Time from Taipei," in L. Leung ed., *Morning Sun: Interviews with Chinese Writers of the Lost Generation (Studies on Contemporary China)* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe Publisher, 1994), 255.
- 18 In some cases, the awareness of one's cuteness as a habitus leads to out-right rejection of such self-presentation, rather than continuous application of it as a performance. I myself, for example, began to notice my own typically cute manner and speech only a few years ago, when growing female infantilism in Taiwan and the commercialization of it rendered absurd what I commonly took for granted. The rift between my habitual understanding of femininity and the

more publicized conception of it allowed me to see the artificiality or cultural constructedness in both versions. Subsequent reflections on the subject constitute this paper and an ongoing self-critique.

- 19 Fan Xiaoxuan started her career as a pop singer at the age of 18 in 1996. She was initially packaged as a naughty little girl whose songs targeted primarily children and teenagers. After the release of a few albums which brought her pan-generational popularity, Fan expressed a strong will, against the wish of the record company and many of her fans, to transform her idolized image to that of a more individualistic singer/songwriter. The song discussed here is representative of her image and career transformation. Although it recapitulates many of the girlish themes in her previous albums, this song is no longer sung from the perspective of an unknowing doll. The evolution of her public persona, from naïveté to self-awareness, is thus in itself an example of the main argument here.
- 20 "Nanren" by Fan Xiaoxuan, 2001, Cinepoly Records Co., Ltd.
- 21 James Stanlaw, "Open Your Files, Open Your Mind: Women, English, and Changing Roles and Voices in Japanese Pop Music," in T.J. Craig ed., *Japan Pop: Inside the World of Japanese Popular Culture* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe Publisher, 2000), 99.
- 22 Mikhail M., Bakhtin *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).
- 23 Judith Butler, "Performativity's Social Magic," in R. Shusterman ed., *Bourdieu: a Critical Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 113-128.
- 24 Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publisher, 1997), 200.
- 25 Peggy Orenstein, "Parasites in Pret-a-Porter: The Japanese Shopping Rebellion," *The New York Times Magazine*, July 1, 2001, 31-35.
- 26 Brinton, 1-37.

*I would like to thank the following people for their generous comments and editorial suggestions: Prof. Laurel Kendall, Prof. Myron Cohen, Prof. Stevan Harrell, Prof. Laada Bilaniuk, Prof. Nancy Hartsock, and Michael Feese. Special thanks go to Frank Muyard, who helped initiate the project and provided most valuable support.*