Lolita:
Dreaming, Despairing, Defying

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As it exists in Japan, Lolita Fashion, like other Japanese subcultures, developed as a response to social pressures and anxieties felt by young women and men in the 1970s and 1980s. Rather than dealing with the difficult reality of rapid commercialization, destabilization of society, a rigid social system, and an increasingly body-focused fashion norm, a select group of youth chose to find comfort in the over-the-top imaginary world of lace, frills, bows, tulle, and ribbons that is Lolita Fashion. However, the more gothic elements of the style reflect that behind this cute façade lurks the dark, sinister knowledge that this ploy will inevitably end, the real world unchanged.

Background: What is Lolita Fashion?

If one enters the basement of street fashion hub *Laforet* in Harajuku, Tokyo, one will come across a curious fashion creature found almost exclusively in Japan: an adult woman, usually in her late teens or early twenties, dressed like a doll. Indeed, the first store one enters, *Angelic Pretty*, looks very much like a little girl's dream doll house. The walls and furniture are pink and decorated with tea-sets, cookies, and teddy bears. The shop clerk is dressed in a long pink jumper skirt decorated with birds and bunnies, along with a gigantic bow and knee socks of the same pattern. Her feet are shod in artificial-leather, purple Mary Janes, her huge bleached-blonde hair is curled and piled on her head, and with her milky-white complexion and long nails decorated with plastic figures of confectionaries, she looks like she could be marketed as an Easter Edition Fairy Tale Princess doll.

Move on to the darkly lit *Atelier Pierrot* and one will find a slightly different fantasy realm. The walls and dressing room are draped in red velvet and the exposed back wall is covered with golden stars. The clothes lining the walls are decidedly muted. This shop clerk could have walked out of a Victorian-era portrait. She is dressed in a knee-length, black jumper skirt with a soft-pink rose pattern. A ribbon is tied around her slim waist. On her shoulders is a princess-sleeved cream shrug edged in fleur-de-lis lace. Under her pouffy tulle slip she wears lacy, floral patterned tights and her feet are shod in black boots tied with pink ribbon. Her brown hair has been curled into soft waves and a small pink rose adorns her left ear.

Although the women (and occasionally men) in *Laforet* look slightly different, they all share the same basic elements in their appearance: long, curled hair, frilly dresses, delicate head-dresses or elaborate bonnets, knee-socks, round-toed Mary Janes, round-collared blouses and pouffy, tulle slips. This fantasy child-inspired dress-up fashion is called Lolita, and it has developed into a full-fledged subculture in Japan. Not to be confused with Vladimir Nabokov's novel of the same name, Lolita refers to the practice of adult women dressing in excessively frilly, doll/princess/maiden-inspired clothing. And like cuteness in Japan, Lolita pervades every aspect of a Lolita's appearance, and to a certain extent, her (or his) life. It is easy to think of Lolita as an anachronistic living version of an expensive doll – and indeed, Lolitas often own and carry around matching dolls.

The Lolita genre has fragmented into several main subgenres. Sweet Lolita is the saccharine, pink imaginary childhood Lolita brand embodied by such brands as *Angelic Pretty*. Classic Lolita is the elegant, 19th-century damsel-inspired aesthetic embodied by such brands as *Victorian Maiden*. Gothic Lolita features longer skirts, corsets, dark colors and gothic symbols, as seen in brands such as *Moi-même-Moitié*. Pirate Lolita features leather boots, peasant

blouses, gaudy hats and Spanish jewelry, a style represented by such brands as *Alice and the Pirates*. Grotesque Lolita features injured girls in hospital gowns and bandages and is embodied by such brands as *Blah Blah Hospital*. This is only a sampling of the wide gamut of Lolita styles.

What gave rise to such an extraordinary fashion? There is no other nation on earth that has built such a large industry dressing adult women like dolls. Why would Lolita gain such popularity in Japan, and what accounts for its unique characteristics? From September 2009 to July 2010 I studied abroad in Kyoto and made it my personal quest to get to the bottom of this mysterious aesthetic. As well as traditional research I had the unique opportunity to personally delve into the enigma of Lolita Fashion by working at both the Classic Lolita brand *Mary Magdalene* as well as the famous *Baby the Stars Shine Bright*.

From January to July 2010 I worked four hours once a week at the business office of *Mary Magdalene*, a small atelier specializing in Classic Lolita. *Mary* is run solely by four individuals: the CEO, the designer, and two young employees out of a tiny apartment in Osaka, a quintessential example of the types of "apartment maker" brands which gave birth to Harajuku fashion. It was a fascinating look at the behind-the-scenes process and politics of Lolita Fashion. I did translation work as well as various tasks such as inspecting, cleaning, and ironing clothes.

During the same period I also worked as a sales clerk at the *Baby the Stars Shine Bright* store which opened in Kyoto in March 2010. *Baby the Stars Shine Bright* is probably the best-known Lolita Fashion brand and specializes in Sweet Lolita. The mid-size shop was located on the seventh floor of OPA, a multilevel fashion-based shopping center. OPA is mainly dominated by *gyaru* (gal) brands, which cater to fashion and peer-conscious women in their teens and twenties. I was fairly shocked to hear that *Baby*, the anathema of *gyaru*, would open shop literally in the middle of a *gyaru* stronghold. Our store was located on the "Cute and Sexy" floor, surrounded by stores selling lingerie, punk-rock clothing, shoes, and nail and hair accessories.

At *Baby* I performed all the responsibilities of a regular staff member. I assisted customers in selecting products, answered queries about products or *Baby* in general, handled cash and maintained the cash register, managed product inventory, sent and received shipments, etc. I was able to meet and spend considerable time with the company founder and President Isobe Akinori, as well as management from the Kansai area. After opening, I worked once or twice a week for eight hour shifts, got to know the other Lolita stores in the area, and met many Lolitas in the Kyoto area.

My interaction in the Lolita community was conducted almost entirely in Japanese. Most of my interaction was on an informal basis and the conversations recorded in this paper are recalled from notes and journals, not from recorded interviews. For privacy reasons I use mostly shopnames or nicknames of colleagues cited in this paper. Unless otherwise indicated, any translation from Japanese to English is my own.

Some may be tempted to dismiss this fashion as another short-lived fad dreamed up by desperate clothing manufacturers looking to squeeze a bit more profit out of Japan's dwindling youth population. These fashions may be devoured by over-indulged Japanese girls anxious to jump on the next hot fashion bandwagon, but are soon to go the way of pet rocks and cabbage patch dolls. This could not be further from the truth. Lolita Fashion has been around for more than thirty years and is as firmly rooted in youth culture as it has ever been. I found that Lolita Fashion is not just a frivolous marketing ploy; it is a complex form of rebellion and social commentary on Japan's oppressive social structure and its social expectations on young people, especially young women.

Cuteness in Japan

Lolita Fashion has a surprisingly long history. Despite the change that has occurred since Lolita's first appearance in the late 1970s, certain elements remain intact: the clothes must draw

inspiration from a time period and place that is not modern Japan, they must be high-quality (not costume-like), and they must emphasize the innocence, vulnerability, sweetness or – in other words – cuteness of the wearer. One thing can be said with certainty: if it is not cute, it is not Lolita. So it is from *cute* that we will begin our foray into the Lolita wonderland.

Say what you may about politeness and *bushi-do*, but "cute" has become the new byword for Japanese culture. Step off the plane and into Narita airport, and cuteness screams at you: cute food, cute cell phones, cute key chains, cute characters telling you not to smoke in public areas, cute toilet paper, cute slot machines – seemingly the most impossibly crude or mundane are gilded with a perky, pink veneer. Western visitors to Japan are often shocked at how cuteness, whether tasteful or tacky, seems to have worked its way into every aspect – even the most sinister or unsavory – of Japanese life. Hello Kitty condoms? Yes, they're out there.[1]

Many Westerners feel unsettled with the extreme cuteness in Japan. This is especially true when Westerners, especially women, encounter the Lolita – who not only consumes *cute*, but transforms herself into a living symbol of *cute* – a lavish, decadent, symbol of an impossible ideal.

Background: *Cute*

What is considered cute varies slightly from culture to culture, but at the basic level what is "cute" is made of the same basic components. The *cute* reaction seems to stem from two contradictory human tendencies: the desire to protect our vulnerable young, and the need for mastery and manipulation.[2]

Both compassion and sadism are expressed in the Japanese meaning. The Japanese word for "cute", *kawaii* comes from the Chinese compound 可愛, with 可 meaning "can", or "possible", and 愛 meaning "love" or "affection". Directly translated as "lovable", *kawaii* became immensely popular as a word describing "infantile and delicate at the same time as being pretty".[3] However, *kawaii* is closely related to the Japanese word *kawaisou* (可哀相), meaning poor, pathetic, or pitiable.

Responding positively to cuteness is in our genes. Seeing and interacting with cuteness makes people feel good. New research suggests that cute images stimulate the same pleasure centers of the brain aroused by sex, a good meal or psychoactive drugs like cocaine.[4]

There is, however, a very sadistic aspect to *cute* consumption. Like sex, cocaine, or food, it can have an addictive tendency. Indeed, *cute* is closely associated with the grotesque.[5] Surrounding ourselves with defenseless, pathetic objects gives us a sense of our own empowerment. In *The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde*, Ngai Sianne writes, "in its exaggerated passivity and vulnerability, the cute object is as often intended to excite a consumer's sadistic desires for mastery and control as much as his or her desire to cuddle."[6] The sadistic side of *cute* can be seen very plainly in the Grotesque Lolita subgenre.

Whether it induces a sense of motherly protection or satisfies our desire to dominate, *cute* makes us feel good. *Cute* sells, and therefore, manufacturers are constantly vying with one another on how to best cute-sucker consumers.

Sweet Lolita: Courtesy of Irene Orozko, http://gurololi.deviantart.com/

Cute is the number one reason women give for why they wear Lolita. Indeed, of the thirty or so Lolitas I came in contact with, every single one of them said they were attracted to Lolita because it is cute. What makes the Japanese such suckers for *cute*? Cuteness has not always been a mainstay of Japanese culture. As far as researchers can tell, the "*kawaii* craze" began in the late 1960s and early 1970s.[7] This is also when Lolita-esque brands were born, beginning with Lolita precursor brands like *Milk* and *Pink House*.

Japan's Prozac

It is generally agreed that cuteness is used as sort of a cultural Prozac in Japan's brutally rigid society.[8] Brian J. McVeigh, scholar of East Asian studies at the University of Arizona, explains, "Cuteness is used to soften up the vertical society, to soften power relations and present authority without being threatening".[9] As Iizumi Misako, a 33-year-old office lady, says, "When I look at cute things, lovely things, that makes me feel relieved. It's like a pet. They cure our wounded soul."[10] However, the dark side that lurks behind much of Japan's pop culture seems to suggest a certain level of awareness by Japanese youth that it is going to take more than a cute Band-Aid to heal their psychological wounds.

Arduous Adulthood

Unlike in much of the West, where adulthood is seen as a period of freedom, in Japan adulthood is viewed by many young people as a gloomy period of heavy burdens.[11] According to Sharon Kinsella, the majority of Japanese teenagers expect their adult life to be a period of restricted freedom and a time of adult responsibility to family, company, and societal obligations.[12]

It is easy to understand why this is the case. For many Japanese children, hard-core career training begins after a relatively relaxed, fun elementary school period. Japanese youth are pushed hard to study for college entrance exams, and half of them will enter cram school upon junior high, though some students begin cram school as early as kindergarten.[13] Cram school usually ends around 9:00 p.m. or 10:00 p.m. in the evening, and this in addition to extracurricular activities and school work leaves youth physically and mentally exhausted.[14] It is easy to imagine how a high school senior, facing extreme pressure from all the adults around her and her fellow peers, could find solace by looking back to those care-free elementary school days, and seek to relive those years through Lolita.

Adulthood in Japan, although challenging in general, places special burdens on women. Although conditions have improved slightly since the 1970s and 1980s, women on average still earn ¢52 (US) on each dollar men earn.[15] Additionally, the expectation for a woman to marry and bear children still carries significant weight.[16] Unfortunately, life after marriage is not a glowing picture of family bliss.[17] Mothers are discouraged from social life and increasingly expected to devote themselves to supporting their children's trajectory through the education system.[18]

Against this social background it is no surprise that cuteness has gained such widespread popularity and that Japanese *cute* focuses so squarely on childishness. Acting childish is an effort to partake of childhood's legendary simplicity, happiness, and emotional warmth, something lacking in modern adult Japanese life.[19] Lolita Fashion is primarily based in the neo-romantic notion of childhood and encourages its devotees not only to dress like children, but indulge in childish activities such as playing with stuffed animals and eating sweets.

However, behind the lace trims and glitter is a very nihilistic element of Lolita, revealed by the dark, sardonic side of this fashion. Although the Lolita may find temporary relief in her attempt to create an eternal childhood, try as she may she cannot completely isolate herself from society's pressures. She knows, at least subconsciously, that someday her imaginary world will come crashing down. Although most Lolitas will insist that their lifestyle will not change as they age, it is rare to see a Lolita older than forty, though they do occasionally exist. This struggle against inevitable capitulation may help to explain the militancy of many Lolitas, who wear their clothes proudly and vow fer-

vently that they will "follow their own path", as well as some of the disturbing, cynical aspects which seep into their culture.

Cute Against "The Man"

The kind of extreme cuteness expressed in Lolita is not simply a cultural Prozac. Although the seeds of *cute* consumption may have been planted in the post-war period, Japan's *kawaii* culture emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s and peaked in the 1980s. In addition to a form of self-consolation it also acted as a rebellion (though a rather indirect, weak, and cowardly one) against established order and values. Rather than challenging "the Man" through angry and sexually charged forms such as Punk and Rock, which were favored by Western youth, Japanese mainstream culture simply refused to grow up. Rather than fighting commercialization and forcing social change, *kawaii* culture indulged it, finding comfort and companionship in consumption. Sharon Kinsella states, "The contemporary associations of social disaffection or social rebellion with childishness began during the students' movement at the end of the 1960s."[20]

The Sweet Lolita is a salient symbol of rebellion. By adopting the appearance and attitude of a child (*not* of an adolescent), the Lolita is able to create an imaginary persona for herself where she is free from the pressures of adult life. The dedicated Sweet Lolita does not just wear the clothes of a child, but she will speak in a nasal, high-pitched voice, adopt a pigeon-toed childish posture, and carry around children's toys. She not only surrounds herself with cute, comforting things to make her feel better about herself, but personally embodies the cuteness itself. By presenting herself as weak, innocent, and vulnerable, she sends a clear message about her inability or refusal to accept adult roles. At first glance the Lolita persona may appear to be the spoiled, petulant, stupid-but-pretty girl aesthetic so distressing to feminists. When compared to the traditional Japanese model of a woman as a subservient, long-suffering daughter, wife, and mother, however, the selfish, in-your-face Lolita aesthetic is surprisingly subversive.

It should not be a surprise that most adults hate the Lolita style. In a 1994 poll by *SPA! Magazine*, Lolita came in first as the most reprehensible youth fashion trend, beating out low-riding pants, bling, and man skirts.[21] By acting selfish and childish, the Lolita contradicts nearly every single "traditional" Japanese value: self discipline, responsibility, self-sacrifice, and hard work. She is saying, "I'm a spoiled, immature little brat and I like it that way!"

I was personally taken by surprise at the rebelliousness of many of the Lolitas I met. As mentioned above, when I asked Lolita fans why they liked Lolita, the answer was always the same: because it's cute. This, however, was not enough to explain a lifestyle dedication. I met many girls who expressed their desire to wear Lolita clothing, but couldn't because their parents (usually the father) would not allow it. Most of the girls who worked at a Lolita company or wore Lolita on a daily basis were certainly not shrinking violets and were well aware of the subversive nature of their appearance. The girls were often subject to extreme pressure by their parents and society and found in Lolita a way to push back. In a fascinating coincidence, all six of the staff members at the Kyoto *Baby*, including myself, were oldest children whose parents had held high expectations for their futures. With the exception of myself, all the girls had come from working class families who had dreamed of upward mobility for their daughters, but their daughters had had other ideas.

Kei, my coworker and the best salesperson in Kansai, was an excellent example of this stubborn spirit. She was a tiny, extremely bright woman of twenty-two and seemed a bit more socially-adjusted than most Lolitas. She was originally from Fukuoka but was living with her sister, who was attending a training school for teachers in Kyoto. She came from a typical working class family; her father was a plumber and her mother a housewife. But despite her modest circumstances she had attended private schools since kindergarten and had even visited the US during a school trip. She spoke English better than she would admit and was remarkably witty. I first met her at a dinner held for us by *Baby*'s CEO. The first thing she asked me

was, "How do you say, 'I will follow my own path' in English (自分の道を行くしかない)? As in, I will follow my heart and make my own decisions." I was impressed by her pluck.

"Kei-chan", I asked. "When did you first start liking Lolita?"

"Well, I have actually liked it since high school," she admitted. "But my mom, you see, said it was alright and cute and all, but it was too expensive and embarrassing and wouldn't let me wear it outside the house. So it was only after I moved out that I could really wear it." She paused for a minute. "But I have to say, my parents are really unhappy with me working here. Especially after they sent me to private school and college and everything …"

"Oh, you went to college?" I was surprised and yet not entirely shocked. Kei did seem better-educated than the other girls at *Baby*.

"Yeah, I studied law for four years at Fukuoka University, so they freaked out when I found this part-time job at a Lolita store. Especially my old man."

"But, then why did you choose to study law?"

"Well, ever since I was little my parents told me I have to become a lawyer, so when I went to college naturally that is what I studied."

"Why did your parents want you to be a lawyer?"

Kei looked at me like I was an idiot. "Because of the money, of course! In Japan if you want a high salary you become either a doctor or a lawyer … but when I was looking for jobs there wasn't really anything I was interested in. Then my sister was moving out here and *Baby* was hiring, and I've wanted to work at *Baby* since I was in high school, so I decided I should take the chance."

I couldn't help admiring Kei for choosing a life of relative poverty and a job she liked rather than having money and a job she hated, even though I did understand her parents' disappointment. What was even more surprising was that she was not entirely unusual. When I was talking to Kanami, the manager of the Kobe store, about how many American students have to pay their way through college, she became extremely defensive.

"Well, a lot of Japanese students must pay their own way too!" she said, puffing herself up. "What do you think I did?"

"Wow, you paid your own way through college?" I said, "That's really admirable!"

"My parents told me I was a girl and girls didn't need to go to college. But I wanted to go, so I paid for it myself. It wasn't easy." She laughed. "But even with a college degree I still only earn JP¥800 [US$9] an hour. But I wouldn't give up this job for anything. Life's just not fair, is it?"

Kei and Kanami were not the only Lolitas on rocky ground with their parents. Haru, the oldest girl, had not spoken with her father since high school, and Choco only spoke of her parents to complain. Even at *Mary* the situation was pretty dismal. Makki, who was my supervisor, was twenty-five and came from a large family of devout Catholics who had wanted her to become a nun. "That just wasn't the life for me", she said.

Despite these women's resistance to pressure to conform, they did not channel their discontent into some sort of social movement, whether through political action, volunteer work, or socially-minded careers. Lolitas on the whole tended to be nice people, but they were quite wrapped up in their own self-centered worlds and were not aware or simply did not care about issues of social justice, even ones that affected them. When I told my coworker Haru that I was taking a class on women's issues and was disappointed in the sex discrimination in Japan, she had never even heard of sex discrimination.

"What do you mean, discrimination because of sex?" she asked. I was surprised to hear this from a woman who was getting paid half of what her husband was, even though she was probably twice as qualified.

I struggled to explain with my still limited Japanese, "It is where, you know, people don't have the same opportunities or are disadvantaged because of their sex."

She thought about this for a bit. "Oh yeah, I guess we do have that here. You mean, like how boys can't go into certain Picture Club booths?"

Origin of Inaction

To be sure, there are plenty of apathetic young people like Haru in the US. But unlike in the US, where the rebellions of the 1960s were instrumental in bringing about important reform about sex, race, and equality, the Japanese demonstrations of the 1960s and 1970s met bitter defeat. Since this time there have been very few public protests in Japan, while they have remained popular in the US and continue to bring attention to social injustice. The defeat of the Ampo protesters in 1970 delivered a fatal blow to Japanese progressives.[22] Since the Ampo demonstrations, public protests or any sort of public display of discontent is considered taboo.[23] Only feeble, superficial stabs at rebellion (such as altering personal appearance) are tolerated, and only to a certain point. It is probably because of this crushed progressive spirit that very little headway has been made to solve social problems such as sexism, racism, and ageism in Japan. Unlike in the US and Europe there are no laws in Japan protecting its citizens against discrimination and litigation rates are still comparatively low.[24] In a society where bleaching ones hair endangers their chances of college entrance, and where parents bet everything on their child's success, it is hard to blame Japanese young people for giving up on real social change and acting selfishly and pettily by wrapping themselves in a protective dream-land cocoon.

Laced with Nostalgia

Lolitas are not just obsessed with childhood, but specifically with a childhood that never belonged to them – a neo-romantic Victorian notion of childhood.

Like the rest of *cute* culture, Lolita was heavily influenced by the sense of nostalgia that overwhelmed the consumer market in the 1970s and 1980s. The high economic growth beginning in the 1950s brought wealth, but was accompanied by serious pollution and social breakdown. Doubts about the future were already widespread by the end of the 1960s. The Ampo demonstrations and oil crisis fueled these doubts. At the same time Western culture in the form of film, television, and print media flooded the country, and Japanese began to idolize these often sugar-coated portrayals and reproduced them in *cute* culture.[25]

Lolita Fashion, like many "fancy good" products, was particularly smitten with French images. Uehara Kumiko, the head designer at *Baby the Stars Shine Bright*, says she draws much of her inspiration from the Rococo period.[26] Marie Antoinette remains a perennial icon in Lolita culture, with countless dresses bearing her name. In the novel, *Shimotsuma Monogatari* (published in English as *Kamikaze Girls*) the main character and self-professed Lolita Momoko claims that "A true Lolita must nurture a Rococo spirit and live a Rococo lifestyle."[27]

However, despite the popularity of *Shimotsuma Monogatari* and the continuing fixation on Marie Antoinette, Lolita Fashion has much more in common with Victorian children's clothes. Rococo fashion was low-cut, mature, and sensuous, a far cry from the Puritan garb of the modern Lolita. What Lolita has most in common with Rococo is its obsession with detail and frivolity.

The reality is that Lolitas do not really care about the authenticity of their nostalgia. They are dressing up to create a world they imagine to be happier than the real one and have found an image of what they want in 18th- and 19th-century Europe. Actually, Lolita Fashion draws inspiration and idolizes any period where young women acted like "ladies" (お嬢様), be it the French Rococo or the antebellum American South. An ironic element of Lolita Fashion is that clothes are often given seemingly (and sometimes genuinely) meaningful names taken from the world of art or literature such as "Artemisia" (*Mary*) and "The Name of the Rose" (*Baby*), but the majority of patrons are unaware of these allusions and when informed are gen-

Girl's Costume from the Victorian Era: Reprinted from: JoAnne Olian, *Full Color Victorian Fashions, 1870-1893* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1991). Plate 8, March 1971; Plate 3, November-December 1870; Plate 9, December 1874. From Le Moniteur des Dames et des Demoiselles.

erally uninterested. They just like the feeling of nostalgia it gives them.

Patrick Wright states that "nostalgia […] testifies in more general ways to the destabilization of everyday life".[28] The Lolita, seeking to embody nostalgia, is critical and rebellious of the present she lives in as she tries to build an imaginary past.

Beauty

Embracing a fashion that idealizes doll-like cuteness also allows Lolitas to escape from contemporary standards of beauty. Compared to the modern beauty standard, cuteness is a generous ideal, emphasizing roundness, softness and clumsiness. "Beauty attracts admiration and demands a pedestal; cuteness attracts affection and demands a lap. Beauty is rare and brutal, despoiled by a single pimple. Cuteness is commonplace and generous, content on occasion to cohabit with homeliness."[29] Beauty may be especially brutal toward Japanese women, who have had to face Western ideals of beauty since the Meiji era. This was especially true in the mid-1980s, when Body Con (short for Body-Consciousness, a style which favors tight-fitting clothes designed to display a body's sensuous curves) became all the rage.[30] The icons of this style were leggy, curvaceous celebrities such as Madonna and Brooke Shields. Many Japanese women felt they had a hard time living up to this standard, and found a welcome alternative in Lolita Fashion. Lolita designer Hirooka Naoto (*aka* h.NAOTO) is one of the main creative forces behind Gothic Lolita. He theorizes, "I think many Japanese women feel intimidated by high fashion in the West and feel they can never live up to the refined beauty that they feel Western women strive for, so instead they shoot for a cute look, one that doesn't require tall, curvaceous bodies and instead emphasizes girlishness".[31]

Lolita Fashion magnanimously caters to a wide range of body types. Lolita brands have seized upon this appeal and designed their clothes very cleverly to allow girls of astonishingly different proportions to fit into them. Most Lolita styles hide the body shape underneath layers of slips, petticoats, and panniers and look just as appropriate on larger builds as on slim ones. A hallmark of a Lolita dress is the shirring (シャーリング), a gathering device made by drawing the dress material up on parallel rows of short running stitches, placed in the back, which can be loosened or tightened depending on the frame of the wearer. It is because of this device that most Lolita Fashion brands can get away with manufacturing just one size, though the shirring will only stretch so far, to the chagrin of many larger women.

Lolita Fashion's emphasis on modesty is welcomed by many women with skin disorders. Among my coworkers at *Baby* were women plagued by severe acne, keratosis, and vitiligo. I was shocked numerous times to discover that women who I had previously seen wearing a full blown Lolita outfit were hiding a skin disorder. *SPA! Magazine* points out that many of the girls who wear Lolita "would not look good in Body Con". Upon visiting a few stores my own host mother commented that "a lot of Lolitas are chubby, aren't they?" She was not being critical; actually, these girls look fabulous in Lolita Fashion, a style which allows them to express their beauty without conforming to mainstream conventions.

Pretty Clothes for a Pretty Penny

Lolita clothes are over-the-top, but unfortunately for their disciples, so are their prices. The mainstay of a Lolita wardrobe is the jumper-skirt worn over a blouse with knee socks and a headdress. The average brand-name jumper-skirt will cost JP¥20,000 to JP¥30,000 (around US$215-US$315), the blouse will cost around JP¥15,000 (US$160), the socks JP¥2,000 (US$22), the head dress JP¥4,000 (US$44). Coordinate this with shoes of JP¥20,000 (US$215), a necklace (JP¥8000, US$88), and a purse (JP¥20,000, US$215), and you are talking around JP¥90,000, or almost US$1,000 for an ensemble. Considering that most of the dress material is cotton, the shoes and purse are synthetic leather, and the necklace is plastic, this seems an utterly outrageous sum.

Quality or Price Inflation?

Just how inflated are the prices? This was a harder question to answer than I had supposed. I worked in the *Mary* corporate office so I had the chance to see the clothes in process from the drawing board to the retail store. I learned that despite the seemingly outrageous prices the Lolita companies are not making a large profit. The combination of high-quality materials, intense labor, and limited quantities produced makes for expensive clothes.

This was especially true for a tiny company like *Mary Magdalene*. *Mary Magdalene*, as with all Lolita brands, does its best to exude an air of elegance, sumptuousness, and sophistication. Every one of their pieces and their marketing materials reeks of elegance. When traveling to my first interview I was rather confused when the address I had been given led me to a dingy Osaka neighborhood literally straddled between two sets of train tracks. The only buildings in the area were shabby old apartment and condominium complexes. Having spent most of my time in Japan in immaculate Kyoto I was rather disconcerted. I looked at the condominium complex, then back at the address I had been given to see that they did indeed match. I carefully approached the entrance and to my relief saw "Mary Magdalene 3F" written in katakana on one of the mailboxes.

After being buzzed in I rode a dingy elevator to the third floor and was led by a young woman, whom I would later learn was the designer Tanaka Reiko, to a tiny kitchen that had been converted into an office. I had dressed in a suit for the interview, but Tanaka herself wore a classy but plain jumper. They can't be making a lot of money, I thought to myself.

Working at *Mary* on a weekly basis I realized that the spirit of thriftiness I had experienced at that first interview extended to every part of their operation. Despite the illusion of luxury exhibited in their products there was no room for extravagance on the business end. They would usually only produce around 50 of each item, but each item would be impeccable. A staff member would personally inspect each product, remove lose threads, and iron it before it shipped out. The staff salaries were quite low. The starting salary at the time was JP¥700 an hour (US$8), and even the CEO could not have been making much. He ate sack lunches, shopped for used clothing, and rode his bike to work every day.

Although *Baby* has larger operations than *Mary*, they encounter similarly high production costs and rely mostly on staff dedication to make ends meet. There were moments when I was amazed they could afford to stay in business, and it was clear that everyone working there, including the CEO and designers, were not in it for the money. Although the company spent

considerable sums on marketing and goodies for their customers, they kept their labor costs very low. The average salary for a shop staffer was JP¥800 (US$9) an hour, and the highest paid workers were only paid JP¥1000 (US$10). These girls' frugality was astonishing. It was as if these girls lived and breathed for the clothes. Although some of them still lived at home with their parents, the majority of staff I met and worked with lived on their own and supported themselves. Even with a steep staff discount the clothes at *Baby* were expensive, but the girls would buy an item they liked even if it meant their cell-phone service was cut, which actually happened once or twice when I was there.

Cult of *Shōjo*

The Lolita aesthetic is based on the desire to emulate a *shōjo*, or girl of around school age that can be roughly defined as a young woman. It is interesting to note that there is no equivalent male fashion. The closest would probably be Aristocrat, which, as its name suggests, involves men dressing as (usually Victorian) aristocracy. However, when worn by males, the aristocrat is portrayed exclusively as adult; there is no *shōnen* (young man) fashion phenomenon worn by young men. Why would adult women dressing up as a child be so much more popular than adult men dressing up as young boys?

Mary Magdalene: Photographer: Reiko Tanaka. Courtesy of *Mary Magdalene*.

Part of the answer lies in the place of *shōjo* in Japanese popular imagination.

Japanese culture has always held a peculiar fascination for the *shōjo*. She appears in literature, from classics such as Kawabata's *The Dancing Girl of Izu* to Yoshimoto Banana's *Kitchen*. *Shōjo* is the hero of every single Studio Ghibli film, and is the face of a multitude of advertising campaigns. *Shōjo*, between the ages of 11 and 15, is seen as a liminal creature, not a child but not yet a woman.

The original culture of prizing girlhood arose in Victorian England and was embraced by such canonical authors as Wordsworth, Dickens, Ruskin, and Carroll.[32] In Victorian England's strict social structure girls represented the true essence of childhood or bygone times of innocence. In *Men in Wonderland: The Lost Girlhood of the Victorian Gentleman*, Catherine Robson argues that the idolization of little girls by elite Victorian men was linked to the belief that men only become masculine after they leave the nursery – and the domain of women – and are "tainted" by the outside world of men.[33] Little girls, argues Robson, thus offer an adult male the best opportunity to chase after what he imagines to be his purer past. Although boys were ripped from their mothers' arms and made to wear trousers and go to school at around five or six, little girls remained symbols of "true childhood" until puberty. Alice of *Alice in Wonderland* has become the archetype of the Victorian *shōjo*, and it is no surprise that she would become the heroine of Lolita Fashion. Alice of *Alice in Wonderland* is by far the most popular figure in Lolita culture. She even has a magazine of Lolita Fashion – *Alice Deco* – named after her.

The Cult of Girlhood eventually found fertile ground in Meiji-era Japan.[34] The ideal *shōjo* of pre-war Japan was protected by a patriarch and educated in elite schools, a pure girl protected from the ugliness of the real world. But because of her naiveté and lack of experience she was also a symbol of latent potential and social freedom.

Since the rapid commercialization of the 1970s, the *shōjo* took on a new role – one of consumer. Young women, who are still largely excluded from the workforce and important social roles – exist as sheer consumers. Like children – a dependent with no means of production – *shōjo* has become a "master trope for all kinds of social consumption".[35] However, because of this limited opportunity to take on "adult" roles before marriage, the *shōjo* represents a longed-for, carefree, unencumbered life unattainable by men. Lolita, in its excessiveness, exorbitant price tags, and selfish individualism is an embodiment of this ideal. Lolita culture is so perfectly in harmony with the *Shōjo* Myth that it even adopted the Victorian Child – the original object of the cult of the child – as its symbolic attire.

Whether this was a conscious decision by the progenitors of Lolita Fashion is unclear, but one thing is certain: like the Victorian gentleman and the cult of the child, men have played a very active role in the creation and propagation of Lolita Fashion. Kinsella contends that young men, envious of the *shōjo* myth, fetishize young women, "either as real girl friends or syrupy sweet little girl heroines".[36] This fetishization can be seen in such men as Novala Takemoto, one of the main proponents of the Lolita lifestyle. Takemoto's *Shimotsuma Monogatari* was largely responsible for taking Lolita from the back-alleys of Harajuku to the world. However, many Lolita fans are startled to hear Takemoto is actually a straight, middle-aged man, yet is a tireless campaigner for *otome* (乙女) or maiden culture, whose first widely recognized work was entitled *Soleilnuit: For Becoming a Proper Young Lady*. Other examples include the founders of *Baby the Stars Shine Bright* Isobe Akinori and CEO and designer at *Mary Magdalene* Sakamura. These men have, despite being middle-aged and male, dedicated their careers to building up the Lolita industry.

Lolita Fashion and Lolita Complex: Unfortunate Relatives

Although Takemoto, Isobe, and Sakamura are relatively positive examples of men who worship at the altar of *shōjo*, whenever Lolita Fashion is discussed it is inevitably faced with difficult questions about its relationship to Lolicon. Lolita Fashion, with all its emphasis on innocence, chastity, and girls-just-wanna-have-fun mindset, bears an unfortunate resemblance to another Japanese phenomenon that emerged in the same period, and for which Japan has become internationally notorious: the Lolita Complex, commonly known in Japan as *Loli-con*.

Lolicon refers to an adult male's sexual attraction to young girls or girls with youthful characteristics. Lolicon is a major problem (although it is not viewed by the mostly male leadership of Japan as a problem) that has plagued Japan since the 1970s – not coincidentally the same time period that saw the rise of *cute* and Lolita Fashion. For many Japanese men the younger their sexual partner, the better, and this has given rise to a whole host of Lolicon-related industries.[37] Lolicon *manga* (Japanese comic books) is sold openly in many bookstores, and *enjo-kōsai* (援助交際), which refers to the practice of junior high and high school girls prostituting themselves with middle-aged men, remains widespread.

The reasons behind Japan's Lolicon affliction are complex but share many of the same causal factors as Lolita Fashion. Japan has a fairly troubling sexual past – even before the Lolicon boom. In arguably Japan's most famous literary work *The Tale of Genji* the celebrated title character rapes the child Murasaki, and it was as recently as the 1930s that women were being used as sex slaves all over Asia. The Lolicon phenomenon is not an entirely modern problem.

At its basis, Lolicon stems from a desire to have sex with a girl without any resistance, or without all the trouble of a mature adult relationship. John Whittier Treat argues that Lolicon rose out of the commoditization and fetishizashion of the *shōjo*. Like everything else in Japan, sex has become commoditized to an extreme degree, and the unproductive Eros of the *shōjo* has not escaped that commoditization. Because *shōjo*, in their unique social role, are seen as passive, they symbolize "a total object, the object of play" which can be used up and thrown away.[38]

Despite the unfortunately similar monikers and shared time frame, Lolita Fashion is essentially the opposite of Lolicon. Likely the biggest reason for the confusion between the two is the name Lolita: which in the United States refers to a pre-pubescent vamp, while in Japan refers to an adult who wishes to remain pure and child-like. Who first started using the term Lolita to refer to the over-the-top virginal fashion is unclear, but the term can probably be thought of as *wa-sei eigo* (和製英語, English invented in Japan). The vast majority of Lolitas are completely unaware that the fashion subculture they embrace shares its name with a controversial mid-20th-century American novel.

Women who dress in Lolita Fashion are not doing so for the male gaze. Lolitas are very vocal on this point and take care to differentiate themselves from workers at Maid Cafés and even anime fans who dress up as their favorite characters. Photographs are banned in nearly every single Lolita shop, and most Lolitas will not agree to have their photo taken. One thing that all Lolitas can agree on is this: "We wear this fashion for ourselves." Furthermore, Lolita Fashion, with its emphasis on modesty, extravagance, and narcissistic look-at-me-I-don't-give-a-damn attitude, is not considered attractive to men of the Lolicon variety, or indeed Japanese men in general. They are more likely to be frightened than allured by a girl fully done-up in Lolita, because although she is displaying external symbols of childishness, any grown woman who is gutsy enough to wear that sort of fashion in public is certainly no coward and not easily taken advantage of. The Lolitas of Lolita Fashion, unlike Nabokov's Lolita, are actually a pedophile's worst nightmare: they are not young, they are not sexualized, they are not easily exploitable, and they clearly have a lot of needs to be met.

Men: Troublesome Objects of Affection

Although Lolitas take extra precautions to avoid exploitation, they are not intrinsically averse to romantic relationships with men, though their ideal man is likely to never leave his pedestal.

Because of most Lolitas' vociferous insistence that they are not wearing such a style to attract men, I naively assumed they did not care about men at all. In reality I would often see Lolitas shopping with their boyfriends or husbands, some of them with their own peculiar fashion identity, but most often they looked like typical Japanese guys. Once in a while a girl would come into the store toting a boyfriend dressed in Goth and my coworkers would go into a tizzy. Apparently, the ideal match for a Lolita is a Goth, who like the Lolita is willing to spend hundreds of hours and hundreds of thousands of Japanese yen on creating an identity far removed from reality, and therefore understands the Lolita's needs. This fact is supported by several Lolita magazines as well as my coworkers, but this fantasy rarely plays out in reality. Lolitas seem more content to worship a vision of their ideal man than actually settle down with a real one.

Gothic Lolita: Photographer: Terasa Younker

Although many girls would come into *Baby* with their mothers to buy clothes, I never saw a Lolita with children of her own. It seems that if one has to balance between the demands of a Lolita lifestyle and one's family, Lolita usually loses.

Uncertain Futures

What does the future hold for the current Lolitas? Although some of them will end up making careers out of their passions, such as what Tanaka Reiko did with *Mary Magdalene*, the majority of these women will face very difficult choices. Working at a company or store specializing in Lolita Fashion is one of the only viable options for girls who wish to wear Lolita Fashion as everyday outfits, but it is difficult for them to support themselves with such work, much less a family. The prejudice directed toward Lolitas makes it difficult to find a marriage partner and they are likely to be pressured to conform to "Japanese housewife" standards after marriage. In addition to this, the older a women becomes the harder it is to pull off the Lolita aesthetic. There is an emerging group of women who choose to wear Lolita Fashion as they age who have come to be called "Aunty Lolitas", but they are still a small minority.

In my opinion, the fact that, today, nearly forty years after its conception, Lolita Fashion is booming is in general bad news for Japanese society. Although having gone through many stages, including Goth, Punk, and currently saccharine sweet, the idea of escaping from reality still stands at the center of its philosophy. In fact, many of the old-school Lolitas are troubled that the current trend in Lolita Fashion focuses on the creation of a sweet dream fantasy, as opposed to the more outwardly rebellious gothic styles of the 1990s. Rather than expending their creative energy towards achieving social change or form meaningful relationships, they lavish their attention on their own obsessive world of fashion, a female outsider languishing in an unchanging social system.

Although the women I worked with and those that I met insisted they would continue to wear the clothes they loved despite how old they may become, they are facing what is ultimately a losing battle. When asked about their future, most Lolitas either dodge the question or give vague answers such as "I'll keep doing this for a while." My coworker Akki at *Mary*, who lived with her single mother and whose boyfriend was unemployed, was surprisingly honest about her bleak situation. "I really want to make Lolita clothing and succeed at *Mary*, but I don't know. Maybe it would have been better to get a job at a big company like Wacoal. That's where most of my classmates went."

Behind the lace, panniers, glitter, and fake eyelashes of the Lolita exterior lies a vulnerable human being who realizes she cannot hide behind a cute exterior forever. However, until the day she finally gives in to her mother's nagging, sells her Vivienne Westwood shoes and cleans out her closet, she will continue to strut the streets of Harajuku, parasol and stuffed aimal rabbit in hand. She acts as a conspicuous reminder not only of modern youth's resentment of the status quo, but also of their reluctance to do anything meaningful about it.[39]

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