

# Kawaii Fashion in Thailand: The Consumption of Cuteness from Japan

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Japanese fashion is one of the cultural products from Japan that is consumed a most favorable way in Thailand. Young Thai women purchase and use Japanese brands of clothing and cosmetics favorably, and the consumption phenomenon is conspicuous in daily life. In this article, the Japanese fashion or *kawaii fashion* which is rigorously consumed in Thailand, particularly by teenagers and those in their twenties, is investigated. The article attempts to illustrate the popularity of *kawaii fashion* from Japan by examining a role of Japanese magazines for young women, translated and published in Thailand. It also investigates the reasons for popularity of Japanese “sailor-style” uniforms in private schools in Thailand to analyze the factors underlying popularity of *kawaii fashion* in Thailand. With ethnographies, interviews and published data, this article examines why and how young women in Thailand consume Japanese fashion.

## Introduction

Japanese fashion is one of the cultural products from Japan that is consumed a most favorable way in Thailand. Young Thai women, particularly teenagers and those in their twenties, purchase and use Japanese brands of clothing and cosmetics favorably, and the consumption phenomenon is conspicuous in daily life. Although the phenomenon is conspicuous, however, academic discussions around fashion or fashion studies are difficult raise. One of the reasons for the difficulty derives from the intangibility of fashion.

Fashion is a concept that separates itself from other words which are often used as synonyms of fashion, such as clothing, garments and apparel. Those words refer to tangible objects while fashion is an intangible object. Trying to define a particular item of clothing as fashion is futile because fashion is not a material product but a symbolic product which has no content substance by/in itself.<sup>1</sup>

Kawamura differentiates “fashion” from “clothing” by pointing out that clothing is the raw material, while fashion is the value added to clothing. Clothing, garments and apparel refer to tangible objects, while fashion is an intangible object, which can exist only in people’s imagination and belief system.

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<sup>1</sup> Kawamura, Yuniya. (2005) *Fashion-ology: an introduction to fashion studies*. Oxford: Berg., p. 2.

“Fashion is not visual clothing but is the invisible elements included in clothing.”<sup>2</sup> In that sense, when we talk about *kawaii* fashion, we are not concerned with clothes or attire as the raw materials of clothing that somebody might buy at a shop in *Siam Square*, but we are interested in the coordination of the clothes bought in Thailand which has a taste of *kawaii* fashion from Tokyo. Each item of the outfit may have been made in different countries; for example, the skirt and blouse may have been made in Thailand, and the shoes may have been made in Korea. But the fashion is that all of these items coordinated together can be *kawaii* fashion, the fashion sense of Japanese youth culture.

Much of the early writings on fashion and clothing were from purely descriptive, over-simplified socio-historical or feminist viewpoints.<sup>3</sup> The reason for the devaluation of fashion as a social phenomenon to be studied, is due to the fact that fashion is linked with outward appearance and women. Early theorists of fashion related the concept of fashion to the social position of women,<sup>4</sup> which has made the issue look as if it is part of a gender issue. Contemporary feminists are sometimes still wedded to the perspective of fashion or beauty “that fashion emerges out of the desire to be beautiful, the norm for which is created by men in a male-dominated society.”<sup>5</sup> Today, to the contrary, there are also perspectives which focus on fashion and beauty as a source of power for women. Having understood the ongoing debate between fashion and feminism, I am herewith detaching the discussions of this article from any feminist discourses.

Fashion plays a more conspicuous *rôle* in modern times, because the differences in our standards of life have become so much more strongly accentuated, for the more numerous and the more sharply drawn these differences are, the greater the opportunities for emphasizing them at every turn.<sup>6</sup>

Clothing is an important artifact, as we need to dress something when we go out and it is “a form of communication and it can be viewed as a system of signs that derives meaning from its context while enabling us to carry on our activities.”<sup>7</sup> Erving Goffman points out that “when an individual appears before others he will have many motives for trying to control the impression they receive of the situation.”<sup>8</sup> Based on this notion, I assume that the clothing people choose to wear in public is likely to influence the outward impression of the individual in question, and that fashion may be considered a reflection of the individual’s attitudes toward a particular country and culture, as well as the individual’s

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 1–4.

<sup>3</sup> Wilson, Elizabeth. (1985) *Adorned in dreams: fashion and modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press., p. 10.

Bydon, Anne & Nissen, Sandra. (1998) Introduction: adorning the body. In Brydon, Anne & Nissen, Sandra (Eds.), *Consuming fashion: adorning the transnational body*. Oxford: Berg., p.ix.

<sup>4</sup> Kawamura (2005), *op. cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Simmel, Georg. (1957) Fashion. *The American journal of sociology*. Vol LXII. No. 6. pp. 541–558., p. 541.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph, Nathan. (1986) *Uniforms and nonuniforms*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, Inc., p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Goffman, Erving. (1959) *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Anchor Books., p. 15.

belief system and the desire to portray one's appearance in a certain way to the others. In that sense, clothing including fashion, is a social artifact which is a clue to understand people's attitude towards Japan and Japanese culture.

This article, therefore, attempts to examine the popularity of Japanese fashion in Thailand. Is the Japanese fashion really popular among Thai youth? If so, how do they adopt and consume it? What are the underlying reasons for the favorable attitude toward Japanese fashion? By exploring the various phenomena of consuming Japanese fashion in Thailand through ethnography, this article tries to delineate how and why Japanese fashion has become popular in Thailand.

### What is *Kawaii* Fashion?

On March 28, 2009, a beauty contest was held at Central World Plaza in Bangkok. The contest was called *Kawaii Festa* and was co-organized by the Japanese Embassy in Thailand, the Japan Foundation and *Cawaii! Magazine*, a girls' Japanese fashion magazine (Figure 1). What was special about the beauty contest was the theme, which could be detected in the title *Kawaii Festa*. The Japanese word "kawaii" is often translated as "cute" or "lovely" in English, but it can also be a counterpart for the English words "sweet," "pretty" or "tiny," depending on the context. The word is an adjective which expresses that something is "adorable" or "lovable." Today, "kawaii" is not a mere word, but it is also a value which young Japanese women adore. They are always looking for and seeking out "kawaii" items, and almost every item is valued according to whether it is "kawaii" (cute) or "kawaikunai" (not cute). For them, "kawaii" is one of the most important factors when they are deciding what to wear in their daily lives.<sup>9</sup>

In the *Kawaii Festa* in Bangkok, unlike other beauty contests which select winners based their physical appearance, the contestants were also evaluated in terms of the fashion concept of the Japanese "kawaii." Wearing their favorite clothes and accessories, therefore, the contestants tried to show their ability at coordinating a good sense of Japanese fashion, in addition to the cuteness of their physical appearance. On the streets of *Siam Square*, a shopping area in central Bangkok, we can see many young Thai women wearing fashion clothes which are very similar to the clothes worn by models in Japanese fashion magazines. For the Thai youth, *Siam Square* is the center of youth culture in Thailand, and we can find many boutiques and apparel retailers (Figures 2 and 3) that sell clothes for those young Thai women who like to read Japanese fashion magazines.

The broader sense of the term "Japanese fashion" includes various kinds of fashion, from the tradi-

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<sup>9</sup> Kinsella, Sharon (1995) 'Cuties in Japan', in Skov, Lise & Moeran, Brian (eds.) *Women, media, and consumption in Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press., pp. 228–230.; Mead, Rebecca. (2002) Shopping rebellion: What the kids want. *The New Yorker*. March 18., p. 109.; Kawamura, Yuniya. (2006) Japanese teens as producers of street fashion. *Current sociology*. Vol. 54(5)., p. 795.; see also, Koh, Barbara. (1999, November 8) Cute power! *Newsweek*. pp. 40–45.; Drake, Kate. (2001, June 18) Kwest for kawaii. *Time*. Retrieved on January 12, 2010 from <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,131022,00.html>; Bremner, Brian. (2002, June 25) In Japan, cute conquers all. *Business Week*. Retrieved on January 12, 2010, from [http://www.businessweek.com/bwdaily/dnflash/jun2002/nf20020625\\_7574.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/bwdaily/dnflash/jun2002/nf20020625_7574.htm); Lee, Diana. (2005, September 1) Inside look at Japanese cute culture. *UNIORB*. Retrieved on January 12, 2010, from <http://uniorb.com/ATREND/japanwatch/cute.htm>; Kageyama, Yuri. (2006, June 14) Cuteness a hot-selling commodity in Japan. *Washington Post*. June 14.



Figure 1. Poster of “Kawaii Festa” in Bangkok

tional Japanese *kimono* to the maid costumes in *otaku* subculture, from baby clothing to elite designers’ high fashion, and there are gender-differentiated fashions for female and male as well as unisex fashion styles. But, as the research work for this paper was designed to be conducted in the context of Japanese cultural product consumption, I will discuss casual fashion for young females, or “kawaii fashion,” which was originally produced by the boutiques and the apparel manufacturers on the streets of Tokyo such as in *Harajuku* and *Shibuya*, Japan.

In Thailand, the main consumers of *kawaii* fashion from Japan are young women. It is important to note that young Thai women are also the main consumers of other Japanese cultural products; and Japanese fashion is one of these Japanese cultural products that they conspicuously consume. The reason for excluding traditional fashion, high fashion and men’s fashion of Japan from the discussions in this article is that these fashions are latent/not so visible in street scenes in Thailand. The high fashion clothes made by Japanese elite fashion designers such as *Kenzo*, *Issey Miyake* and *Junko Koshino*, or the fashion for male consumers, may be consumed by some middle and upper class Thai people, but they are not meaningfully visible in the everyday life of the Thai people.

This article focuses on the consumers themselves and some of the surrounding groups connected to the fashion system. In the fashion system, various kinds of people and institutions are involved, such as



Figure 2. Photo—A signboard of a Japanese fashion shop



Figure 3. Photo—A store front of a Japanese fashion boutique

fashion colleges, students, designers, design houses, patternmakers, tailors, seamstresses, as well as fashion magazine editors, models, photographers, distributors, retailers, buyers, shops and consumers. But our aim is to delineate the *kawaii* fashion consumed by young Thai women, and it is not meant to incorporate the whole Thai fashion system.

The flux of *kawaii fashion* from Japan into Thailand was already observed from the late 1990s onwards. For instance, *atuzokogutsu* or thick-soled shoes, which are also called platform shoes, became very popular among Japanese young women in the late 1990s. But *atsuzokogutsu* raised the feet more than 10 cm off the ground, and it was not easy for young women to walk when they were wearing that type of shoes. Despite the difficulties associated with of walking in those shoes, *atsuzokogutsu* turned into a big boom in Japan, and there were many accidents which were caused by women stumbling as a

result of walking in *atsuzokogutsu*. These turned into social issues during that time.<sup>10</sup> The *atsuzokogutsu* boom was quick to spread in East Asian countries, and it also entered the youth culture of Thailand. In 2000, Uehara Masashi of *Nikkei Shimbun* reported that *atuzokogutsu* were very popular among young Thai women who were walking in *Siam Square*. In Japan, there is a famous fashion center in Tokyo, called Harajuku, and, in the report, Uehara said that *Siam Square* is the “Harajuku of Thailand,” and that Japanese youth culture would propagate to Thailand very quickly, as well as to Hong Kong and Taiwan.<sup>11</sup> A questionnaire study of Thai high school students, conducted in 2005, has also revealed that young Thai women like Japanese fashion. In the questionnaire results, 64.7% of all respondents, both male and female students, answered that they like Japanese fashion and 73.9% of female students said they like it.<sup>12</sup>

### **Kawaii Fashion in Thailand**

#### *Siam Square*—“Harajuku” in Bangkok

*Siam Square*, located next to *Chulalongkorn University* in Bangkok, is one of the most popular shopping areas for young Thais. After school hours on weekdays, there are many high school and university students walking around *Siam Square*; on weekends, the many young people who work on weekdays come to the area to enjoy shopping and dining with their friends. Today, shopping and entertainment facilities have been constructed in the areas surrounding *Siam Square*, and many tourists also visit the area to experience both shopping and entertainment. Since there are many small boutiques and clothing apparel shops in the area (Figure 4), and since we can observe many young women walking on the street dressed in fashionable clothing, many Japanese who visit *Siam Square* find similarities between the scenes of *Siam Square* and those of *Harajuku* in Tokyo.

For young women in Bangkok, *Siam Square* is not a mere shopping area, but it is also a venue where many scouts of the entertainment business search for future idols. Therefore, when those young women who wish to be discovered by scouts walk around the streets of *Siam Square*, they wear fashionable clothing, fashionable hair styles and also cosmetics which are readily available in the shops of *Siam Square*. Furthermore, their appearance, wearing Japanese fashion, probably encouraged other young women to come to *Siam Square* for shopping, and consequently Japanese fashion has become a trend in the area.

<sup>10</sup> Nakata, Keiko. (1995, July 20) Atuzoko sandaru: kinou yorimo kakkoyosa (Thick-soled sandals: coolness rather than functions). *Asahi Shimbun* (Evening), p. 2.; Asahi Shimbun. (1999, June 11) “Atuzoko sandaru” goyoujinwo: 2 wari ijou ga tentou keiken. Tandai kyouju ga chousa. [Be careful with “thick-soled sandals”: Junior college professor research revealed more than 20% have experience of tumbling down]. *Asahi Shimbun.*, p. 25.; Asahi Shimbun. (1999, September 2) Henshi: Atuzoko 10 cm sandaru deno tentou ga gen-in ka [Unnatural death: Stumbling by 10 cm thick-soled sandals?]. *Asahi Shimbun.*, p. 1.; Sims, Calvin. (1999, November 26) Tokyo Journal: Be tall and chic as you wobble to the orthopedist. *New York Times International.*, p.PA4.

<sup>11</sup> Uehara, Masashi. (2000, May 1) Tai no “harajuku”-atsuzokogutsu [“Harajuku” in Thailand—Thick-soled shoes]. *Nikkei Shimbun* (Evening), p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Toyoshima, Noboru. (2008) Longing for Japan: the consumption of Japanese cultural products in Thailand. *Sojourn*, 23(2), pp. 252–281.



**Figure 4.** Photo—A *kawaii* fashion shop in Siam Square

### *Japanese Fashion Magazines*

Two Japanese fashion magazines, *S-Cawaii!* and *Ray*, have both played an important role in popularizing Japanese fashion in Thailand, as they are two of the first Japanese fashion magazines to be translated and published in Thailand. *S-Cawaii!* and *Ray* are magazine brands which were originally published by Shufunotomo, Co., Ltd. in Japan. In fact, these magazines are not strictly categorized as “fashion magazines” by the Japanese publishing industry, since the category focuses on high fashion,<sup>13</sup> while *S-Cawaii!* and *Ray* contain information about casual fashion and cosmetics for young women. In other words, the former focuses on elite fashion and the latter focuses on *kawaii* fashion.

In 2004, Inspire Entertainment Co., Ltd. in Thailand started to publish the Thai version of *Cawaii!* (Figure 5), a monthly fashion magazine for young women under 20, which was the first Japanese magazine published in Thai (May 2004 Issue, published on April 15, 2004). Although *Cawaii!* has been a popular fashion magazine in some Asian countries and local versions have been published in China and Taiwan, due to the decrease in the number of copies bought in Japan, Shufunotomo Co., Ltd. discontinued the publication of *Cawaii!* in 2009 (the last issue was published in June 2009), and Inspire Entertainment Co., Ltd. switched the magazine name to *S-Cawaii!* (Figure 6) from the August 2009 issue (Issue No. 64) onwards.

*Ray* (Figure 7) is another fashion magazine that Shufunotomo Co., Ltd. is publishing in Japan. In addition to *Cawaii!*, whose target group was the under 20 audience, Inspire Entertainment started to publish *Ray*, which is for a readership audience of young people in their 20s, from the September 2006 Issue (published on August 25, 2006) onwards. *Ray* targets college students and female office workers in their 20s. The fashion style in *Ray* is described as “serebu kajuaru” (the literal translation of which is “celebrity casual”), and the articles in the magazine are not only about fashion and cosmetics, but they

<sup>13</sup> c.f. Moeran, Brian. (2004) A Japanese discourse of fashion and taste. *Fashion theory*. Vol 8(2), pp. 37–38.



Figure 5. The first issue of Cawaii Magazine (Thai ver.)



Figure 6. The cover of S-Cawaii magazine (Thai ver.)





Figure 7. The first issue of the fashion magazine *Ray* (Thai ver.)

also cover topics that interest and concern the age group it targets. The Thai versions *Ray* and *S-Cawaii!* are sold at a price of 90 Baht (US\$2.70) and the circulation of each magazine is 120,000. These fashion magazines have surely been playing an important role in diffusing *kawaii* fashion in Thailand, as they are not just magazines, but they also introduced the system of amateur models to Thailand.

As intermediaries between producer and consuming public, fashion magazines exist to teach the lay public why fashion should be important in their lives, what the latest trends may be, who are the names that drive them and where the clothes themselves may be purchased. In other words, they legitimate fashion and the fashion world in cultural terms.<sup>14</sup>

As Moeran points out, fashion magazines act as ‘mediators’ between producers and consumers, which serve the important function of developing fashion in society. Both producers and consumers of fashion communicate through fashion magazines.<sup>15</sup> In that regard, the birth of Japanese fashion magazines in Thailand was a milestone in the development of Japanese fashion in Thailand. But in the case of Japanese fashion magazines, they are not just mediators, but they also seem to play a role in moder-

<sup>14</sup> Moeran, Brian. (2006) More than just a fashion magazine. *Current sociology*. Vol 54(4)., pp. 737–738.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 737–738.

ating the communication. In order to help explain the function of fashion magazines, therefore, I will explain briefly the role of Japanese fashion magazines in Japan, which has made Japanese young women participate in the production of *kawaii* fashion.

In Japan, *kawaii* fashion is diffused and spread through the mass media, especially through fashion magazines, and by models and actresses who appear on magazines and on television. Since the 1990s, Japanese fashion magazines for young women started to use amateur models on their pages, amateur models who were discovered walking along the streets of *Harajuku* or *Shibuya* (with well-coordinated fashionable clothing) when their photographs were taken. These amateur models are called “dokumo” (abbreviated form of “dokusha moderu”) which literally means “(magazine) reader model.” Although there was no remuneration for dokumos in the beginning, some of them have become very popular with the readers of the magazines and have started to work as professional models. Among those professional models, some of them have stepped into work as actresses. The success story of an ordinary girl becoming a dokumo and starting a career as an actress has attracted many young women in Japan. Today, famous fashion magazines regularly hold auditions for dokumo; even fashion magazines for children have auditions, and hundreds of primary school girls apply for an audition. One of the important factors to pass an audition to become a dokumo is the applicant’s fashion sense, because the applicant will have photographs taken while wearing her own clothes and accessories at the audition venue.

With the “dokumo” system of fashion magazines, *kawaii* fashion is now produced by the same young Japanese women who are consumers of clothes and accessories; they are also the producers of the fashion trend. Unlike high fashion, which is created and supplied by elite designers and large fashion brand names, *kawaii* fashion has been created by the dokumos who are chosen from the magazine readers based on their fashion sense and their physical appearance; subsequently, the dokumos became the fashion leaders.

When the idea of the publication of Japanese fashion magazines was imported into Thailand, the editorial office in Thailand adopted the dokumo system. Although there are many ways to become models and actresses in Thailand, such as beauty contests, talent contests, modeling contests, and some other types of contests sponsored by cosmetic or fashion product companies, the Japanese dokumo system has opened up yet another way to enter the world of show business, which can be tried simply by sending the appropriate application form to the editorial offices (Figure 8). Also, these magazines sometimes hold beauty contests such as “Cawaii Girls Contest” in *Siam Square*, and, according to the report of the Nation, an English-language newspaper in Thailand, the venue of the event temporarily becomes “Little Japan.”<sup>16</sup>

The dokumo system and the beauty contests are important, not because they recruit new fashion models, but because their activities raise awareness about *kawaii* fashion among the magazine readers.

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<sup>16</sup> The Nation. (2005, May 29). Teen cuties celebrate a first. *The Nation*. Bangkok: Nation Multimedia.

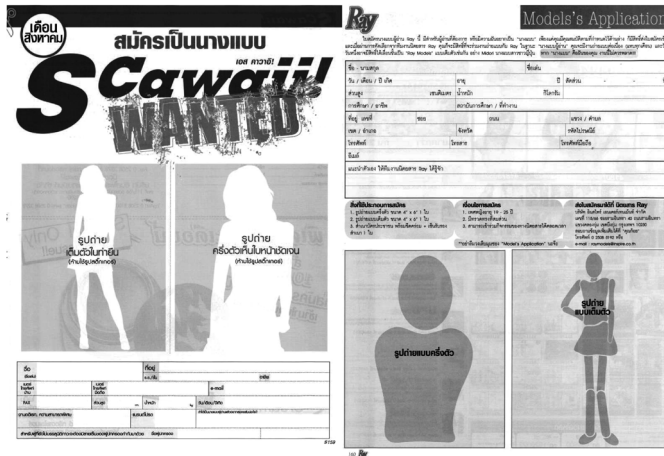


Figure 8. A model application form in a fashion magazine

The publication of Japanese fashion magazines in Thailand and starting to recruit magazine models, or dokumos for the magazines should have contributed in making young Thai women more interested in *kawaii* fashion and more conscious about their own clothing and cosmetics.

*Japanese Fashion through Other Forms of Media*

In addition to the fashion magazines from Japan, young Thai women are exposed to *kawaii* fashion through other kinds of media such as television programs and J-Pop music. Since the 1990s, many Japanese television dramas have been broadcast in Thailand. For example, as shown in the Table 1, more than 50 Japanese dramas have been broadcast by ITV PCL (Public Company Ltd.) from the 1990s through to March 2006. All of the dramas were contemporary; the lifestyles of contemporary Japan and the new fashion at the time were shown within the stories. While watching these dramas, Thai audiences have been exposed to Japanese fashion and cosmetics through the lifestyles of the heroines. This is thought to have stimulated consumers to be interested in Japanese fashion clothing.

... the popular music and fashion industries are regarded as sharing a close relationship: popular music is taken to play a powerful role in 'shop-windowing' and selling clothes (with certain rock and pop stars regarded as 'fashion leaders') and, in return, clothing has been viewed as a central part of how popular music signifies.<sup>17</sup>

The influx of music from Japan has also introduced fashion styles which are related to the music. In the 1990s, some of Japanese rock bands such as *Lucifer*, *X-Japan* and *Luna Sea*, have become popular among some music fans in Thailand and the fans of these bands were exposed to rock fashion. Rock

<sup>17</sup> McLaughlin, Noel. (2000) Rock, fashion and performativity. In Bruzzi, Stella and Gibson, Pamela Church (eds.), *Fashion cultures: theories, explorations and analysis*. London: Routledge., p. 264.

**Table 1.** Japanese drama broadcast by ITV (-June 2006)

Drama Titles (English)	Drama Titles (Japanese)	
With Love	With Love	Fuji
Beach Boys	ビーチボーイズ	Fuji
Love 2000	二千年の恋	Fuji
Over Time	Over Time	Fuji
Precious ime	神様、もう少しだけ	Fuji
GTO	GTO	Fuji
Ring Saishusho	リング 最終章	Fuji
Anchor Woman	ニュースの女	Fuji
Ice World	氷の世界	Fuji
Power Office Girls 1	ショムニ 1	Fuji
Sweet Daddy	世界で一番パパが好き	Fuji
Power Office Girls 2	ショムニ 2	Fuji
Beach Boys Special	ビーチボーイズ スペシャル	Fuji
GTO Special	GTO スペシャル	Fuji
Love Generation	Love Generation	Fuji
Long Vacation	Long Vacation	Fuji
Imagine	イマジン	Fuji
The Sun Shines Forever	太陽は沈まない	Fuji
Love Complex	ラブコンプレックス	Fuji
Give Me Your Love	愛をください	Fuji
Brand	ブランド	Fuji
Fighting Girl	ファイティングガール	Fuji
Shotgun Marriage	できちゃった結婚	Fuji
Antique	アンティーク 西洋骨董洋菓子店	Fuji
Love Revolution	ラブレボリューション	Fuji
Yamatonadeshiko	やまとなでしこ	Fuji
Power Office Girls Final	ショムニ ファイナル	Fuji
My Husband	ムコ殿	Fuji
The Queen of Lunchtime Cuisine	ランチの女王	Fuji
Artificial Beauty	整形美人	Fuji
Power of Love	恋ノチカラ	Fuji
Hero	Hero	Fuji
The Beauty or the Beast	美女か野獣	Fuji
Always the Two of Us	いつもふたりで	Fuji
Searching for my polestar	天体観測	Fuji
Long Love Letter	ロング・ラブレター 漂流教室	Fuji
Double Score	ダブルスコア	Fuji
Be Nice to People	人にやさしく	Fuji
My Husband 2003	ムコ殿2003	Fuji
Animal Doctor	動物のお医者さん	TV Asahi
Daddy	おとうさん	TBS
Good Luck!	グッドラック!	TBS
Golden Bowl	ゴールデンボウル	NTV
Remote	リモート	NTV
Orange Days	オレンジデイズ	TBS
My Madonna	僕だけのマドンナ	Fuji
Water Boys 2	ウォーターボーイズ2	Fuji
Crying Out Love at Center of the World	世界の中心で、愛をさけぶ	TBS
You Are My Pet	きみはペット	TBS
Nurseman	ナースマン	NTV
Nurseman Ga Yuku	ナースマンがゆく	NTV
Dragon Sakura	ドラゴン桜	TBS
Pride	プライド	Fuji
Brother Beat	ブラザー☆ビート	TBS
Nobuta Wo Produce	野ブタをプロデュース	NTV

\* NTV = Nippon Television Network Corporation., TBS = Tokyo Broadcasting System Television, Inc.

\* Fuji = Fuji Television Network, Inc., TV Asahi = TV Asahi Corporation

Source: JETRO (March 2007)

fashion has not become popular in Thailand, however, as the number of the Japanese rock music fans was limited, and the related leather fashion clothes were not suitable to be worn in the warm Thai climate. In the late 1990s, when *Morning Musume* and other female idols became popular in Japan, both their music and their *kawaii* fashion were imported to Thailand, and many young Thai women were

exposed to such fashion through the idols.

It is difficult to establish a direct causal relationship between exposure to Japanese fashion through the consumption of television and music media and the actual consumption of *kawaii* fashion, as many other Japanese cultural products are intermingled with the above factors to make the young Thai women interested in *kawaii* fashion. However, it is important to note that many Thai women are exposed to Japanese fashion over and over when they watch television programs and when they see Japanese idols and actresses wearing Japanese fashion. In 1968, the social psychologist Robert B. Zajonc published an article on “mere exposure effect”; the general hypothesis of the effect is that “mere repeated exposure of the individual to a stimulus is a sufficient condition for the enhancement of his attitude toward it”<sup>18</sup> (Zajonc, 1968: 1). Applying the Zajonc’s theory, we can explain the repetitive exposure of young Thai women to Japanese fashion in various media have caused their favorable attitude toward Japanese fashion.

### *Japanese women in Thailand*

The presence of Japanese residents in Thailand is also an influential factor in diffusing Japanese fashion in the country. According to the Embassy of Japan in Thailand, there are 45,805 (30,334 male and 15,471 female) registered Japanese nationals living in Thailand, as of October 1, 2009.<sup>19</sup> As shown in Table 2, more than 70% of Japanese nationals live in Bangkok. In addition to the Japanese residents, there are many Japanese tourists in Thailand. In 2007, statistics showed that 1,277,638 Japanese nationals visited Thailand as tourists.<sup>20</sup> Compared to those Japanese nationals who have been living in Thailand for many years, we can assume that tourists who come to Thailand directly from Japan wear Japanese fashion, since most of the spare clothes in their luggage would have been bought in Japan, which is a part of Japanese fashion. Wearing Japanese fashion clothing, these tourists usually visit major sightseeing places in Thailand such as Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Phuket, and Samui but some of them also visit small towns and villages on the outskirts of those big cities, so the people in the countryside also have a chance to see Japanese tourists wearing Japanese fashion.

Harumi Befu discusses the dispersal of Japanese citizens around the world which has resulted from Japan’s economic globalization through analyzing the Japanese “diaspora” with the terms “non-permanent” and “permanent” sojourners,<sup>21</sup> which suggests the importance of Japanese sojourners’ presence in other countries in understanding the global context of Japan outside Japan. The phenomena that we

<sup>18</sup> Zajonc, Robert B. (1968) Attitudinal effects of mere exposure. *Journal of personality and social psychology monograph supplement*. 9(2), Part 2. (June 1968), p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Embassy of Japan in Thailand. (2010) Kaigai zairyū houjinsū toukei (Annual statistics on Japanese nationals overseas). Retrieved on February 6, 2010 from the Embassy of Japan in Thailand Web site <http://www.th.emb-japan.go.jp/jp/consular/zairyu09.htm>

<sup>20</sup> Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT). (n.d.) *International tourist arrivals to Thailand by nationality and mode of transport* (2007—January–December). Retrieved on February 6, 2010 from TAT Web site [http://www2.tat.or.th/stat/web/static\\_index.php](http://www2.tat.or.th/stat/web/static_index.php)

<sup>21</sup> Befu, Harumi. (2001) The global context of Japan outside Japan. In Befu, Harumi & Guichard-Anguis, Silvie (eds.) *Globalizing Japan: ethnography of the Japanese presence in Asia, Europe, and America*. London: Routledge., pp. 5–9.

**Table 2.** Japanese nationals in Thailand (by area of residence)

	Number	Percent
Bangkok	33,152	72.4%
Chonburi	3,264	7.1%
Chiang Mai	2,442	5.3%
Pathumtani	998	2.2%
Ayutthaya	860	1.9%
Samut Prakan	662	1.4%
Phuket	584	1.3%
Nonthaburi	466	1.0%
Nakhon Ratchasima	401	0.9%
Prachinburi	375	0.8%
Rayong	362	0.8%
Chiang Rai	327	0.7%
Nakhon Pathom	174	0.4%
Khon Kaen	145	0.3%
Phayao	107	0.2%
Others	1,486	3.2%
Total	45,805	100.0%

As of October 1, 2009

Source: Embassy of Japan in Thailand. (2010) *Kaigai zairyû houjinsû toukei*.

can observe in the everyday life of the Thai people suggest that the presence of Japanese nationals has had a positive influence on the attitude of the Thai people toward Japanese fashion and other Japanese cultural products.

#### *Sailor Uniforms from Anime*

In the formal educational system in Thailand, students are required to wear school uniforms specified by each school. For example, female university students usually wear white short-sleeved blouses, black mini-skirts and sandals, while female secondary school students usually wear short-sleeved blouses (various colors), dark blue or black skirts, white socks and black shoes. Male university students wear white long-sleeved shirts, black trousers, white socks and black shoes, while male secondary school students wear short-sleeved shirts (various colors), black or brown short trousers, white socks and shoes. The colors and designs vary at each school, but the simple combination of top and bottom wear is the basic school uniform in Thailand.

Since the early 2000s in Bangkok, however, we have sometimes been seeing female students in “sailor-style” uniforms, which seem similar to the school uniforms in Japanese secondary schools. These students are the students of private vocational schools in Thailand, as some schools started to change the uniform design in order to attract students by offering *kawaii* uniforms. A news article on the Internet in 2005 reported that there were about 400 vocational schools in Thailand, and about 90 of



**Figure 9.** Photo—Female students wearing sailor uniforms at *Varatip Business College*

those vocational schools have changed the style of their school uniforms, while 30 more schools were planning to change the uniform style in the course of the following year.<sup>22</sup> The article pointed out that some of the private vocational schools in Thailand were suffering a decrease in number of students, and they felt they were forced to take such measures to try and increase numbers of students.

In 2002, *Varatip Business College* changed its uniform design to the Japanese style “sailor uniform,” and it is said to have been the first school to adopt it in Thailand. When I visited *Varatip Business College* in September 2009, Wilairath Meelomsakda, the School Principal, told me that the design of the former uniform was no different from the design of the uniform at other vocational schools, and the school decided to create a new uniform design, so that the students would be proud of their uniforms.<sup>23</sup>

*Varatip Business College* is categorized as a vocational school in Thailand, but it actually has two different courses in the school, namely “por wor chor” and “por wor sor,” the former course is a high school course (Grades 10 to 12) and the latter is a two year college course. There are about 600 students in the school studying computer, accounting and marketing. In *Varatip Business College*, there are about 100 male students who wear ordinary Thai school uniforms, but the design of the female students was changed from 2002 onwards; suddenly, the number of students increased by 70% within one year. The new uniform (Figure 9), the set of a shirt, a ribbon and a skirt, costs about 1,200 Baht (US\$36), while the former uniform set cost only about 600 Baht (US\$18). Meelomsakda told me that the parents, as well as students themselves, like the design of the uniform very much.<sup>24</sup>

The sailor uniform is a symbol of female secondary school students in Japan, but the origin of the

<sup>22</sup> Thaiokoku.com. (2005, August 2) Nihonfū no seifukusaiyou de, tai no bunka houkai no kiki (Crisis of cultural collapse by adoption of Japanese style school uniform). *Thaiokoku.com*. Retrieved on February 10, 2010 from [http://www.thaiokoku.com/news\\_topics/20050802/20050802.html](http://www.thaiokoku.com/news_topics/20050802/20050802.html)

<sup>23</sup> Personal communication, 2009, September 3.

<sup>24</sup> Personal communication, 2009, September 3.

sailor style uniform derives from the uniform designed for the UK Navy in 1857. The design was adopted by UK naval schools, and it thereafter quickly spread to many secondary schools in Europe. The sailor style uniforms were worn in European schools from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century until World War II.<sup>25</sup> Opinion was divided on the first introduction of the sailor uniform to Japan but the oldest record regarding this is in 1920, when *Heian Jogakuin* (St. Agnes' School) in Kyoto changed its uniform from the "hakama" (Japanese kimono style, currently worn by female university students at graduation ceremonies) to the western "sailor style" uniform.<sup>26</sup> Today, more than 50% of female students attending junior high schools and more than 20% of female students attending senior high schools in Japan wear the sailor style uniforms.<sup>27</sup>

It is very important to note that the sailor style uniforms appear in some of the popular manga and anime, where the story relates to lives at school. In many anime and manga, the heroes and heroines wear school uniforms and many of the heroines wear sailor style uniforms, although many female high school students wear blazer-coat style uniforms these days. In my observation, during the past two decades, the value of the sailor uniform as *kawaii* fashion has been elevated considerably. In the 1990s, after the collapse of the economic bubble in Japan, female high school students started to wear sailor style uniforms by making the skirts look shorter and by coordinating uniforms with vests, sweaters, mufflers and so on, so that they could look cute and active. Although most secondary schools in Japan had regulations stipulating the lengths of the skirts (and other restrictions regarding students' clothing), female high school students changed their appearance to try to look cute by rolling up their skirts to look like mini-skirts when they were outside the scope of the supervision of their teachers. Today, the sailor style uniform is the pride of female high school students in Japan, and the fashion style is a common symbol of female students in manga and anime.

"The uniform influences wearers themselves; everyone with whom they interact is an other who proffers the same mirror. Since no other statuses, nor any touch of individuality, are recognized in the uniformed individual by others, wearers are encouraged to act primarily as occupants of their uniformed status."<sup>28</sup>

In Japan, the status of female high school students has changed over time. In the past, the status that the sailor style uniform afforded a high school student implied that she was immature and childish, requiring them to obey the adults' orders and instructions. However, in the last few decades, the status of the female high school students has been raised to that of a trend leader and 'the concept "a high-

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<sup>25</sup> Sano, Katsuhiko. (n.d.) Gakkou seifuku toshiteno sêrâ fuku (Sailor uniform as school uniform). *Tombow Co., Ltd. Web Site*. Retrieved on February 11, 2010 from [http://www.tombow.gr.jp/uniform\\_museum/pocket/no003.html](http://www.tombow.gr.jp/uniform_museum/pocket/no003.html)

<sup>26</sup> Sano, *op. cit.*; Heian Jogakuin. (n.d.) Seifuku no rekishi nit suite (About the history of the uniform). *Heian Jogakuin Web Site*. Retrieved on February 11, 2010 from <http://www.heian.ac.jp/head/about/uniform.php>

<sup>27</sup> Sano, *op. cit.*

<sup>28</sup> Joseph, *op. cit.*, p. 74.



school girl” had itself become a kind of unofficial brand label’,<sup>29</sup> especially in fashion, and items that become popular among them will turn into big business. Today, female high school students know that many of the companies producing apparel, cosmetics, accessories and so on pay attention to the activities of female high school students, and the students thus become proud of wearing the sailor style uniform, the symbol of a female high school student in Japan.<sup>30</sup>

The designs of Japanese style sailor uniforms in Thai vocational schools do not seem to be copied directly from Japanese *kawaii* fashion, as they look more similar to the designs of the costumes of the heroines depicted in anime and manga, which are more elaborate and exaggerated, compared to the real sailor style uniforms in real schools in Japan. Nevertheless, the parents and the teachers, as well as the students, accept the Japanese style design as the school uniform. The positive attitudes of the students and parents in Thailand towards adopting the uniform are probably supported by their longing for *kawaii* fashion and other cultural products from Japan. The need for vocational schools to attract more students, together with the popularity of the Japanese cultural products, such as manga, anime and fashion, have all combined to bring the sailor style uniform to the scenes of everyday life in Thailand.

### ***Kawaii* Fashion for the Thai women (Concluding Remarks)**

#### *Similarities and Differences*

The fashion that I have discussed in this article has its origin in America and Europe; Japan also adopted it more than 100 years ago. Over the years of familiarizing with non-traditional clothing brought to Japan, consumers as well as fashion designers in Japan have learned to customize and make clothing with the same innovational skills and passions that Japan has shown its talent for in producing industrial products. Miller points out that “Japanese fashion innovations are not the surface emulation of any specific foreign trend, but are based on a selection of items from different eras, places, and cultures.”<sup>31</sup> Young Japanese women seem to be good at creating and putting together an ensemble by borrowing fashion items from various cultures and various eras—the result is Japanese *kawaii* fashion. During the last few decades, when the consumption of fashion products by young women started to become very active in Japan and the fashion product companies have alongside with them, fashion has turned into big business and it started to be disseminated throughout other Asian countries, especially East Asia.

Having observing the popularity of Japanese fashion in Thailand for several years, I found that one of the most important reasons for young Thai women to prefer Japanese fashion is that there are similarities in physical appearance between Japanese and Thai people. Japanese and Thai people, being Asian in origin, share some similar physical features such as skin shading, colors of eyes and hair, body size, skeletal structure and also facial characteristics, which is often explained as their being “culturally

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<sup>29</sup> Kinsella, Sharon. (2002) What’s behind the fetishism of Japanese school uniforms? *Fashion Theory*. Volume 6, Issue 2., p. 229.

<sup>30</sup> See also Larimer, Tim. (1999) She’s a material girl. *Time*. May 3–May 10, 1999., pp. 28–31.

<sup>31</sup> Miller, Laura. (2003) Youth fashion and changing beautification practices. In Mathews, Gordon and White, Bruce (eds.), *Japan’s changing generations: Are young people creating a new society?* London: Routledge Curzon., p. 83.

proximate” in Cultural Studies discourses.<sup>32</sup> For example, when a Thai woman looks at the page of a European fashion magazine, fashion that a European model wears may look good in the magazine. However, when a Thai woman wears the same fashion as a European model in the magazine, she may look very different from the fashion image that she saw in the fashion magazine due to the difference in physical features. Thus, I hypothesize that young Thai women choose Japanese fashion because it looks good on Thai women due to the similarities in physical appearance.

Although this hypothesis has not been tested by formal research methods, many of my informants who are young Thai women agreed to this point. Furthermore, when I talked about my hypothesis during the interview with Kamata Katsuji, the educational advisor of the *Bunka Fashion Academy* (Bangkok), he agreed with my point by saying “that’s what our students also say about Japanese fashion.”<sup>33</sup> In 2003, *Asahi Shimbun* reported rapid increase in the export of cosmetics from Japan to Asian countries, and the Yokohama Customs department deduced that the reason for the increase was the underlying popularity of Japanese fashion in Taiwan and Hong Kong, and the similarities of facial features as “Orientals” would make it easier for women in other Asian countries to imitate Japanese women.<sup>34</sup> Befu also points out that physical and biological similarity between Japanese and neighboring Asians as one of the reasons for the popularity of Japanese cosmetics and of Japanese-designed clothes in Asian countries.<sup>35</sup>

Japanese *kawaii* fashion has become popular among young Thai women, but it does not mean that everything about Japanese fashion has been accepted by the Thai people. In the questionnaire study of Thai high school students, conducted in 2005, some of the students wrote negative comments about Japanese fashion in the free space on the questionnaire sheets, such as “Japanese fashion exposes women’s bodies too much.”<sup>36</sup> One of the informants for my research in Thailand, who is a student of *Chulalongkorn University*, also wrote in her e-mail that Japanese fashion is sometimes “too much” for the Thai people.<sup>37</sup> These comments may also reflect the opinion of the elder Thai people, which can be found in mass media, on Japanese fashion. For example, a well known Thai teacher “*Archan May*,” who is the President of Rattanaabundit University, exhorted the deviance of the Japanese sailor style uniform from traditional Thai culture, by pointing out the short skirts and blouses which fits too tightly are unseemly and show the bodyline of a student.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Iwabuchi, Koichi. (2002) *Recentring globalization: popular culture and Japanese transnationalism*. Durham: Duke University Press., pp. 147–157.

<sup>33</sup> Personal communication, 2009, September 1.

<sup>34</sup> *Asahi Shimbun*. (2003, January 17) Memoto keshouhin no yushutsu zouka—nihon no oshare ajia de ninki (The export of the eye cosmetics increased—the popularity of Japanese fashion in Asia). *Asahi Shimbun*., p. 35.

<sup>35</sup> Befu, Harumi. (2003) Globalization theory from the bottom up: Japan’s contribution. *Japanese studies*. 28(1), p. 7.

<sup>36</sup> Toyoshima, *op. cit.*

<sup>37</sup> Personal communication, 2010, January 30.

<sup>38</sup> *Thaikoku.com, op. cit.*

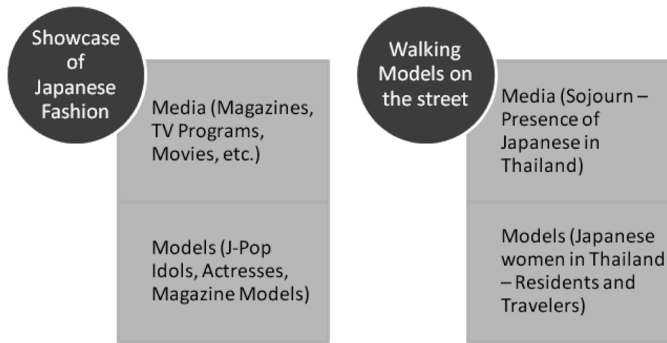


Figure 10. The poster of JUNKO KOSHINO's talk show

### *Abundance of Japanese Fashion*

As we have seen in this article, there are many factors that promote consumption and the dissemination of Japanese fashion in Thailand. Various kinds of events, conventions and exhibitions are held in Thailand to promote Japanese fashion and culture by the Japanese government as well as commercial enterprises. In February 2010, “Nihon Kawaii Fair” was held in *Central World Plaza* and *Isetan Department Store* in Bangkok, which was operated by the *Small and Medium Enterprise Agency* and sponsored by the *Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry* (METI) of Japan, to promote Japanese cute products, accessories and so on.<sup>39</sup> As we have already seen, the first *Kawaii Festa* in March 2009 was sponsored by the Embassy of Japan and the Japan Foundation which also organized a talk show by

<sup>39</sup> Newsclip.be. (2010) Bankoku de nihon kawaii feâ (Japan Kawaii fair in Bangkok). *Newsclip.be*. Retrieved on February 14, 2010 from [http://www.newsclip.be/news/2010212\\_026611.html](http://www.newsclip.be/news/2010212_026611.html); METI (Ministry of Economic, Trade and Industry). (2009) *Heisei 21 nendo chiiki sanpin no ajia chûtou shijou charenji shien jigyou (A subsidy program for making inroads to the Asia and the Middle East markets with local products—2009)*. Retrieved on February 14, 2010 from <http://www.chusho.meti.go.jp/keiei/shokibo/2009/090731ChiikiSanpinAsiaMiddleEastChallenge.htm>



**Figure 11.** The exposure to Japanese fashion in Thailand

JUNKO KOSHINO, a leading Japanese fashion designer, in Bangkok, in August 2009.<sup>40</sup>

For the Thai people, especially young Thai women, exposure to Japanese fashion is abundant in Thailand, as we have seen that the mass media, such as fashion magazines, television programs, and movies, are playing a showcase role, and Japanese residents and travelers in Thailand are the walking fashion models of Japanese fashion (Figure 11). Today, as many clothing products of Japanese fashion design are made in Thailand, consumers can buy clothes at reasonable prices in *Siam Square* and other places while the middle and upper classes travel to Japan to visit *Harajuku* and *Shibuya* to buy famous *kawaii* fashion brands.

### *Selective Consumption*

Although Japanese fashion is popular in Thailand, Thai people choose clothing to wear from the large influx of Japanese fashion, based on natural and social criteria. First, the climate of Thailand rules out winter clothes as the country has no cold season. In fact, high-class department stores carry some winter clothes, such as down jackets, winter coats and other items for people who travel abroad, but these items are not consumed for the use in the country. Most of the *kawaii* fashion clothes sold in *Siam Square* are spring and summer dresses. It is also important to note that Thai people don't have color images for specific seasons because of the absence of autumn and winter. They prefer to wear clothes with warm, pastel or vivid colors, which are colors, often used for spring and summer clothing in Japan. On the other hand, Thai people tend not to select brown, dark brown or black clothes, even though they may be *kawaii* fashion in Japan.

The ubiquitous nature of dress would seem to point to the fact that dress or adornment is one of the means by which bodies are made social and given meaning and identity. The individual and very personal act of getting dressed is an act of preparing the body for the social world,

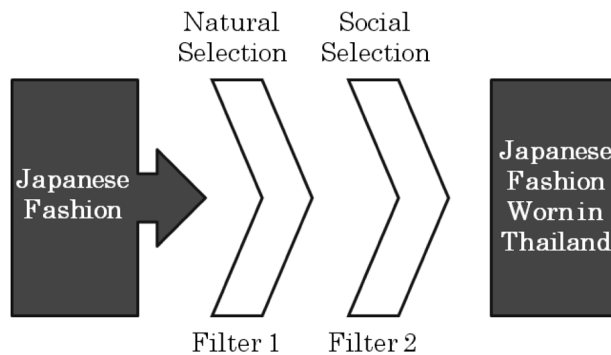
<sup>40</sup> Japan Foundation. (n.d.) *Art & Culture 2009: "Mode et Construction" Special Talk and Film Show by JUNKO KOSHINO World-famous Japanese Fashion Designer*. Retrieved on February 21, 2009 from [http://www.jfbkk.or.th/2009/art\\_culture\\_20090813.php3](http://www.jfbkk.or.th/2009/art_culture_20090813.php3); see Figure 10.

making it appropriate, acceptable, indeed respectable and possibly even desirable also.<sup>41</sup>

No one finds difficulty in assenting to the commonplace that the greater part of the expenditure incurred by all classes for apparel is incurred for the sake of a respectable appearance rather than for the protection of the person.<sup>42</sup>

Second, social pressure restricts what kind of clothes young Thai women can wear in public places. Craik notes that clothes are an index of codes and display, restraint, self-control, and affect-transformation.<sup>43</sup> The inappropriateness of Japanese fashion clothing, which was pointed out by some of the respondents in the high school questionnaire research, are likely to reflect the opinion of their parents' generation about Japanese fashion. Although the majority of female high school students expressed a positive attitude toward Japanese fashion, the older generation in society warned them to select carefully what to wear. Also, criticisms of the sailor style uniform by some of the Thai older generation pose the question "What clothing is appropriate as a Thai?"

Woodhouse wrote that 'we expect men to dress to "look like" men and women to "look like" women'<sup>44</sup> although in contemporary societies around the world, some men dress like women and some women dress like men, while some people dress in uni-sex clothing. According to the norms and values of each culture of the time, what is appropriate as far as clothing is concerned is constantly changing. Kawamura points out that "dress attempts to balance two contradictory aims: it focuses our attractions and at the same time protects our modesty."<sup>45</sup> Regarding Japanese fashion, the young Thai women tend to choose clothing based on the attractions of *kawaii* fashion, and the older generations brake the drive; the fine balance of the two powers which are at play lead young Thai women select



**Figure 12.** The process of selective consumption of Japanese fashion

<sup>41</sup> Entwistle, Joanne. (2000) *The fashioned body: fashion, dress, and modern social theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press., p. 7.

<sup>42</sup> Veblen, Thorstein. (1994) *The theory of the leisure class*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., p. 103.

<sup>43</sup> Craik, Jennifer. (1994) *The face of fashion: cultural studies in fashion*. London: Routledge, p. 10.

<sup>44</sup> Woodhouse, Annie. (1989) *Fantastic women: sex, gender and transvestism*. London: Macmillan., p.ix.

<sup>45</sup> Kawamura (2005), *op. cit.*, pp. 5–6.



Figure 13. Photo—"Lolita fashion" sold at "Akiba Kiss"

items of clothing from Japanese fashion that are acceptable in Thailand.

In the selective consumption, Japanese fashion which is actually worn by Thai women is filtered by the selection processes (Figure 12). It is important to note that Thai women choose which clothing to wear based on these two criteria, namely the natural environment and social norms, before they actually wear it.

The positive attitude of Thai women towards Japanese *kawaii* fashion (Figure 13) has been a result of the combined influence from the various factors that I discussed in this article. In addition to these factors which are directly related to fashion, the rigorous consumption of other Japanese cultural products expose the Thai youth to Japanese cultural products and commodities, and the trend of consuming Japanese cultural products at the same time drives the consumption of Japanese fashion in Thailand. Yet we know that fashion trend is ambivalent and constantly changing, we also do not know how long the popularity of Japanese fashion will last. In the near future, when more Thai designers start producing their own apparel brands, a Thai version of *kawaii* fashion may even overwhelm the Japanese fashion and may be exported to Japan and become a factor which influences Japanese *kawaii* fashion.