

JAPAN, THE U.S. AND THE GLOBALIZATION OF CHILDREN'S CONSUMER CULTURE

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Mattel Toys recently discovered that it no longer had to produce Barbie dolls with Asian features and clothes. With the opening of Eastern Europe in the 1990s to aggressive marketing and the growing identity of the commercially-savvy young in many third world countries, Mattel was able to sell Barbies in about 140 countries by 1997, but did so by assuming the dress and physical look of forty nationalities. However, in 2002, market testing led an official from Mattel to proclaim: "Blond Barbie sells just as well in Asia as in the U.S." No longer, did the \$55 billion global industry in children's playthings have to manufacture different toys for children in different countries. This, of course, is a boon for companies who now seem to be able to orchestrate global merchandising of identical games, dolls, and toys. And so "Mattel's Rapunzel Barbie, whose ankle-length blonde locks cascade down her pink ball gown" was released late in 2001 in 59 countries including the U.S.—"the company's biggest product launch ever," reported the *Wall Street Journal*, with TV ads broadcast in 35 languages and quickly selling \$200 million of the dolls, almost half outside the U.S.¹

The phenomenon of dark-haired girls in East Asia selecting blond-haired Barbie dolls might suggest the remarkable marketing power wielded by Mattel. It may even be a reflection of U.S. cultural imperialism, with girls in Korea or Japan concluding that European blond hair is more attractive or even superior to their own dark hair. But there is no evidence for this view, and instead this case may illustrate a more complex dynamic of globalization of children's culture that has been developing for several decades.

For one thing, the flow of toys across the Pacific Ocean is not unidirectional. Toys produced in Japan, for example, have become popular in the United States (and world-wide) with no modification. The Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers are one example. The televised version of the Rangers on the Fox Children's Network did make some changes to accommodate programmers' belief that the U.S. market required one more female ranger (for a total of two out of five), and African-American and Hispanic actors played two of the male roles. The toy action figures sold in the U.S., however, were the same as their Japanese counterparts. Marketing supervisors Murakami Katsumi bragged that "we had enough confidence in our products to bring them to the American market unchanged. We knew that they would appeal to kids in America just as they had to kids in Japan—and we were right."²

More fundamentally, the cultural imperialism argument fails because Japan has hardly been dominated by foreign values and products during the late twentieth century. Certainly Japan imported much foreign culture, but always on its own terms. As Mary Yoko Brannen points out in the context of analyzing Tokyo Disneyland, "The process of assimilation of the West, the recontextualization of Western simulacra, demonstrates not that the Japanese are being dominated by

Western ideologies but that they differentiate their identity from the West in a way that reinforces their sense of their own cultural uniqueness and superiority, or what we might call Japanese hegemony."³ Tokyo Disneyland is immensely popular in Japan in part because its overseas origins confer on it a sense of the exotic. Blond dolls also tap into a Japanese curiosity about foreigners, but not a sense of inferiority to them.

Underlying this story is a more subtle trend—the linkage of modern children's consumer culture with the globalization of the design and manufacture of innovative products. It is not merely that the American makers of Barbie have swept away traditional dolls and local culture, but the plaything industry across the world has become integrated, with design centered in the U.S. and Japan and production based in China. This particular configuration may be of recent origin, but dolls and toys have long been objects of international trade. Playthings have long roots in local folk cultures and crafts, and regional and national traditions of toy and doll making have long reinforced ethnic and local identities in children. But the construction of modern childhood over the past century especially has paralleled the decline of these craft traditions and the emergence of a global children's commercial culture.

Origins of a Global Playthings' Industry

In Europe, specialized toy-making centers emerged as early as the sixteenth century in and around the small German towns of Sonneberg and Erzebirge as well in the Groeden Valley in South Tyrol where families carved distinctive wooden animals and dolls in their cottages for an extensive European market. From 1578, craftspeople from Nuremberg produced toy animals from tin and in the eighteenth century, Nuremberg became a center for cheap tin toy armies and the "Nuremberg Kitchen," a precursor of the modern doll's house. Gradually, German toy-making became a well-organized trade across Europe. At first, peddlers sold handcrafted toys at fairs and door to door. Later, merchants centered in Nuremberg gained control over these traveling salesmen and forced village artisans to adopt uniform designs and to specialize.⁴

Toy makers in Britain and France also specialized for the international market. By 1800, for example, small-scale English manufacturers from the Black Country were producing cheap musical instruments, soldiers, and animals out of wood and tin. Paris became a center for high-quality hand-crafted automata and porcelain dolls in the 19th century. But, after 1860 German manufacturers prevailed over British and French competitors with aggressive marketing that targeted regional cultural differences and appealed to a broad middle class (with military miniatures of the emerging naval arms race and whimsical wind-up toys). By 1900, Germany was by far the world's greatest producer of toys, making two-thirds of the dolls for Europe and exporting 75 percent of its output.⁵

German and French toy-makers found new, cheaper materials and new techniques to broaden their markets. Paper dolls appeared in England and the German states in the 1790s, offering a low cost version of the three-dimensional fashion doll. By 1850 papier mâché and "India" rubber cheapened dolls and by the 1890s composition (a mixture mostly of wood fiber, bran, and glue) began to replace china and other clay materials for dolls' heads. At the same time, chro-

molithography allowed mechanical printing to replace much hand painting on tin plated toys. These innovations made possible more playthings per child as well more variety and novelty in playthings, making children's products part of an emerging fashion industry. We even see early signs of linking the play of children to celebrity culture: In the 1840s and 1850s, paper dolls featured the likenesses of royalty, ballerinas and famous singers like Jenny Lind.⁶

Of course all these trends would develop in full flower only in the twentieth century. Craft methods prevailed and families still made toys at home or in small shops until the end of the nineteenth century and were sold by peddlers and in general stores. Toy manufacturing was often a sideline of "serious" industry (for example, wood workers made miniature garden tools and toy horses with scraps).

Rise of the American and Japanese Toymaker

Americans imported and copied German playthings, though by the late 1870s were producing their own lines of wooden and cast iron toys. By 1890, the Horsman Doll Company led the way toward an American-style of doll-making, using unbreakable "composition" heads and more child-like features on doll's faces to promote daily and more intimate doll play. Even though American retailers increased their importing of playthings until 1914, World War I shut down most European shipments, paving the way for the demise of a "global" dominance of the playthings' industry by Germany. The value of American toy and games rose from 8.29 million dollars in 1899 to 70.17 million in 1919 and to 103.65 million in 1929. Yet few American toys were exported until after World War II.⁷

The logic of toy making was to make it an early candidate for "outsourcing," at first domestically. Not only did toy making depend on cheap labor to assure low retail prices in a very competitive industry, but manufacturing was seasonal (sales heavily concentrated in the last quarter of the year, coinciding with Christmas). While in the 1920s and 1930s A.G. Gilbert, maker of erector sets and scientific toys, tried to keep on his loyal staff in the off season by manufacturing home fans, seasonal layoffs in the toy industry were common. The industry remained competitive, requiring little start-up capital and remaining small-scale and largely manual into the 1930s; it was centered in New York City and in New England. Moreover, with the coming of the depression, many of the more expensive companies were forced out of business and the makers of cheaper toys prevailed. Most notably Louis Marx, a manufacturer of tin-plated wind-up toys distributed through Sears and Woolworth's, built factories in rural New York. While other companies worried about cheap Japanese imports and price cutting competitors in the 1930s,⁸ Marx established a Japanese subsidiary, LinMar, to import even cheaper toys made with low-cost labor using cheap materials like recycled tin cans.⁹

At the same time, the drastic decline in European toy production during World War I helped give rise to a vigorous toy industry in Japan. An ally of Britain at the time, Japan's leaders saw the European conflict as an opportunity for geopolitical and economic advancement. Declaring war on Germany and Austria in 1914, Japanese military forces did little more than remove small German garrisons from several South Pacific islands and take over sparsely-defended German territories in China. Throughout the war, Japan devoted most of its at-

tention to manufacturing, producing ammunition, uniforms, and other staple goods for the allied armies at great profit. Toy manufacturing was a part of this general upsurge in Japanese wartime manufacturing.

German-made toys were well known in Japan and widely respected for their quality. The technical know-how to make such toys existed in Japan by 1914, but the infrastructure to manufacture high-quality toys efficiently was not yet in place. The wartime reduction in competition, however, enabled larger Japanese manufacturers to produce toys of decent quality for export despite the higher costs. The value of all Japanese toy exports tripled between 1914 and 1916 and tripled again between 1916 and 1920, at about 21,000,000 yen. Celluloid toys alone became Japan's thirteenth most valuable export commodity during the war years. The war's end re-opened the U.S. market to Japanese exports, but the German toy industry quickly recovered because, like Japan's, it was based mainly on cottage industries.¹⁰

One result of this renewed German competition was that Japanese manufacturers strove to improve the quality of their toys. Internal criticism was also an impetus for change. In 1927, the Ministry of Education issued a statement declaring Japanese toys and picture books inferior to those of other countries and created a commission to investigate and recommend improvements. In his 1930 book *Gangu to kodomo no kyōiku* (*Toys and Children's Education*), Seki Hiroyuki, education professor at Tōyō University, complained of the difficulty that Japanese children had in moving from imitation to independent creativity. He placed part of the blame on the unimaginative offerings of toy makers, who he alleged were content simply to produce copies of foreign toys.¹¹ From the 1920s onward, Japanese toy makers increasingly regarded themselves as providers of an essential component of proper childhood development and therefore as assisting in promoting the nation's future. In 1931, the Japan Toy Association founded the magazine *Gangu* (*Toys*) with the explicit goal of improving Japanese toys from both an educational and a manufacturing perspective.¹²

Nevertheless (as we shall see), the Japanese toy industry did not slavishly follow the demands of educators. The total value of Japanese toy production peaked in 1937 at slightly over 40,000,000 yen, the same year that full-scale war in China broke out after simmering for almost a decade. Although Japan's toy industry had grown impressively during the 1920s and 1930s, small-scale manufacturing was still the norm, and there was much potential for increasing efficiencies owing to economies of scale. In 1936, for example, 91% of toy production took place in factories smaller than 10 tsubo (approximately 360 square feet), and the majority of toy factories employed less than five workers. The general trend, however, was for all factories to increase in size. Toy manufacturing declined drastically starting in 1938, when the government prohibited the making of tin toys for the domestic market. As the war intensified into the 1940s, toy making stopped except for small-scale, war-related purposes.¹³

Exploiting the baby boom market, the American toy industry grew enormously following the war. The wholesale value of toys rose from 86.7 million dollars in 1939 to 608.2 million in 1953.¹⁴ While older established companies like A.C. Gilbert and Louis Marx survived until the 1960s, they were surpassed by new toy and doll makers who adapted to TV advertising and product innovation in the 1950s that set the stage for the globalization of the American

industry in the 1970s. Out of a small novelty business of plastic jewelry and picture frames, Eliot Handler founded Mattel in 1945. At first, Mattel manufactured plastic doll furniture, toy guitars, bird call novelties, and even in 1955 a "Bubble-O Bill Bubble Hat."¹⁵ Only in 1955, when Mattel bought ad time on Disney's new daily TV program for children, the *Mickey Mouse Club*, did Mattel become a major innovator. Advertising daily (not waiting for the Christmas season) and appealing directly to children revolutionized toy marketing. The resulting explosive sales of cap guns made regular TV advertising a must and catapulted Mattel into a leading toymaker. Ruth Handler's launch of the Barbie fashion doll in 1959 not only broke from the traditional baby and companion doll, but was widely advertised on children's TV. Thanks to TV ads, Mattel's sales rose from six million in 1955 to 25 million in 1960.¹⁶

A second newcomer to the American toy industry played an equally important role. The Hassenfeld Brothers (Hasbro), who started in 1923 selling textile remnants and who shifted to pencil boxes in the 1930s, made their mark in the toy business with "Mr. Potato Head" in 1952 (one of the first to advertise on TV).¹⁷ But again Hasbro became a global company only after its launch of G.I. Joe action figure in 1964. Imitating Barbie, Hasbro adopted what was often called the "razor and razor blade" principle of marketing, requiring the doll owner to purchase uniforms, jeeps, and weaponry for meaningful play. Decades of success in creating many "lines" of G.I. Joe figures allowed Hasbro in 1984 to begin buying out major competitors (Milton Bradley for its games and Playskool, an infant toy company). Hasbro also brought in remnants of Ideal, Tonka, Parker Brothers, and Kenner. Thanks to diversification, Hasbro could avoid the prices of failed product lines.¹⁸ Similarly, Mattel radically expanded its foreign market in the late 1980s by expanding sales of Barbie worldwide. In 1993, it bought preschool toy giant Fisher-Price hoping to increase sales abroad to middle-class parents.¹⁹

In the early postwar years, Japan's government promoted toy manufacturing both because the industry was relatively easy to revive compared with others and because toys suggested a peaceful, or at least non-threatening image. In 1946, a time in which some Japanese died of malnutrition and most citizens were in desperate need of food and shelter, the Diet passed a resolution urging the nation's citizens to give toys to children.²⁰ Although impractical at the time, this resolution presaged the gradual change in gift giving that would take place from the 1960s onward, in which toys became year-round gifts instead of gifts strictly limited to seasonal events such as the New Year. Toy exports resumed in 1947, reflecting a longstanding interest of educators in toys. In 1951, the Japan Teachers Union began a campaign to rid the country of war-related toys. At the same time, the toy industry adapted very quickly to global trends. Paralleling the American trade, as early as 1950, Japanese-made plastic toys appeared on the market.²¹

During the decade 1955–1965, the overall growth of Japan's toy industry was dramatic. Japan had clearly superceded Germany as the kingpin of global sales. Exports amounted to approximately two-thirds of the value of Japan's total toy production (compared with about one-third in the case of the world's other major toy producing countries). During the early 1960s, Japan became the world's second largest producer of toys, behind the United States, and the

world's largest exporter of toys. Significantly, although the U.S. was the largest buyer of Japanese toys, they also found their way to nearly every country in the world that imported toys.²² In other words, Japan began to exert a significant influence on world youth culture during the early 1960s.

This influence was in part the result of efforts by leading Japanese toy manufacturers to combine their resources. In imitation of the American Toy Fair, the Japan International Toy Trade Show (Nihon Gangu Kokusai Mihon-ichi), now called the Tokyo Toy Show (Tōkyō Omocha Shō) appeared in 1962, featuring 83 participating companies and signed contracts amounting to over 1,500,000,000 yen. Within a decade, the trade fair grew each year in nearly every respect. In 1972, a decade after its founding, the trade fair generated 6,749,000,000 yen in contracts.²³

The years 1965–1975 were a time of extensive change in Japan's toy industry. Exports dropped from 70% to 55% of production in the three years after 1965. This change reflected both growing affluence, and with it a rising demand for toys in Japan, as well as increased competition from Hong Kong and others. This competition obliged Japanese firms to adopt the kind of cost-cutting measures introduced to the American toy industry in the 1930s. One approach was to move manufacturing of toys out of Tokyo to reduce the cost of labor. In 1965, eleven factories relocated as a group to Tochigi Prefecture, about 100 km from Tokyo. Dubbed the “toy *danchi*” (*danchi* are suburban apartment buildings) in popular parlance, this site was home to 31 factories by 1970. The new factories were also much larger, and they coordinated their efforts in efficiently shipping their products to the docks at Tokyo and then utilizing the same trucks to return with raw materials.²⁴

In the late 1960s, representatives of Japan's toy industry decided to pursue European markets more aggressively. In 1967, they also convened the first conference on the international toy trade in Hamburg, discussing with representatives of other countries how to open restrictive markets, policies toward developing countries, especially China and Hong Kong, and ways of preventing other countries from stealing toy designs.²⁵ Well before Japan became a major influence in other areas of world affairs, it had taken the lead in shaping the global market in toys.

The so-called “oil shocks” of the early 1970s hit Japan's toy industry hard. Owing to the higher cost of fuel and raw materials, especially plastic, the retail price of toys increased by as much as 50%. In the meantime, starting in 1970, Hong Kong overtook Japan as the world's leading exporter of toys. The value of Japanese toy exports during the years 1968–1973 remained flat.²⁶ During the latter half of the 1970s, the domestic market for Japanese-made toys continued to increase, along with innovative ways of marketing and selling toys. For example, in 1977, toys placed in capsules began to be sold in vending machines.²⁷ Some Japanese firms also began outsourcing the production of toys to other parts of Asia, a practice that became increasingly common during the 1980s and subsequent decades.

Meanwhile, American toy makers accelerated the practice of foreign outsourcing in response to the competitive pressures to reduce manufacturing costs. These savings were, in turn, liberated for use in advertising and product development. This shift is shown in the sharp increase in toy imports, rising between

1981 to 1993 from 1.49 billion to 8.49 billion dollars. In the latter year, 73 percent of toys sold in the US were manufactured abroad (\$3.77 billion produced in China). Off-shore manufacturing became profitable because the cost and time consumed in communication and transport declined and quality controls in foreign factories improved. Major companies like Mattel devoted considerable managerial energy to accelerating this process in the late 1980s. Foreign outsourcing became important also because new toy warehouses and discount chains centralized and increased the pace of distribution and put pressure on manufacturers to reduce costs. By 1993, Toys 'R' Us alone controlled 21.5 percent of U.S. toy sales and discount giants (Wal-Mart, K Mart, and Target) together sold another 25.8 percent.²⁸ The toy industry in the US (as well as Japan) participated in a new era of "fast capitalism"—the increasingly rapid shift from one product line to another on a virtually global scale. With production costs reduced to a minimum, the toy industry could concentrate on design and marketing.

During the 1970s, U.S. and (to a lesser degree) Japanese firms increasingly outsourced the production of toys to factories in Hong Kong. Toy, game, and doll imports from China by 2002 reached \$12,226,624 of some \$17,050,513 in total imports of playthings into the U.S.²⁹ As access to Chinese markets improved in the 1980s, this outsourcing began to spill over across Hong Kong's border into Guangdong Province. Today, China (including Hong Kong) is the world's largest producer of toys, with recent estimates placing its production at 70–80% of the world's toys. Approximately 70% of China's toy production is based in the southern province of Guangdong, home to over 4,500 factories, most located in the Pearl River Delta cities of Guangzhou (Canton), Shenzhen, Dongguan, and Shantou. Shenzhen is a special economic zone that also produces a large share of toys, gifts, and decorations for the Christmas season.³⁰ While many of these factories produce relatively simple items, some are capable of fabricating sophisticated, high-tech toys. In 2002, for example, Microsoft allied itself with two Guangdong makers, Fletonics and Wistron (manufacturing arm of The Acer Group) to produce its Xbox games console.³¹

Chinese manufacturing firms today, like those in 1970s Hong Kong and 1950s Japan, occupy what some call a "sweet spot" within the world economy, combining a capable workforce with low wages, and a concentration of capital in Guangdong. Long hours, low pay (as little as 12 cents an hour), and unsafe conditions are common, and several tens of thousands of Chinese workers die each year from work-related accidents. This situation has recently attracted much attention from news media throughout the world. It has also sparked labor protests in China. In late 2003, the International Council of Toy Industries announced voluntary inspections of Chinese factories.³²

While production shifted to China, the U.S. and Japan remained centers of design and innovation with action figures, ever changing Barbie dolls, and lines of mini-dolls for small children. But it was especially Japanese innovation from the 1980s in the design and marketing of high-tech, computerized toys that had the greatest impact on global youth culture. Leading the way was Nintendo, a firm created in 1889 (and called Nintendo from 1907) that started as a manufacturer of Japanese- and Western-style playing cards.³³ In 1980, Nintendo's Game Watch, a small, hand-sized console for playing a simple video game, entered

the Japanese market. Also in 1980, Nintendo established Nintendo of America (NOA) in New York. Nintendo continued to pursue computerized video games, bringing out the "Famicom" (from "family computer"), a home video gaming console running on an 8-bit processor, in Japan in 1983. This device evolved into NOA's Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), which began to revive the depressed U.S. video game market. It became the best-selling toy in the U.S. in 1988, and by 1990 existed in one-third of American homes.³⁴ Nintendo's success was a boon for Japanese chip manufacturers (to keep prices low, Nintendo purchased chips in vast quantities) and software designers in both the U.S. and Japan. It also generated competition in the 1990s, which accelerated the technological advancement of video games and stimulated the development of personal-computer-based gaming.³⁵

While Nintendo was in the process of attaining a near monopoly in the U.S. video game market, elements of Japan's toy industry created TOYNES, a value-added network (VAN in typical Japanese abbreviation, or *fukakachi tsūshimō*) for the toy industry in 1989. VANs had become popular in many of Japan's industries, and allowed participating companies to share data and perform certain common tasks efficiently without eliminating the element of competition between firms. In general, Japan's toy industry prospered along with the rest of the country's economy during the "bubble" years of the late 1980s. Although Japanese firms like Nintendo tended to dominate many of the high-tech toy markets at this time, the rapid pace of technological change, the global scope of the various components high-tech toy manufacture and marketing, and an expanding worldwide market ensured vigorous competition and the rise of new challengers.³⁶

While Japan and the US remain the major innovators initiating design and distribution of children's playthings, new players are emerging to challenge this dual hegemony. Hong Kong firms increasingly tend to concentrate on design, outsourcing the manufacturing of their products to the nearby factories in Guangdong.³⁷ As one would expect from their focus on contract manufacturing, Chinese toy companies possess relatively few brand names and patents. One major exception was Playmates, who developed the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles in 1988. Within three years, Playmates had sold \$80 million worth of these action figures to retailers mostly in the U.S. This line of figures was based on a comic book spoof on the martial themes common in children's media. Playmates president, Chan Tai Ho, was a refugee from China in 1966 who had once been a subcontractor for American toy makers. By 1990, he was contracting out production of Turtles to mainland China from Hong Kong.

It is likely that we will see more toy hits from Chinese companies in future years. Leading toy manufacturers in Guangdong are now doing what similarly-situated firms in Japan did in the 1960s in terms of industry coordination and promotion. The province has established a toy innovation center in Foshan, which has ties to several domestic universities. Guangzhou's International Toy Centre is now in the first phase of construction. The completed center will serve as a source for information exchange, exhibits, and the promotion of common goals and standards for the Chinese toy makers.³⁸ As a result of such efforts, further shifts in the economic landscape of the global toy industry are likely in the future.

Implications of a Globalized Children's Consumer Culture

These developments are not merely economic in nature, but are part of wider social and cultural transformation in children's experience of play and closer relationship to consumer goods. The global children's commercial culture culminated only in the late 1970s with the emergence of elaborate lines of action figure toys, Barbie, and video games. But it originated around the turn of the twentieth century in the US, creating a consumer culture built on rapidly changing commercial fads and product integration around fantasy narratives that separated children's from adults' culture. These innovations would eventually displace slow-changing regional children's culture in large parts of the world.

This is a very complex story that can be only outlined here. At first, the toy industry adopted the images and crazes emanating almost haphazardly from new media and even the shopping and leisure crowd in the first decade of the twentieth century.³⁹ That industry encouraged and shaped fads, but was not capable of initiating or managing them until the 1930s, when we see the first signs of fully orchestrated commercial fads in the integration of Disney films and character toys.

The teddy bear provides the best example of the earlier less coordinated form when it appeared as an international craze in 1906.⁴⁰ The claimants to the invention of the teddy bear stand on both sides of the Atlantic. Probably it was inspired by Morris Michtom, New York storekeeper (and later founder of Ideal Toys), who in 1902, noticed a newspaper cartoon showing Teddy Roosevelt sparing a baby bear on a hunting trip and sold handmade stuffed bears from his New York candy store. But the novelty took off only with the German producer of "plush" toy animals; Margarete Steiff designed a cuddly soft bear about 1903. Using machinery designed originally to manufacture upholstery, Steiff shifted production from cottage craftspeople to a modern factory in 1905, shortly after linking with an international network of wholesale buyers (including Americans). By the summer of 1906, toy bears attracted crowds of little boys and their parents along boardwalks at the seaside resorts of the Jersey Shore. But the bear craze also attracted adults and people on both sides of the Atlantic. Although the bear fad declined by 1908, the teddy bear was periodically revived again on an international scale when, for example, the arrival of a panda at the London zoo sparked a new fad of panda bear in 1937.⁴¹

Despite the multinational appeal of these commercialized children's fads, Americans were by far the most successful in exploiting them. This success may have been because of the close association of the American toy industry with novelty manufacturing as it emerged in the decade after 1900. Novelty makers understood that their products had to be updated continuously to fetch a premium price created by artificial demand. Dependence upon a news event or spontaneous "craze" to launch a commercial fad was problematic because of their unpredictability. More certain demand could be created by licensing popular cartoon and movie characters to be made into dolls and toys. Although this marketing strategy had roots in the use of early comic strip figures as novelty toys (from 1900–1930), it was only with Disney's cartoon characters that the linkage between media and plaything created major commercially-driven fads.⁴² To subsidize his cartoons, Walt Disney licensed the making of Mickey Mouse dolls

in 1930 and, by the mid-1930s, promoted licensing and merchandising across the U.S. and Europe.⁴³ The advent of the feature length cartoon with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1938) launched a new kind of marketing—licensing and promoting the characters in the film to anticipate and coincide with the release of the movie, leading to the synergistic interaction of film and product that is practiced on a global scale today. Only in the 1970s would this pattern become permanent with rising family income and the fully development of TV and child-directed advertising.⁴⁴

Japan alone imitated these American innovations. Unlike the British and German toy industry which stuck to adult ideas of toys (especially as miniatures of adult things), Japanese makers adapted to an emerging children's commercial popular culture during the 1920s. Paralleling a trend already well-established in the U.S., Japanese toymakers and the popular media cross-marketed their products. For example *The Adventures of Sei-chan*, a popular comic book, led to toy spin-offs in 1924 such as Sei-chan playing cards and hats. In 1926, popular comic books were the inspiration for wind-up dolls such as the walking Nonkina Tōsan (easygoing dad). This trend accelerated in the 1930s, with the best example being the appearance of the first installment of the comic series *Norakuro* (literally "stray black") about the adventures of a homeless black boy (resembling a cat) named Chaplin who eventually joins the army and racks up a series of exploits. Serialized in the magazine *Shōnen kurabu* (Youth club), the series ran until 1936. The complete series then became a best seller in book form. This media popularity propelled *Norakuro* into the form of various toys, including *Norakuro* masks, a *Norakuro* harmonica, and a variety of school accessories such as pens, pencils, lunch boxes, hats, book bags, and more. The success of *Norakuro* also gave rise to other boy action heroes in the late 1930s, in part a reflection of the increasing militarization of Japanese society at the time.⁴⁵ In any case, the Japanese embraced the critical changes: toys based on commercial fantasy narratives divorced from the memories and expectations of adults.

Postwar affluence obviously helped to tip children's culture in the direction of the "fast capitalism" of the commercial fad. Between 1950 and 1970, Americans increased toy spending on their children from \$143 to \$252 (in constant money).⁴⁶ We find a similar change in Japan, where spending on toys went from 49,150,000 yen in 1966 to 206,279,000 yen in 1974, a dramatic increase even considering the relatively high inflation rates of the early 1970s.⁴⁷

The more important change, however, is the shift in the pattern of gift-giving to children. In the late nineteenth century, it became the norm for adults to gift children seasonally (Christmas especially) and for rites of passage (birthdays, vacations, and the like). Christmas giving to children had become a central rite of the season since the 1880s when toy and novelty makers successfully tapped the ethic of free and unconditional spending on children that was so effectively symbolized by Santa Claus. Beginning in the 1880s and culminating about 1910, sturdy and special playthings marked growing up stages (generic dolls' houses and electric trains as well as name brand Flexible Flyer sleds and Daisy Air Rifles, e.g.).⁴⁸

The playthings industry, however, had continuously chafed under the constraints of intermittent spending on children. Manufacturers and retailers cheered when crazes had occasionally sparked off-season toy buying (teddy bears,

Mickey Mouse dolls, e.g.), and, during the Depression, even makers of the coming-of-age toy (like the complete electric train set or doll's house) opted for cheaper fad products (Daisy's Buck Rogers' pistols and Lionel's Mickey Mouse handcar in the mid 1930s). While these trends were resisted by educators (who wanted playthings to serve educational/developmental purposes), the fad culture gradually was superimposed on a festival/transitions culture and led to the "anytime" gift.⁴⁹

The shift from the seasonal/rite-of-passage to "anytime" gift was certainly complex: As we have seen, since the mid-1950s (especially with the *Mickey Mouse Club*) direct and daily advertising to children extended sales beyond the fourth (or holiday) quarter and promoted fads that broke with "traditional" rites gifts (like the "revolutionary new look" to dolls in the Barbie doll of 1959). The novelty item was transformed with the shift to the "line" of toys or figures that made it possible to extend a fad over months of purchases. By the late 1960s, American manufacturers formed alliances with makers of children's movies, TV cartoons, comic books and even greeting cards. Beginning in the late 1960s the childhood "fad" culture ceased having the kind of generational cross-overs of earlier novelties (replacing, for example, a fad like the Hoola hoop of 1957 with horror comics and toys that intentionally annoyed adults) and "classic" pass-down and rite-of-passage gifts like electric trains lost their appeal and were replaced by play objects taken from child-focused media. This process accelerated sharply in the 1980s (sparked by the merchandising bonanza of the "Star Wars" trilogy of 1977–1983). An important sign of this change is the fact that about 60% of toys sold in the US by 1987 were based on licensed characters compared to roughly 10% in 1980. Key to this pattern were changes in TV programming, especially the advent of toy-based cartoon shows (like *He-Man and Masters of the Universe* and *Jem*) that simultaneously entertained children and promoted a line of toys drawn directly from characters and plot.⁵⁰ Toy companies got a full half-hour's worth of advertising time with these programs. Equally important, these programs helped toy makers to manage fads. The TV show gave children a set of fantasy situations and personalities upon which to model play. Even more, that play could be orchestrated through the careful exposure of the story line and the addition of new figures as the story evolved. By the mid-80s this marketing formula had been perfected.⁵¹

Over the same period, Japanese toy makers became equal masters of the art of continuous innovation. In 1952, the electric toys, a sedan automobile and a passenger plane, make their debut. The first radio-controlled toy car appeared in 1955.⁵² Quick to adapt to American fads, Japanese robot toys and flying saucers were widely sold in the U.S. Although unsophisticated (Japanese toy space ships looked like slightly modified military tanks or planes and Japanese toy companies had no money to license Flash Gordon or Space Cadet images), these robot and space toys set the stage for Japanese innovation in the 1980s.⁵³

The Japanese toy novelty the Transformer—a die-cast vehicle that turned into a semi-human robot warrior with a few deft tugs on wheels and other parts—was purchased by Hasbro in 1984. Like other action figure lines, children were attracted to its "back story," the adventure that gave the toy characters their roles and situations for children to reenact in play. The citizens of Cybertron were divided into the "good" Autobots and the "evil" Decepticons who, having

landed on earth, made war on each other. Annual model changes took on the character of an arms race: Dinobots (robot dinosaurs) allied with the Autobots in 1985. But in 1986, the Decepticons responded with their own animal transformers, the Predacons and Sharkicons. By the 1990s, Japanese companies like Bandai on their own developed world-scale toy hits like the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers (1993) with the full complement of demand-creating TV shows, videos, and movies featuring their toy lines.⁵⁴

Worldwide toy hits like the Transformers and the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers came out of a vigorous Japanese toy market that stressed novelty and creativity during the 1980s. In the late 1970s, the trend for popular toys to be associated with serial animation episodes (televised and print versions) became especially pronounced with the popularity of *Oyoge! Taiyaki-kun* (literally, "Swim! sea bream waffle"). This series chronicled the tale of a fish-shaped display in a restaurant who returned to the ocean as a result of quarreling with the restaurant's owner and faced various challenges adapting to his new environment.⁵⁵ In 1981, Robot Warrior Gundam model toys became a big hit in Japan owing to the popularity of Gundam animation.⁵⁶ Although Gundam did not become widely known in the U.S., he was much beloved by hardcore American anime fans.⁵⁷ Later in the decade, other animation stories involving part human, part robot action figures became popular in Japan and produced best sellers in the domestic toy market. One example was Sage Fighter Seiya, broadcast on Saturdays (1986–89). Seiya, a Japanese lad who became a "saint" and acquired superhuman powers while training in Greece, was accompanied by a group of teenage warriors of diverse origins. This group resembled Daoist sages (despite being called "saints") in that they had internalized the power of a microcosm of the universe within their bodies.⁵⁸ Although it was the Transformers that became international best sellers, Gundam, Sage Fighter Seiya, and other fantasy action figures had similar potential for world-wide popularity.

In contrast to the Japanese manufacturers, German, French, and British makers of dolls, toys, and children's literature remained relatively static in the years after 1920. In particular, German toys lost their dominance in the U.S. during World War I and after Hitler came to power when industry militarized (missing out on the Disney revolution in marketing in the 1930s). Moreover, owing to the persistence of older patterns of child rearing based on tradition and the improvement ethic of the educational establishment, the European playthings and children's media industries were also slow to adopt American-style integration of toys, film, books, and even theme parks around character licensing. There was little TV advertising to children in Europe at the time when Americans were developing it in the 1950s and 1960s and some countries even banned it in response to the Americanization of children's culture. By the 1960s, the British toys appealed to the nostalgia of adults or addressed the concerns of parents to educate and separate their children from the popular culture. British Meccano construction sets and Lesney "Matchbox" cars shared Swedish Brio's simple wooden toys and Playmobil's sturdy play sets the status as niche products sold to affluent parents in the global market who rejected the commercial fantasy culture.

Some European toy companies survived by imitating or becoming subsidiaries of aggressive American toymakers. In 1962, the venerable Lines Brothers of

Britain made an obvious copy of Mattel's Barbie doll called Sindy and, in 1966, Palitoy became the distributor for Hasbro's GI Joe (called Action Man in Europe). But this was only a transition. By 1985, the American warehouse retailer, Toys "R" Us, arrived in Britain and soon thereafter on the continent, selling Barbie dolls and action figures similar to those offered in the U.S. European syndication of American TV cartoons created markets for American toy lines and the new style of play. The Danish company Lego, whose simple but ingenious interlocking plastic blocks appealed to parents opposed to the trend toward action figure fantasy, adapted to American/Japanese innovation by developing a global marketing strategy. This strategy included museum and mall displays, and Legoland theme parks (in Denmark, Britain, and Southern California) and compromising its "educational" goal with Lego "systems"—models based on sets and figures from Star Wars and other media fantasies.⁵⁹ The European child has become part of a global consumer culture dominated by the US through satellite TV, movies, comics, and, after 1991 especially, video games.

Very much the same thing happened in the Pacific Rim. Japanese popular children's media and the toys deriving from it are especially popular in continental East Asia. Much as some European countries sought to shelter their populations from excessive American influences in youth culture, South Korea once did the same vis-a-vis Japan. Japan's economic boom during the 1980s coincided with a relaxation of restrictions on Japanese media in South Korea, and the beginnings of mass media in China. Japanese material culture had been popular in Taiwan and Hong Kong even earlier. Taiwan was a former colony of Japan, but experienced a relatively enlightened colonial occupation. Moreover, the Japanese-dominated recent past looked especially good to many Taiwanese in comparison with that island's traumatic and bloody occupation by Jiang Jieshi's (Chiang Kai-shek) Guomindang (Nationalist party) in the late 1940s. In short, strong postwar Japanese cultural influence on Taiwan and Hong Kong is evident from the 1960s, and a similar degree of influence on South Korea and China developed during the 1980s. Although South Korean companies have had some impact on video games,⁶⁰ Japanese firms have played the greatest role in shaping children's fashions and fantasies throughout much of East Asia during the last two decades, with U.S. toy makers like Mattel also playing a major role.

One question remains: Why did Japan rise to share leadership with the U.S. in the globalization of children's popular culture? During the 1960s, Japan's toy industry promoted itself vigorously to the rest of the world, developed innovations in manufacturing, and took the lead in developing formal dialogue among toy exporting countries. Japanese leadership was not evident in the creative realm—the creation of new, innovative, and broadly popular toys and children's media—until around 1980. Japan's emergence on the world stage as a major creative force in children's culture was the result of a fortuitous convergence of several factors.

The oil shocks of the early 1970s and rising standards of living throughout the decade cut into Japan's ability to serve as a world headquarters for the making of inexpensive toys. Hong Kong increasingly took over that role. If Japan's toy industry was to continue to grow, it simply had to become more creative. The 1980s was also a decade of especially rapid growth for Japan's economy as a whole. Ezra Vogel's best-selling *Japan as Number One: Lessons for America* appeared in 1979, and a fascination with Japan's "miracle" economy soon became

common in U.S. media. An early recognition of the importance of computerization, robotics, and the dawn of a new "information age" was a major force behind Japan's spectacular growth. As the information age dawned, children across the globe were especially receptive to the computerized toys that Japanese firms took the lead in creating. Aggressive marketing techniques, some inspired by U.S. advertising practices, served as a catalyst for the commercial success of the new generation of Japanese toys, with Nintendo's Famicom and NES being perhaps the best early example.

Perhaps a more subtle factor behind the scenes was that Japanese toy companies had long been exposed to a wide variety of foreign toys and recognized as early as the 1920s and 1930s the sales potential of media-derived and licensed toy lines. Many of these companies had manufactured toys for foreign markets and quickly adapted to the science fiction fads of the 1950s. By 1980, many Japanese toy companies had extensive experience with popular toys and children's media in other parts of the world. At that point, they were well positioned to launch their own global toy and video game hits.

By the 1980s, commercialized children's culture in the U.S., Europe, and on the prosperous Pacific Rim had become the norm. Toys were increasingly designed and marketed through American and Japanese companies and manufactured in South China adjacent to the international commercial center of Hong Kong. The growth of satellite TV and privatization of the mass media has breached the walls that separated European, Asian, and other regions from the power of globalization. The American and Japanese conquest of European and Asian toy markets meant the reduction of regional styles of playthings and a shift away from toys that imitated adult worlds of work and life. Parents in Europe and many parts of East Asia, like affluent parents elsewhere, look to their children for emotional gratification and buy toys to please their offspring. Reduced family size and divorce have also accelerated this trend.⁶¹ The playthings that children desire and parents give have become part of a global system of communication and distribution. The result is that Asian girls want blond Barbies and American boys want Japanese Power Rangers.

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ENDNOTES

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