**Isn't That Cute? In Japan, Cuddly Characters Compete**

**Cities, Associations Promote Mascots; Flying Tax Filer, 'Lovable' Premier Abe**

By Daisuke Wakabayashi and Miho Inada

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More than 800 plush characters faced off for the title of Most Popular Mascot in Japan's third annual Yuru-kyara Grand Prix. Think: Miss America, but with bear-like creatures and inflatable sumo wrestlers. WSJ's Daisuke Wakabayashi reports.

TOKYO—Japan's new prime minister won election this month promising a more muscular military, and campaigning with a trademark clenched fist in TV commercials vowing to "take back Japan."

But soon after taking office Wednesday, Shinzo Abe will get an image makeover. Next month, his Liberal Democratic Party will unveil the design of a soft, cuddly mascot modeled after him—based on a proposal deemed most "widely lovable and cute," said an official when announcing the contest in November. The LDP will choose from more than 60 ideas received from supporters during a two-week proposal window.

In the past, backers of Mr. Abe had promoted his looks. But now, "we thought Mr. Abe would be accepted more widely by being cute versus being handsome," said Taizo Toyoda, an LDP spokesman.

**Getting Into Characters in Japan**



Yabukiji-kun, left, and Orion-chan at this year's yuru-kyara contest. Daisuke Wakabayashi/The Wall Str

It is no surprise that Japan's democracy has been infected by the craze for "yuru-kyara," or "loose characters." A growing army of yuru-kyara is inundating Japan with hundreds of soft, plush mascots representing municipalities, government organizations and companies with a uniquely Japanese mix of cute and bizarre.

Creating a yuru-kyara usually starts with a mascot in a soft, full-body suit and an oversize headpiece. Their name often provides some clues to "what" they are—because it may not be clear visually. The characters, each with an elaborate back story, communicate with fans through their own websites, Twitter and other social media.

Luring tourists to overlooked rural towns and regions, drawing attention to obscure causes, or softening the image of organizations from the military to railway operators, these mascots take Japan's long-standing fixation with all things cute to the next level.

Japan's national tax agency, for instance, has "Eeta-kun"—created to promote electronic tax filing.

Eeta-kun—a green mascot with a square head resembling a computer screen, with eyes and mouth configured in the shape of an "e" and the word "tax" written vertically on his torso—stands 5-foot-5 inches tall, according to his official profile. His weight is "secret" and he is skilled with computers. His friends include a gang of rainbow-colored mascots called the "El-rangers" who share a similar passion for promoting the electronic filing of taxes, although they focus on local levies.

"He can fly too," said a tax agency official of Eeta-kun. "He flies around the country to different locations to get as many people as possible to use this e-tax system."

The most common characters are ones used to promote a city or region. "Koroton" is the tourism ambassador of Maebashi, a landlocked city known for its pork. Koroton—a name that combines the Japanese onomatopoeia of koro-koro, the sound of a rolling object, and ton, the word for pork—is a totally round pig with blushed cheeks and tiny stumps for arms and legs. According to Koroton's profile, the rosy cheeks are a sign of good health to encourage people to eat the city's pork.

Other characters are extensions of real-world cuteness. A branch office of East Nippon Expressway, which operates about 4,000 kilometers of highways in Japan, created "Manatee." The giant turquoise-blue mascot—or "manner"-tee—teaches proper driving etiquette. A spokesman for the group said Manatee can deliver lessons on automobile manners through hugs. The manatee's goal is to create a "heartful highway."



Kumamon

"There are characters overseas, but the abundance of characters here is a very Japanese trait," said Japanese cartoonist Jun Miura, who came up with the name yuru-kyara about a decade ago.

During travels around Japan, he discovered many municipalities had created mascots for a region's food, wildlife or landscape. Often, they toiled in anonymity without the polish of characters like Japan's most famous ambassador of cute, Hello Kitty.

While today's yuru-kyara mascots are more sophisticated, the label has stuck. In the past few years, the number of mascots has surged. This year, 865 characters—double the number from last year—competed in the "Yuru-kyara Grand Prix," an online contest to select Japan's most popular mascot.

Last year's Grand Prix was marred by allegations of vote-rigging by overzealous backers of some characters, including "Nishiko-kun," a mascot representing Tokyo's Kokubunji area.

Nishiko-kun has a giant, circular headpiece like the round, decorative edges of roof tiles found in many of the historical buildings in that area. His fans are alleged to have created multiple email accounts and used a specially created program to stuff the ballot for their candidate automatically, according to the contest organizer.

After an investigation, "Kumamon," a mischievous black bear from Kumamoto Prefecture, edged out "Bary-san," an egg-shaped, yellow bird from the southern city of Imabari—an area known for grilled chicken cuisine—to become the 2011 winner.

After the victory, Kumamon's face was put on 6,000 different goods sold by local businesses, ranging from smartphone apps to bottles of soy sauce. This year, the prefecture expects sales of Kumamon goods to double last year's total of ¥2.5 billion, or $30 million.

Kumamon has more than 100,000 followers on Twitter and nearly 70,000 "likes" on its [Facebook](http://quotes.wsj.com/FB) [FB -1.20%](http://quotes.wsj.com/FB) page, where fans can find pictures of the pear-shaped mascot riding a horse, working at a convenience store or bungee jumping.

The winner of this year's voting was announced last month that the third-annual Yuru-kyara Summit in Saitama Prefecture, two hours outside of Tokyo. Nearly 300,000 visitors attended the two-day event where 265 mascots mugged for photos, sold goods bearing their image and revealed details about themselves during "PR Time."

For example, Eco Meister, a bearlike creature with a plant growing from the top of its head, wears clothes made from a plastic bag and promotes a green lifestyle. Taking the stage during PR Time, one of Eco Meister's handlers spoke on behalf of the silent mascot and surprised the audience by saying the androgynous character is a woman—"a housewife, actually"—who just had a child. The crowd cheered.

Then, the announcement that everyone was waiting for. Last year's runner-up Bary-san won the vote. In representing Imabari city, the bird wears what appears to be a crown but is actually a replica of a nearby bridge and wraps a towel around its waist. Towel-making is one of the area's biggest industries.

When its name was called, the mascot lifted a giant trophy and a handler speaking for the mascot wept and thanked supporters. Bary-san's booth sold out of merchandise, and the character was mobbed everywhere during the two-day summit. During one giant scrum of fans and photographers, a middle-aged man turned and said to no one in particular: "This is just like seeing a celebrity."

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**Soft Samurai Wins Hard Battle of Mascots**

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Bottom of Form



Sano City

Sanomaru celebrates winning the Yuru Kyara Grandprix 2013.

A samurai warrior with an upturned noodle bowl on his head is the latest winner of the hotly contested battle of the furry mascots.

The number of online votes in this year’s “[yuru-kyara](http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323717004578156610405635572%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)” contest doubled to 15 million, a measure of how these unlikely objects of national affection are gaining popularity in Japan.

[Sanomaru](http://ameblo.jp/sanomaru0225), the official mascot of Sano City, beat more than 1,500 competitors to win top spot in the [Yuru Kyara Grandprix 2013](http://www2.yurugp.jp/) on Sunday. Participation rates surged by over 80% from the previous year, as 1,580 municipalities and corporations vied to gain another shower of publicity for their cuddly representatives.

Sanomaru is a samurai character who wears traditional clothes – a hakama style skirt and zori flip flops. Instead of a kasa straw hat, he wears a ramen noodle bowl, emblazoned with the name of the city, and he prefers two potato fries to a sword. The combination represents two of the city’s culinary specialities: Sano-ramen noodles and potato fries with a special sauce.



Sano City

Sanomaru celebrates victory other award recipients. 2011 winner Kumamon, far right, makes a special appearance.

[Sano](http://www.city.sano.lg.jp/index.html) is in Tochigi prefecture, about 55 miles north of Tokyo, and has a population of 125,000. The city is trying to establish tourism as a third pillar of the local economy in addition to manufacturing and retail, according to a spokesperson at the city hall.

Like an increasing number of cities in Japan, Sano is a sprawling combination of municipalities brought together to consolidate local finances. Sanomaru was created not just to attract attention to the city, but also to build unity among the three municipalities that joined forces in 2005.

Sanomaru is already hard at work to achieve his mission. He makes about 60 appearances a month, earning a modest ¥5,000 ($50) fee each time. Sanomaru also brings revenues into the city through sales of 350 different character goods ranging from cellphone straps and badges to children’s books.

Although the city has yet to calculate the total revenue Sanomaru generates, Tsutomu Ono, spokesperson at the Sano City office, estimates the mascot brought in about ¥100 million to the city in 2012 through goods sales.

After winning the fourth place in the 2012 Yuru-Kyara contest, Sanomaru’s popularity surged thanks in part due to increased media exposure including television appearances, Mr. Ono said.

“The foremost benefit of Sanomaru is the sense of togetherness in the city and the love for the city fostered through the project,” Mr. Ono added.

The popularity of yuru-kyara – literally loose characters in English – has rocketed thanks largely to the promotional activity of [Kumamon](http://blogs.wsj.com/japanrealtime/2012/12/26/the-life-and-times-of-japans-mascots/), a rosy-cheeked black bear character from Kumamoto prefecture in southern Japan. Kumamon may look whimsical but his cash-generating ability is no joke: He generated ¥29 billion ($285 million) for his prefecture last year in sales of related goods. Kumamon has [entertained the emperor and empress](http://blogs.wsj.com/japanrealtime/2013/10/29/japans-favorite-bear-entertains-royal-couple/), visited France, Taiwan and the U.S. and even participated in [an economics seminar at Harvard University](http://blogs.wsj.com/japanrealtime/2013/11/14/harvard-degree-the-political-economy-of-kumamon/) since winning the national mascot contest in 2011.

Sanomaru, clearly has his work cut out, if he is to match Kumamon’s post-victory feats.