24 The 2020 Olympic mascot characters

Japan wants to make a difference

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Can you remember any former Olympic mascots? How did they look and what were their names? Olympic mascots have been around since the 1972 Games in Munich and while they are an important funding source and a crucial part of Olympic marketing, few leave a lasting impression. However, when Prime Minister Abe dressed up as Super Mario at the 2016 Rio Olympics to whet the appetite for Tokyo 2020, he could be sure that people all around the world would recognize Nintendo's iconic video game character. Japan as self-proclaimed "character superpower" wants to make a difference. Everyday life in Japan is filled with characters: so-called "working characters" that communicate information and "commercial characters" like Hello Kitty.

The Tokyo 2020 Olympic mascot Miraitowa and the Paralympic mascot Someity balance between cool and cute in their appearance (see Figure 24.1). While their Pokémon-like designs equal that of commercial brands, their life-sized costumed variants that attend promotional events resemble *yuru-kyara*, another type of mascot representing prefectures or institutions in Japan. One internationally acclaimed example is the black, round-bellied mascot character Kumamon of Kumamoto Prefecture.

The Olympic mascots' color coding alone, blue for Miraitowa and pink for Someity, is clearly gendered, despite the official statement that they are not. In addition, the official mascot website describes Miraitowa as "very athletic" and having a "strong sense of justice," while Someity is "usually quiet" and said to be influenced by cherry blossoms. Both designs are based on the traditional Ichimatsu "check" pattern which is also part of the Olympic logo. The Olympic mascot's name is derived from *mirai* (future) and *towa* (eternity), while Someity is a portmanteau of the cherry tree *Somei yoshino* and the English words "so mighty."

Both the design and selection process for the mascots were explicitly set up to engage the general population. Both amateurs and professionals were allowed to submit their designs. The final design was decided through a voting process among Japanese elementary school children. They voted for the designs of professional character designer Taniguchi Ryo. Mascot goods went on sale in July 2018, with the total revenue of mascots and other

Olympic goods predicted to be about \$140 million. Will these characters remain after the Games end or will they be forgotten like their predecessors? Only time will tell.

Figure 24.1 Olympic mascots Miraitowa and Someity.

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