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To cite this article: Alisa Freedman (2014) Sesame Street's place in Japan: marketing multicultural New York in cosmopolitan Tokyo, Japan Forum, 26:2, 144-163, DOI: 10.1080/09555803.2014.902397

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09555803.2014.902397

Published online: 12 May 2014.
Sesame Street’s place in Japan: marketing multicultural New York in cosmopolitan Tokyo

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Abstract: Sesame Street, the longest running and most popular children's program in world television history, has failed to gain a large fan base in Japan because of notions of place. Since 1969, Sesame Street has taught socialization skills, pioneered programming formats, developed marketing strategies and spread American ideologies. Sesame Street has aired in English in 145 countries; over thirty countries have developed localized versions. Japan's NHK public television broadcast Sesame Street from 1971 to 2004 to teach English to secondary-school students. In 2004, Sesame Street was moved to the commercial TV Tokyo network and was localized. Muppets were added to appeal to younger children. Yet the program was cancelled in 2007. A key to Sesame Street's worldwide success has been teaching cognitive skills and promoting compassion for local cultural differences, while tapping consumer desires for idealized American childhood. When New York was erased and the English language removed, Sesame Street could not compete with Japan's already extensive children's television market. Sesame Street characters, however, became more successful when removed from their original context.

I overview five aspects of Sesame Street in Japan and Japan in Sesame Street that best exemplify the program's cultural and consumerist politics, significance in television history and the image of urban society it represents. Namely, I analyze Sesame Street's place on children's television, the reasons for its importation and localization, depictions of Japan, broadcast history and legacy after cancellation. I argue that the kind of popularity Sesame Street has enjoyed in Japan is different than in other countries and provides insight into the Japanese television industry and marketing of American childhood. I explore a historical moment when television was particularly influential in international relations and in constructing notions of 'home'.

Keywords: television; education; children; globalization; international relations

Sesame Street, the longest-running and most popular children’s program in world television history has failed to gain a large fan base in Japan because of notions of
place. Since its inception in 1969 and internationalization in 1970, \textit{Sesame Street} has influenced global youth culture, world politics, the spread of US ideologies, educational theories, notions of race and ethnicity, language learning, television programming, cross-media promotion and product marketing, performance styles and more. As of October 2012, \textit{Sesame Street} has been televised in more than 145 countries, and over thirty countries have developed localized versions. In 1971 \textit{Sesame Street} became the first American program imported to teach English and was broadcast on Japan’s NHK public television (Nihon hōsō kyōkai) until 2004. In 2004 \textit{Sesame Street}, as it had been known for twenty-three years, was taken off the air and replaced by a local \textit{Sesame Street} with formats and Muppets aimed at pre-schoolers in Tokyo. This program was cancelled in 2007. A key to \textit{Sesame Street}'s worldwide success has been using television to teach cognitive skills and promote compassion for local cultural differences, while tapping consumer desires for idealized American childhood. When New York was erased and the emphasis on English language was removed, the program could not compete with Japan’s already extensive array of children’s shows; yet \textit{Sesame Street} continued to inspire successful copycat series. \textit{Sesame Street} characters became more successful when removed from their original context and found unforeseen commercial usages.

This article overviews five aspects of \textit{Sesame Street} in Japan and Japan in \textit{Sesame Street} that best exemplify the program’s cultural and consumerist politics, its significance in television history and the image of urban society it represents. Namely, it analyzes \textit{Sesame Street}’s place on children’s television, reasons for its importation and localization, depictions of Japan, broadcast history and legacy after cancellation. I argue that the kind of popularity \textit{Sesame Street} has enjoyed in Japan is different than in other countries and provides insight into the Japanese television industry and marketing of American childhood. Because Japanese \textit{Sesame Street} is essentially American \textit{Sesame Street} modified for the local setting, the model of cultural flow it represents is neither one of top-down imposition nor one of appropriation that takes the original entirely out of context. Instead, it is a fertile middle ground on which to explore issues of agency in globalization. \textit{Sesame Street}, created at a time when television was particularly influential in international relations and defining notions of ‘home’, shows how Japan has viewed its relationship with the United States.\footnote{1}

\textbf{The landscape of early children’s television in Japan}

It is important to know the history of children’s television before and around the time of \textit{Sesame Street} to understand why it was shown in Japan. In large part because they were inexpensive to make, easy to film, able to air in the daytime before primetime hours and could attract families, children’s programs have been a feature of Japanese television since the start of regular broadcasting by NHK and all four commercial stations in the 1950s.\footnote{2} On 1 February 1953,
NHK began a limited programming schedule of events at which cameras could easily be present and which did not require elaborate stage sets. These included professional sports (especially wrestling and baseball), musical performances and stage plays also broadcast on NHK radio. The first programs reached few households, for television was an attraction too expensive for most families. A fourteen-inch television set cost upwards of 140,000 yen in 1955, at a time when people could purchase a small plot of land in cities for only around 200,000 yen and a male factory worker earned around 7,000 yen a month (Itô et al. 1988, pp. 16–17, Partner 1999, pp. 71–72, 165). Most people watched television as a public or a neighborhood, as crowds, sometimes numbering in the hundreds, even thousands, gathered around appliance shop windows or television sets placed on pedestals in outdoor spaces. Restaurants and bars used television sets to attract customers. Television became more popular through live NHK broadcasts of national events, especially the royal wedding of future Heisei Emperor Akihito and Michiko Shōda on 10 April 1959 that was watched by 540,000 viewers at a time when only 24 per cent of the population owned televisions (Partner 1999, pp. 174–175) and the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, for which the first global satellite television link was established. In addition the growth of television was made possible by technological advances, decreasing costs of television sets, advertising and the extension and diversification of programming. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Japanese public came to see owning electronic household appliances as a means towards a comfortable middle-class life. By 1965, 90 per cent of Japanese households had purchased televisions, and programs had become a primary form of entertainment (Schilling 1997, p. 35).

Common features of children’s programming date from the early years of television. Starting in 1946, the NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute (Hōsō Bunka Kenkyūjo) began studying children’s television, especially programs that could be aired in schools. NHK had used radio for educational purposes, as in the ‘Radio School Programming’ (Rajio Gakkō Hōso) from 1935 (see Tiene et al. 1986, pp. 178–179). ‘Gakkō Hōso’, or ‘School Programs’, which NHK designed for an audience of students in schools to watch with the guidance of teachers, began for secondary schools in 1953 and for kindergartens in 1956 (see Kodaira 1990, p. 1). A separate NHK educational network (NHK Kyōiku Terebi) opened in 1960, and most educational programs were moved there. Many of the earliest children’s programs were puppet shows, the first of which was Tamamomae (Before seaweed) set in the Edo period, begun in 1953, the first year of NHK television broadcasting. One of the longest running was the adventure series Pop-up Gourd Island (Hyōkkori hyōtan-jima, 1964–1969). Other shows featured human hosts assisted by large characters (humans in costume). The use of characters perhaps demonstrates the influence of monster (kaijū) movies like the Godzilla series and ‘tokusatsu’, or special effects filming, which became common on 1960s television beginning with the superhero Gekkō Kamen in 1961 and the Ultra Series (Urutoraman, began in 1966 on TBS). Kaijū and tokusatsu
were among the first genres of mass-market film and television from any country imported into the United States. Early ‘interactive’ television encouraged creative play instead of passive viewing habits and included arts-and-crafts programs like *We can do it* (*Dekiru kana*), starring the human host Noppo and his large gopher Gontarō, which lasted from 1967 to 1990 and was also broadcast in Latin America.

There was a strong American presence on early Japanese television, but foreign shows were only for entertainment. Among the first US programs to be shown on Japanese television were cartoon series, such as Hanna Barbera’s *Huckleberry hound* (*Chiken hakkuru*) from 1959 to 1961 on NET, the educational network that became Asahi Television in 1977. Cartoons could be dubbed easily into Japanese and thereby localized, while providing a window onto American popular culture and technological progress. *Astro Boy* (*Tetsuwan atomu*) was the first Japanese television series regularly aired in the United States and, for a few weeks in winter 1964 (months before the Tokyo Olympics), was the most popular program on the NBC network (Mori 2003, p. 88). Japanese cartoons aimed at younger children included those based on manga by the artistic duo Fujiko-F-Fujita (real names Fujimoto Hiroshi and Abiko Motō), famous for *Doraemon*, which has aired on Asahi Television on Friday evenings since 1979. For example, *Obake no Q-tarō* (*Q-Tarō the ghost*) about the adventures of a mischievous but friendly ghost, perhaps inspired by the American *Casper*, was broadcast in three series from 1965 to 1968, 1971 to 1972 and 1985 to 1987. A main character was the American ghost Dorompa, who was pink with a red star and blue stripes on his body and drove a large car.

The longest-running NHK children’s educational programs, *Together with mother* (*Okāsan to issho*, begun in 1959) and *Songs for everyone* (*Minna no uta*, begun in 1961), have formats similar to later *Sesame Street*. *Together with mother*, a multi-format show of songs, dances, live-action and animated shorts, and physical exercises, teaches proper hygiene, nutrition and other life skills. The title reflects the postwar family norm of a mother who remained home to care for the children while the father commuted to work during the day. The program was ‘hosted’ by two adult singers and dancers – ‘older sister’ (*onēsan*) and ‘older brother’ (*onisan*), the forms of address indicating their close ties to child viewers as ‘family members’. Three animal-like characters were friends with the humans. The ‘doll theater’ (*Ningyō geki*) sequences of both puppets and actors in costume led to spin-off series like *Three little pigs* (*Bājiitū*, 1960–1967). The commercial Fuji television followed a similar model in *Fun with mother! Ping pong pang!* (*Mama to asobō! Pin pon pan!*), later renamed *Everyone play! Ping pong pang!* (*Minna to asobō! Pin pon pan!*), which aired from 1966 to 1982 with cable television and spin-offs through to around 2002. The program is best known for the exercise song ‘Ping pong pang’ that topped the music-ranking Oricon charts in 1972.

*Songs for everyone* is similar to shorts in *Sesame Street*. This five-minute program is comprised of one or two original songs by both well-known and
up-and-coming singers with original animated, and occasionally live-action, videos. The more than 1,310 songs as of October 2012 provide a rich window into the history of Japan’s popular music and animation styles. Songs often feature child or child-like characters and are sung from a child’s perspective. Subjects include human emotions, family relationships, favorite foods, and non-political topical issues like respect for the elderly, as evident in ‘Computer grandmother’ (Konputta oobaachan created by Sakamoto Ryuichi in 1981) (Izumi et al. 2005, p. 32). The most popular Songs for everyone have been those with interesting art, silly lyrics and catchy tunes. In 1999, the tango song ‘Three Dango brothers’ (Dango sankyōdai), personifying three rice-balls on a stick as siblings who play and fight, topped the Oricon charts for three weeks and sold over a million copies (Oricon Style 1997–2012). UrumaDelvi’s ‘Butt-biting bug’ (Oshiri kajiri mushi) about a magical insect that encourages people to communicate better by biting their rear ends was so popular that it aired for five consecutive months in 2007. Such programming as Together with mother and Songs for everyone paved the way for Sesame Street to enter the Japanese market.

Sesame Street was attractive to the NHK in 1970, a time when the United States was considered a trendsetter in world television. Japanese producers were seeking ways to use entertainment to educate children, a goal of Sesame Street. Sesame Street was innovative, while encompassing formats familiar to Japanese viewers, such as characters who interacted with humans, puppetry, songs, skits and animation. As stated by Fuji Television director Noda Kōichiro, when he reminisced in an interview about watching Sesame Street for the first time, ‘Everything was so fresh. It was amazing that education by visual images could be so much fun’ (Noda 1987, p. 37).

**Sesame Street’s background and goals**

Knowledge of the background and goals of American Sesame Street is needed in order to understand why it was chosen by NHK and how it influenced Japanese television. Sesame Street premiered in the United States on 10 November 1969 on the 180 National Educational Television stations (NET, 1953–1970), a predecessor of the Public Broadcasting System (PBS, begun in 1970). Children’s Television Workshop (renamed Sesame Workshop in 2000), a non-profit organization founded by producer Joan Ganz-Cooney and Vice-President of the Carnegie Corporation Lloyd Morrissett, created Sesame Street as a reaction to what they perceived as the poor quality of American television in the 1960s. The 1968 Nielsen Ratings, the standard measurement of American audiences, indicated that children under age 6 were spending more than 54.1 hours a week watching television. In the late 1960s, American television comprised three commercial networks (unlike Japan’s four), plus a local station or two; educational programs were often on lower UHF frequencies that did not reach all households. Children’s television was dominated by cartoons and live-action series with tie-ins to
toys and was largely unregulated. Parental and other audience criticism of excessive commercialism and violence resulted in Congressional Hearings, such as those in 1952 on the effects of television on children, and the founding of grassroots movements such as Action for Children’s Television (1968–1992). Thus the Children’s Television Workshop strove to make better use of television and to find a means to teach cognitive skills instead of merely encouraging creative play (Davis 2008, p. 128). When the Children’s Television Workshop began, their budget was $8.2 million, the largest given to a children’s program; 49 per cent came from the United States government, with the rest from the Carnegie Corporation, the Ford Foundation and private groups (Hendershot 1998, p. 142). Sesame Workshop was later also supported by UNICEF, Merrill Lynch (a primary sponsor of China’s Sesame Street) and other corporations, and by the CBS commercial television network, to which Morrisett had first proposed the show in 1967 with the idea that advertisements would bracket rather than interrupt the program.

Inspired by the United States government’s Head Start Program that assisted low-income children and their families, Sesame Street was created to help New York City children prepare for elementary school and featured a regular cast of actors and Muppets (puppets and large characters), celebrity guest appearances, songs and jokes, which also interested their parents. Sesame Street was the first American show based on systematic in-house research and testing, as were NHK children’s programs but about which Cooney and Morrisett most likely did not know. The underlying belief was that children all have the same learning process, regardless of cultural context, and that intelligence could be fostered. The elitist assumption that low-income parents were unable to educate their children perhaps also factored into the creation of Sesame Street. In 1973, Sesame Street was watched by 94 per cent of all the television viewers in Harlem, the area in New York City that inspired the program (Lesser 1974, p. 206).

Since its start, Sesame Street has taught letters, numbers, shapes and colors, problem-solving techniques, human emotions, socialization skills and such basic life skills as traffic safety, proper hygiene and healthy eating habits. Beginning in the 1970s, the show has covered issues affecting families, including marriage, pregnancy and death, in part due to events that have befallen the cast. In 1970, the Children’s Television Workshop began marketing and licensing products to supplement the television curriculum without being directly advertised on programs.

Sesame Street has used a striking amount of parody, especially of celebrities and commercial television, in order to appeal to adult viewers. Parody, which works only when the subject is mainstream enough for audiences to easily get the joke, situates Sesame Street in a history of American entertainment from vaudeville to video games and perhaps makes its export into new national contexts difficult. Parody also renders possible competitors less powerful by exaggerating their characteristics and making them laughable. Parody has been an element often
lacking in Japanese children’s programs, including the local *Sesame Street*, as I will explain.

Premised on the belief that unpredictability would hold children’s attention, *Sesame Street* was designed to be fast-paced and visually varied, with a range of skits of different lengths and subjects. It borrowed formats from commercial television, especially variety programs like *Rowan and Martin’s laugh-in* (NBC network, 1967–1973) and intentionally campy live-action *Batman* (ABC network, 1966–1968) that used words on the screen to visualize sound effects, and from vaudeville (Davis 2008, pp. 148, 150). A nod was made to marketing, for each episode was ‘sponsored’ by numbers and letters (the first show by W, S and E and the numbers 2 and 3). A multi-ethnic cast, originally two men and two women, spanning generations was chosen to defy stereotypes on television and promote acceptance of cultural diversity, but people from Asia were not represented until 1998 when the Japanese-American actor Alan Muraoka was added as the proprietor of Mr. Hooper’s store. Seeing English spoken by foreigners was a selling point of the show in Japan. Jim Henson’s Muppets, which first appeared on the *Ed Sullivan show* (CBS network, 1948–1971) in 1966, were included to teach emotions (Davis 2008, p. 149). Most other shows using puppets did not have them interact with people, as characters in costume do, and be part of the same world out of concern for mixing fantasy and reality. Yet researching and testing showed that children reacted best when the Muppets and people lived on the same street (see, for example, Gilkow 2009, p. 4).

Always called an ‘experiment’, *Sesame Street* has been altered to fit new audiences, environments, world events, educational theories, behaviorist psychology and developments in visual media, animation and digital technologies. Early seasons contained things that could not be aired today, including characters with psychological problems that they do not try to solve, such as Oscar the Grouch, an ill-mannered hoarder (instead of recycler) of trash who appears less on the show than he once did. The visual appearance and voice qualities of Muppets have changed, often according to responses received during *Sesame Street*’s extensive work with test audiences. For example, fangs were removed from the prototype of Cookie Monster (1966) so as not to frighten children; also, after the first season, Big Bird’s original pinhead became bigger and he transformed from a bumbling adult to an intellectually curious 6-year-old. *Sesame Street* has depicted people of different ethnicities, but almost all of the main Muppets have been male. The pink Abby Cadabby was added in 2006 as a major female Muppet. She is the only Muppet to ‘emigrate’ to Sesame Street and is supposed to represent a child from South Asia. Sesame Workshop declared that Muppets do not have sexualities, in part as a response to a 2011 Facebook petition to allow Bert and Ernie to marry (Sesame Workshop 2011).

*Sesame Street*’s success has been dependent on the notion of idealized urban life, as is clear in its vision of New York as a quintessentially American yet global
city. The choice of a friendly neighborhood on the mean streets of New York was unprecedented for children’s programs, which rarely had movie-quality stage sets. On *Sesame Street*, the action is on the neighborhood street, where diverse individuals form a supportive community, thereby becoming a microcosm of what a city should be. Set designer Charles Rosen and his team scouted locations in and around Harlem, Bronx and the Upper West Side, and the 123 Sesame Street brownstone is based on an apartment building on Columbus Avenue (Davis 2008, p. 155, Murphy 2009). Although originally a straight line, the street, filmed in a studio in New York’s Queens Borough, was curved to provide better camera angles (Gilkow 2009, p. 27). A title originally proposed for the show – *123 Avenue B* (after New York’s Lower East Side avenue) – was rejected because it sounded too specific to one location; another title – *The video classroom* – did not take the street into account (Davis 2008, p. 156, Murphy 2009). The name Sesame Street derived from the phrase ‘Open Sesame!’ from American children’s versions *Ali Baba and the forty thieves* and was suggested by Children’s Television Workshop consultant Virginia Schone who researched day-care children (Davis 2008, p. 156). Because real urban streets had crime and lacked racial diversity, some commentators criticized *Sesame Street* as a ‘museum display’ (Hendershot 1998, p. 156).

While originally darkly colored, with paint peeling, trashcans overflowing and the sounds of cars in the distance, the Sesame Street set brightened, especially in the 1990s, as American cities gentrified and Sesame Workshop expanded worldwide. Under the ‘Around the Corner’ urban renewal plan for the twenty-fifth season (1993–1994), Sesame Street was extended to include a cul-de-sac with a day-care center, dance studio, playground with a pond, among other features of neighborhood renewal; the set debuted in the television special *Sesame Street stays up late!* (1993), a celebration of New Year’s Eve on different international *Sesame Street* programs, shown on NHK on New Year’s Day 1994, and was promoted through children’s books (see Stiles and Berger 1994). Sesame Street then shortened to a dead-end alley, and many of the new buildings disappeared by 1997 because they confused children.

While set locally, *Sesame Street* had a global reach from the start. One emphasis of the program has been on teaching empathy for local cultural differences, a lesson Sesame Workshop believes should be taught in children’s native languages. In the 1990s, John Wilson, Senior Vice-President of Programming at the Public Broadcasting Service remarked that *Sesame Street* had the ‘familiar and beloved face of multiculturalism’ and was the ‘poster show for respect of every race, creed, and color that exists (and several – such as the blue and green cast members – that don’t’ (cited in Morrow 2005, p. 164). Sesame Workshop began pursuing co-productions with other countries as early as 1969, when seed grants from the Carnegie Corporation and Ford Foundation were expiring, and it extended international ventures because it increasingly relied on the licensing of
characters for revenue, especially after much US federal funding was withdrawn from the Children’s Television Workshop in 1981. The first agreement to air *Sesame Street* outside the United States was with the Canadian Broadcast Company (CBC) in 1970. That same year, American Armed Forces Radio and Television made the first 130 episodes available to military families in sixteen nations, including South Korea but not Japan. Continued support of military families is currently evidenced in live *Sesame Street* tours on American bases in Japan, not only bringing an element of ‘home’ to children who do not speak Japanese and nostalgia to adults raised abroad, but perhaps unintentionally demonstrating how culture reinforces American imperialism.

International co-productions have involved collaboration between Sesame Workshop and local producers to develop and test a curriculum that adapts basic *Sesame Street* goals to local needs. Familiar Muppets appear alongside new characters on sets that combine features of *Sesame Street* and neighborhoods in other world cities. Despite the country, the show always uses the ‘Sunny Days’ theme song. The first co-productions were Brazil’s *Vila Sésamo* and Mexico’s *Plaza Sésamo* in 1972 and Germany’s *Sesamestrasse* in 1973. Arguably, the most successful has been South Africa’s *Takalani Sesame*, which began in 2000 to promote tolerance, cooperation and harmony and features Kami, an HIV-positive Muppet who represents a child around age 8 (added in 2002). Kami also appears in Nigeria’s *Sesame Square*, launched in May 2011. The *Takalani Sesame – talk to me* special won the Governor of Tokyo Prize in 2005 for advancements in global educational television.

**Japan in *Sesame Street* and Big Bird in Japan**

Over the decades, images of Japan, especially its classical culture, have appeared on *Sesame Street* as part of Sesame Workshop’s agenda for cultural diversity and global marketing. Such segments include the 2009 counting songs ‘10 Japanese ladies’ and ‘15 Japanese crests’, both inspired by Edo-period art and set to the music of samisen, shakuhachi and gongs. In the picture book *A visit to the Sesame Street library* (1986), Big Bird learns origami (Hautzig, 1986). In 1997, Squashimi, member of the international Worm Air and Space Agency (WASA) Wigglesprise Spaceship crew, was one of the first worms to wiggle on the moon. Squashimi honors Doi Takao, who, that year, became the first Japanese astronaut to conduct a space walk. Japan was also stereotyped on the *Muppet show*, a commercial spinoff (CBS, 1976 to 1981), perhaps most infamously in the Swedish Chef’s October 1976 attack on a Japanese cake. When the Chef, singing in incomprehensible Swedish, tries to slice the cake, the cake protests in unintelligible ‘samurai’ Japanese. The chef silences the cake with the help of a Swedish-Japanese dictionary and ‘Cakenschmooscher’ baseball bat. Japanese companies have been involved in the production of *Sesame Street*-related culture. *Jim Henson’s Muppet babies* (CBS, 1984–1991) was outsourced to Tōei Animation in Tokyo.

*Big Bird in Japan*, which was broadcast in Japan with the modified title *Big Bird has come at last* (Biggu bādo yatte kita), was a co-production between the Sesame Workshop and NHK, with the help of such advisors as the Japan Center for International Exchange, and featured Big Bird, Barkley the dog (added as a character in 1977) and Japanese actress and singer Kawakami Maiko. This one-hour special, written and directed by Jon Stone, an original producer of *Sesame Street* and creator of Big Bird, aired on NHK in 1988 before being broadcast in the United States on CBS in 1989. It was a sequel to *Big Bird in China* (CBS, 1983) that was filmed in China when most Americans were unable to travel there. Inspired by an old scroll in Chinatown, Big Bird and Barkley take a slow boat to China and interact with children, while visiting cities and the Great Wall. Because they enjoyed their trip to China, Big Bird and Barkley sign up for a bus tour of Japan. In Tokyo, their first stop, they are left behind by a harried bus guide because they are a minute late. While trying to catch their tour in time for their return flight to Sesame Street, Big Bird and Barkley meet Kaguya-hime, a beautiful woman who is also trying to leave Japan. Together they travel from Tokyo to Kyoto, experiencing both new things and old customs. Kaguya-hime, dressed in 1980s fashion, is the princess of *Tale of the bamboo cutter* (Taketori monogatari), the tenth-century tale that gives the program its structure. In the show, the children of the Himawari Kindergarten perform a stage play of *Tale of the bamboo cutter*, which is narrated by Pat Morita, and Big Bird and Barkley learn that Kaguya-hime, originally from the capital of the moon (Tsuki no miyako), appeared on earth as a baby in a piece of glowing bamboo and was discovered by an elderly couple. They later realize that their travel companion is this very same Kaguya-hime.

*Big Bird in Japan* unfolds as a series of episodes in a format more narrative than an ordinary *Sesame Street* episode but with songs and skits that regular viewers would expect to find. Songs teach simple Japanese phrases and skits explain contemporary and classical Japan. Big Bird and Barkley greet people as they walk around Tokyo, spend the night with a home-stay family and tour temples and shrines in Kyoto, among other adventures. Big Bird’s cultural mistakes provide gentle humor and serve as teaching tools. For example, Big Bird mistakenly thinks that the people in Tokyo are telling him that they are from the state of Ohio, rather than wishing him ‘good morning’ (*ohayo*), and he learns proper table manners in a restaurant. As the case for most *Sesame Street* specials, *Big Bird in Japan* teaches an emotional lesson. Here, the message is to have the courage to try new things. Bravery is represented by bamboo, which is ‘thin but able to withstand the strongest wind’, as Kaguya-hime states (*Big Bird in Japan* 1988). As Big Bird says to Barkley, ‘I bet we did more and saw more and learned more than if we never got lost at all’ (*Big Bird in Japan* 1988). On the return flight (on program sponsor Japan Airlines), Barkley carries a stick of bamboo in his mouth,
underscoring the symbolism and Kaguya-hime’s true identity. *Big Bird in Japan* contains some images that frightened children, including close-ups of Kannon statues from Kyoto’s Sanjusangen-dō Temple set against a black background to loud gongs. Like other *Sesame Street* shows, including the first episode on 10 November 1969, children talk with, and even take food from, strangers.

*Big Bird in Japan* and *Big Bird in China* were the only two programs in which Sesame Street characters travelled abroad. In the first Sesame Street feature film *Follow that bird* (1985), Big Bird goes on the road in a fictionalized state of Illinois. Most of the characters’ adventures involve New York landmarks, such as the television special *Don’t eat the pictures: Sesame Street in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (1983), and farms, parks and other places which inner-city children visit on class trips. It was more common for international cultures to come to Sesame Street than for the characters to go abroad. For example, Big Bird decorated Sesame Street to look Mexico when the character Rosita was homesick in 2005.

*Big Bird in Japan* showed Americans Japan during the Bubble Economy era, especially in the scenes of Tokyo’s consumer culture and the characters’ excitement about taking the shinkansen bullet train to Kyoto. Yet the focus is on classical culture, a contrast to stern images of corporate Japan and its economic tensions with the United States that filled the news in the late 1980s. The Big Bird sings of his ‘homesickness’ for Japan even before he leaves in an ode to its ‘pretty paper houses, funny twisted trees, all the little children speaking Japanese, and a mountain shining through the sun and the rain’, thus idealizing Japan as pastoral, despite all the modern urban developments he saw (*Big Bird in Japan* 1988). Perhaps more importantly for the purposes of this article, *Big Bird in Japan* demonstrates the close ties between NHK and Sesame Workshop.

**Sesame Street on Japanese television: from NHK to TV Tokyo**

*Sesame Street* made its debut on Japanese television more than a decade before *Big Bird in Japan*. According to stories recorded from early days of *Sesame Street*, Mike Dann, whom Ganz-Cooney hired from CBS to head international productions, contacted ‘Benny Yoshida’,8 his friend at NHK, to suggest *Sesame Street* as a new format for teaching English (Davis 2008, p. 210). NHK paid $250,000 to run the series on Japanese holidays to fill in for regular programming. The decision was also prompted by *Sesame Street’s* winning the NHK-sponsored Japan Prize International Contest for Educational Media (Nihonshō Kyōiku Bangumi Kokusai Kongūru) in 1970 (Kojima 1994, p. 108). Episodes from the first season of *Sesame Street*, which could be watched in any order, were selected and edited for a target NHK audience of students in their third year of junior high school English classes, much older than the program’s intended pre-schoolers. One change to the content of *Sesame Street* was the replacement of Spanish-language segments with English ones. NHK aired thirty episodes during the school
summer vacation of 1971, followed by six episodes during the winter vacation, every morning from 9 to 10 except Saturday. NHK producer Kojima Akira, who was involved with Sesame Street from the start, promoted it as the only language-learning television program to show ‘real’ English at a natural speed. Kojima described ‘Sesame English’ (Sesame Eigo) as ‘difficult but gentle’ but was concerned about ‘street slang’ (Kojima 1994, pp. 12–14, 18–19). Names of Muppets included sounds difficult to pronounce in Japanese – Biggu bādo, Kukki monsūta and Erumo. Past American programs had been dubbed into Japanese; many were given Japanese theme songs that explained the plot and characters, as in the case of live-action Superman, one of the most popular series on Japanese television in the late 1950s (Clements and Tamamuro 2003, p. xvi). Before and at the same time as Sesame Street, English-learning programs produced in Japan were regularly broadcast on NHK radio and television. Weekly in 1977, NHK offered fifty hours of lessons in the five official languages of the United Nations – English, Spanish, Chinese, Russian and French – along with German (Blair 1997, p. 4). To accompany broadcasts, NHK published Sesame Street episode guides in the form of a magazine, a practice that they also used for their other educational programs.

In the summer of 1971, NHK Sesame Street was watched by 1.6 to 2.6 per cent of the national television audience, around the same rate as other NHK English-learning programs and was considered a moderate success. According to surveys completed by viewers who purchased episode guides, the audience (75.5 per cent of whom were between the ages of 11 and 20) included 64.7 per cent junior and high school students, 7.9 per cent elementary school students starting English, 14.9 per cent company workers (kaishain), 7.3 per cent university students and 2.9 per cent housewives (Kojima 1994, pp. 114–115). Viewers were mostly female (61.2 per cent) and lived in cities (Kojima 1994, p. 113). Only 77 per cent of the audience (Kojima 1994, p. 115) answered that they watched Sesame Street to improve their English listening skills, implying different but unstated reasons behind their choice, such as maintaining language skills acquired abroad and a general interest in the United States.

Sesame Street was taken off air for a period in the 1980s due to poor ratings. Broadcasts resumed from 1988 to March 2004. NHK experimented with ways to reach more viewers, such as introducing Japanese-language narration in the early 1990s and dual-language formats in 1995 and later dubbing programs into Japanese. To promote Sesame Street, Big Bird participated in the 1993 NHK New Year’s Eve Kōhaku uta gassen music contest, a major annual event on Japanese television since 1951, the day before Sesame Street stays up late (mentioned earlier in this article) was shown. Commercial tie-ins to Sesame Street included Sony Creative Products (character goods starting in 1989) and Berlitz Language Schools. For example, Sesame Eigo, a Japanese version of Sesame English, co-produced by Berlitz and Sesame Workshop and first appearing in Taiwan and China in 1991, was broadcast on NHK from 2001. Accompanying the program
were electronic flash-card readers and CDs designed to teach English to children younger than age 7. The main character Tingo, who resembles a tiger and speaks around 4,000 languages, is an exchange student in the United States living with his friend Nikki. Only 80 per cent of their conversation was in English; the rest was in Japanese (Gordenker 2001). Despite these efforts, *Sesame Street* ratings fell below 1.3 per cent of the national audience in 2003, lower than the 3 to 4 per cent of other NHK English-study programs (e.g. Takahara 2004a). Yet this was not the main reason why *Sesame Street* was cancelled.

*Sesame Workshop* had pressured NHK to create a Japanese-language co-production that would teach culture in language children could understand instead of broadcasting the English original. NHK refused, arguing that *Sesame Street* is important because of its English and access to American daily life (e.g. Takahara 2004a) and should be shown as is. In 2004, *Sesame Workshop* terminated contracts with NHK and gave the commercial TV Tokyo (Terebi Tokyo) network permission to produce a new local version that would come with rights to create a market of toys, software, clothing and other goods for pre-schoolers (Negishi 2004). In 2004, more than 68 per cent of *Sesame Street* revenues came from licensing of products, and a 4 per cent jump in revenue that year was largely from licensing agreements in Japan (Carvajal 2005; *Sesame Street* Partners Japan 2004, p. 3).

The local version, with new Muppets and a stage set that resembled *Sesame Street* but with a Japanese-style convenience store instead of Mr. Hooper’s storefront, aired from October 2004, mainly on Sunday mornings, the prime spot for programs for children, who usually attended school Monday through Saturday. NHK refused to be part of the co-production. *Sesame Street* Partners Japan (SSPJ) was established in 2004 as a joint venture between *Sesame Workshop* and Japanese media, advertising and licensing companies to develop and manage all rights, including merchandising, to Japanese local *Sesame Street* and the original American show in Japan. SPPJ, which controlled around 700 licensees, representing $1.2 billion in business worldwide, was disbanded in 2010. (Negishi 2004, *Sesame Street* Partners Japan 2004).

According to the *Sesame Workshop* Annual Report (2006) the Japanese co-production focused on the ‘socio-emotional development of young children’, helping them to ‘use their imagination, think independently, appreciate diversity, and learn simple English phrases’. The program featured formats common to Japanese television, and topics were drawn from Japanese daily life, including food culture, school festivals and family relationships. As in the case of other *Sesame Street* co-productions, the cast was trained by *Sesame Workshop*, and Kevin Clash, who voiced Elmo, spent two weeks in Tokyo in 2004 auditioning and teaching puppeteers (E-Mook 2011, p. 23, *Sesame Workshop* 2010).

The TV Tokyo version featured Elmo, Big Bird and Cookie Monster, the most popular *Sesame Street* characters in Japan having a 97 per cent domestic awareness in 2004 (*Sesame Street* Partners Japan 2004, p. 3). New Muppets had names that sounded American or otherwise foreign. There were more female characters than
in the American version, and they furthered stereotypes of girls as more vulnerable and nurturing than boys. The male Mojabo, a green and purple monster who is bossy and likes to exercise, served as the program host, a nod to the conventions in Japanese television, which frequently features figures that host the entire show. The frog Pierre and bird Arthur did a *manzai* routine; Arthur spoke in Kansai dialect in reference to the fact that this form of comedy of a straight man and funny man has roots in Osaka. Teena, colored pink to fit the aesthetics of the ‘cute’ (*kawaii*) culture marketed to young girls, enjoyed singing and was voiced by Mizushiro Rena, former actress in the all-female Takarazuka Revue. The pony-tailed Meg, short for Megumi, closely resembled a human girl, and Grorie, who looked like an orange Grover, dressed in pink with a white apron, as if she were a waitress. The human cast included a convenience-store worker named Dario, played by actor and singer Toda Dario who had appeared in other NHK English-learning programs. There was also an ‘older sister’ as in the earlier Japanese program *Together with mother*. Only six of the thirty minutes of each episode were spent on English lessons, but those were the segments most produced as commercial products and that have endured the longest. For example in ‘English on street’ (*Engurishu on sutorito*) skits, a Muppet, often Elmo, learns an English word or phrase, such as ‘Taste’s bad’, ‘Cool!’ and ‘Be careful’, through conversations with Dario.

TV Tokyo cancelled the program in September 2007, in part due to viewer ratings, which had been as low as 1.5 per cent in December 2004, and problems with content control (Takahara 2004b). Audiences criticized the program’s use of bad English and annoying character voices. Viewers were accustomed to certain voice qualities, showing that sound is as important as image in designing characters. The program was competing, in this and other respects, with American *Sesame Street* as it had aired on NHK (Takahara 2004c). Under contract, all content needed to be approved by Sesame Workshop. For example, Sesame Workshop rejected a script by TV Tokyo producer Beniya Yoshikazu and his team about a child who tripped in a race at a school sports festival and is left behind by his peers. Yoshikazu hoped to teach the value of perseverance (*gambaru*) through this scenario familiar to Japanese children, but Sesame Workshop instead insisted that the other children demonstrate compassion and help him (Takahara 2004b). As stated in 2004 by Gary Knell, President and CEO of Sesame Workshop, about the preference for American *Sesame Street*: ‘It’s the complete opposite of the rest of the world... Everyone else is saying, “Take away American imperialism”, and here, people were saying they want it imposed on them’ (quoted in Negishi 2004). Without the English-language component and global sanitized image of urban America, *Sesame Street* was just one of many programs aimed at pre-schoolers. Unlike other countries that co-produced *Sesame Street*, Japan had a thriving children’s television industry that was often promoted by manga, anime, books, games, toys and other media.

Although failing to achieve an audience, *Sesame Street* inspired commercial spin-offs just as *Together with mother* had. The influence was most apparent
in Fuji Television’s morning program *Hirake! Ponkikki* (1973–1993) aimed at 3-year-olds, directed by Noda Kōichiro, who founded, in 1976, the Japanese Television Workshop Company, Ltd. (Nihon Terewāku Kabushiki Kaisha), a name similar to the Children’s Television Workshop. ‘Hirake’, meaning open, is borrowed directly from ‘Open Sesame!’, from which the title *Sesame Street* derived. (The cute sound ‘ponkikki’ is the name of a character in a novel written by Asano Yoshizumi, Fuji Television director and former Vice-Minister of Japan’s Internal Affairs and Communications Bureau (Noda 1987, p. 37).) *Hirake! Ponkikki* was based on research conducted at Tokyo University and taught topics covered by *Sesame Street*, along with discipline and musical skills. Episodes involved live-action skits, animated shorts and both well-known and original songs in English and Japanese. The hosts, ‘older sister’ and ‘older brother’, accompanied the exuberant green dinosaur Gachapin and red yeti Mukku. Gachapin bears a striking resemblance to the purple Barney the Friendly Dinosaur, later created in 1987 and star of a public television program that became one of *Sesame Street*’s top competitors in the United States. The most famous original song was ‘Swim, Taiyaki!’ (*Oyoge Taiyaki-kun*), sung by Masato Shimon, about a sweet-bean filled fish-shaped cake (*taiyaki*) who wants to enjoy life as a real fish would and freely swims in the ocean; however, in the end, Taiyaki-kun is caught by a fisherman and eaten. The song, first played in December 1975, captured the feelings of adults who felt trapped in their lives. It was the first single to debut on the Oricon charts as number one and to stay in the top place for eleven weeks, selling over 4.53 million copies to become perhaps the best-selling song in Japan (Oricon Style 2008). Thus, although *Sesame Street* did not survive on television, it nourished the market for children’s culture. *Sesame Street* and its spin-offs constitute a case study in Japan’s dominant marketing trend of adapting successful formulas but not internationalizing its own programs because the domestic market for them is already strong enough.

**Sesame Street after Japanese television**

*Sesame Street* is a means through which to reflect on the creative appropriation of cultural forms. Although the television program failed to achieve an audience, Big Bird, Elmo, Mojabo, Teena and other *Sesame Street* characters received greater exposure after TV Tokyo took control of *Sesame Street* in 2004. Muppets became more popular in Japan when freed from their original context, becoming a set of instantly recognizable characters to which different cultural meanings could be ascribed. People did not need to watch *Sesame Street* to appreciate them. Muppets have been adopted into the practice of using cute characters to represent places, agencies and concepts, thus making them easier to remember and softening their sterner associations. This usage has been applied to characters created by corporations, like Hello Kitty, and mascots generated through the efforts of government offices (so-called ‘yuru-kyara’), like the Tokyo
Metropolitan Police’s gender-neutral Peopo (named from the words ‘people’ and ‘police’ and sounding like a police car siren). Muppets endorsed commercial products that had no relation to the Sesame Street curriculum, including KDDI Broadband Internet Service (2003), Daily Yamazaki Convenience Stores (2005) and Domino’s Pizza (2006). They appeared on Tokyo Metro’s posters in 2005 to promote good manners under the slogan ‘Creating the world’s happiest metro’ (Tokyo Metro 2005). The world’s only two Sesame Place Amusement Parks were in the United States (Pennsylvania, established in 1980) and Japan (Akiruno-shi, Tokyo), opened in 2003. After Tokyo’s Sesame Place closed in 2006, characters were moved to Universal Studios Japan. Sesame Street 4-D movie magic, a film attraction with four-dimensional effects like water sprays and leg ticklers, had its world premiere in 2003 at Osaka’s Universal Studios Japan. New attractions have been added, including Sesame Street Fun World (Osaka) in April 2012. Limited edition products to celebrate Sanrio’s fiftieth and Sesame Street’s fortieth anniversaries in 2009 featured Elmo and Hello Kitty meshed into one character, including Hello Kitty in an Elmo costume and a crossover with Elmo’s head on Hello Kitty body. At least eight fashion brands for men and women featured Sesame Street characters in 2011 and 2012: Beams, Fitness, Love Boat, Sr’es Rainbow, gol., Red Cat, The Back Drop, New Era (E-Mook 2011, pp. 28–33). In the local ‘Local Elmo’ (Gotochi Erumo) series of keitai straps (charms hung from and thereby personalizing mobile phones), Elmo dresses as foods and buildings and in costumes from tourist spots in Tokyo, Kyoto and Okinawa, among other places. These souvenirs derived from the extensive ‘Local Kitty’ (Gotochi Kitty) series, which began in 1998 with Lavender Kitty (marketed only in Hokkaido) and increased in offerings from around 2001. In this array of collectibles and stationery goods, Hello Kitty represents every prefecture and various historical moments, unifying the nation through her adorable image and teaching Japanese culture. Shopping ‘mooks’, publications thicker than magazines and thinner than books, about how to buy Sesame Street merchandise have been published (E-Mook 2011). Sesame Street has also been parodied, further demonstrating how well known the program is. For example, in ‘Banana Street’, a skit performed on the variety program Lincoln (Rinkān, TBS) around 2008, two comedians dressed as Ernie and Bert teach the people they supposedly meet at random on streets and in offices and other common places to say offensive things in incorrect English. After the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, Sesame Street characters visited children in shelters with 10,000 coloring books to distribute.

To stay continually relevant, Japanese Sesame Street has adopted new technologies, as evident in its animation styles, and has played a leading role in developing educational computer software. The program has kept an online presence in Japan, and an abridged version of the program’s official website is available in Japanese. Older Sesame Street websites included features not found in the United States, such as the comic strip ‘Monsters in Capes’, written in English.
and set in Japan. Especially after re-released on DVD or made accessible online, older children’s programs have achieved a new market among generations too young to have watched them on television and have inspired remakes and adaptations. For example, the NHK puppet show Pop-up Gourd Island was adapted into an anime series in 1967 and a Sega video game in 1992, and the girl band Morning Musume covered the theme song in 2003, a single that reached fourth place on the Oricon charts. Morning Musume has performed songs and videos based on other 1960s and 1970s popular culture for children and young adults, including Haikara-san ga tōru (official English translation Here comes Miss Modern), a manga about a schoolgirl set in the 1910s and 1920s. Sesame Street is part of the market for nostalgia for childhood culture although it was never popular among Japanese children.

In conclusion, Sesame Street exemplifies a moment before the development of cable and satellite television in the 1980s, of video games and software formats in the 1990s and the current digital age, when television played a more dominant role in community building, education, the marketing of popular culture and definitions of childhood. The localization of Sesame Street occurs such that the program, no matter in which country or language it airs, is recognizable to viewers who have seen it before. Yet Japan gave this American product new meaning. By coincidences and parallel developments, Sesame Street mirrored trends in Japan’s history of children’s programming in perhaps unexpected ways and inspired creative styles that the Japanese television industry had the technologies to produce. Perhaps the reason this program – designed to teach basic cognitive skills and acceptance of cultural diversity to pre-schoolers while entertaining their parents – failed was that it reached the wrong audience because of different ideological goals. The original program was not designed to teach English as a second language; the local version was not interesting to parents, as it lacked the parodies, celebrity appearances, songs and nostalgic value of the show in the United States. Muppets, however, sold alongside Hello Kitty, have come to stand for a different marketing trend. Sesame Street in Japan represents a way in which internationalism has been managed, rather than merely embraced, and how cultures have brought into close proximity through attention to local educational and commercial trends. Sesame Street provides insight into why certain programs translate more easily into foreign languages and cultures than others. It demonstrates that media meant for pre-schoolers reveal another side of the creation and consumption of culture and magnify trends of the adult world.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Jonathan Abel, Jeffrey Angles and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback and Vicky Young and Hugo Dobson for their encouragement and support.
Notes

1. Academic studies (Lesser 1974, Kojima 1994, Davis 2008), illustrated books for general readers (Gilkow 2009) and documentary films (The world according to Sesame Street 2006) have explained Sesame Street’s history, especially its early years, and successful international ventures. The few sources that mention Japan focus on the NHK broadcast; none analyzes Sesame Street’s influence on Japanese popular culture.

2. NHK was founded in 1926 with a first television broadcast in 1940. One of the first programmes was Before dinner (Yatemenai), a family drama in twelve-minute episodes. Japan’s four major commercial networks began airing programmes in the 1950s, starting with 1953 with NTV (Nihon Television), founded in 1951 as part of the Yomiuri newspaper company. In 1955, KTV, the predecessor of TBS, became the first network with commercial sponsors. Fuji Television and NET (Nihon Educational Television, later Asahi Television) started in 1955. NHK developed as a private company funded through the payment of licensing fees (jushinryō) by all families who owned televisions. Regular television began in the United States in 1948.

3. Obake no Q-tarō was serialized in manga magazines for boys published by Shogakukan, including Weekly Shōnen Sunday, from 1964 to 1966.

4. In 2008, Dorompa became the name of thee mascot of the J. League Japanese soccer F. C. Tokyo team. This Dorampa does not resemble the earlier pink ghost.

5. The first songs in April 1961 were ‘Nobody knows’ (Daremo shiranai), sung by Kusunogi Toshie and animated by Wada Makoto, and ‘Ah, lovely meadows’ (Omakiba wa midori), a translation of the Czechoslovakian folksong ‘Hořela lipka, hořela’ by the Little Singers of Tokyo (Tokyo Shōnen Gasshōtai) and set to film footage of peacefully grazing cows.

6. When the actor who played Mr Hooper (Will Lee) died of a heart attack on 7 December 1982, Sesame Street faced the problem of the disappearance of a main character. Their answer was the special Farewell Mr. Hooper, which aired on the commercial CBS network on 24 November 1983 (the Thanksgiving holiday that year). It was the first and perhaps only television programme to explain death to children.


8. I have not been able to find Benny Yoshida in my research at NHK. Perhaps the name is short for Beniya Yoshikazu, who worked for TV Tokyo on the local Japanese Sesame Street.

9. SSPJ included ASATSU-DK Inc., Kyodo Television, Ltd., Nikkeisha, Inc., Odyssey Communications, Inc., Sesame Street Partners Japan Television Tokyo Broadband Entertainment Inc. and We’ve, Inc. Commercial sponsorship of TV Tokyo’s Sesame Street included Merrill Lynch, Tomy Direct (toy company) and Cosmo Oil Company.

10. In rare cases, Sesame Workshop has withdrawn funding from international co-productions, the most recent being the cut of $20 million from Pakistan’s Sim sim hamara (begun in 2011 and filmed in Urdu). The official reason was allegations of fraud by a partner organization (see Aslam 2012).

11. Hello Kitty was made tourism ambassador to Asia by the Japanese government in May 2008 with the idea that she could help erase memories of wartime atrocities and other issues plaguing the relationship between Japan and other Asian nations.


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Sesame Street’s place in Japan

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