

## KAWAII IN TAIWAN POLITICS

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### ABSTRACT

*By investigating the case of A-Bian Doll (扁娃, see Figure 1), this paper explores how Kawaii (可愛い, the Japanese word for "cute") has pervaded in Taiwan, and has since been appropriated by Taiwanese politicians as one of the significant methods for advancing democratisation, and constructing collective imagination and national identities. Particularly, this paper explores how Kawaii is represented and reproduced in Taiwan politics. I will first discuss how Kawaii is produced and consumed in Taiwanese people's everyday life in relation to the process of democratisation and the formation of consumer society. I will then move to the discussion of the A-Bian Doll and its accessories, which is arguably the most significant example of how Kawaii is made tangible in Taiwanese politics. I will examine how Kawaii is appropriated as a familiar element from Taiwanese culture by former President Chen's staffers, and is then injected into ingredients drawn from Taiwanese baseball culture and the features of Chen to produce the A-Bian Doll and its accessories. By making and advertising the A-Bian Doll and its accessories, Chen's staffers create a new culture, and then feed this back into social circulation, mobilise supporters and gain votes.*

**Keywords:** *Kawaii*, Taiwan politics, A-Bian doll, democratisation, national identities

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## **KAWAII IN TAIWAN'S HYBRID CULTURE**

The hybridity of Taiwanese culture highlights a fundamental feature of Taiwanese culture. It also shows how Taiwan has negotiated other cultures' influences upon it. Influenced in the past by China, and today by the global forces of modern Japan and the U.S., Taiwanese culture can be said to be somewhere in between. Rather than passively accepting these cultures, Taiwan instead appropriates and domesticates them by incorporating local features, transforming them into "Taiwanese" culture. The new concept of "Taiwan" is thus a product of the negotiation between globality and locality, and is a hybrid of Chinese, Japanese and American cultures.

Hybridised culture has prevailed in Taiwanese society for several decades, and the re-creation of Taiwanese culture takes place consistently, in the ordinary details of everyday life. Hsiao Hsin-Huang describes how Taiwanese society undertook a profound process of cultural reshaping in response to the effects of globalisation.

"Side by side with the Americanization, Europeanization, and Japanization of lifestyles and popular culture here, there has also been a rise in 'repackaged' cultural localization and indigenization, in which many local cultures and traditional lifestyle elements, including traditional Taiwanese cuisine, opera, puppet shows, antique collecting, tea houses, and tea drinking, as well as Taiwanese rock music and modern art, have been revitalized and reinvented" (Hsiao 2002: 57).

This cultural reshaping in Taiwan occurred because of the rapid formation of consumer society and the speedy process of democratisation (Chuang 2008). Faced with the forces of globalisation prevalent in popular culture, Taiwanese society has responded by appropriating them, in order to reconstruct Taiwanese identities. Various forms of hybridisation and creolisation have emerged, in which "the meanings of externally originating goods, information and images are reworked, syncretised and blended with existing culture traditions and forms of life" (Featherstone 1995: 117).

Literally, the word *Kawaii* means "adorable." *Kawaii* draws on people's attraction to the aesthetics of petiteness, and to the "values of vulnerability" (Yomota 2006).

Both American and Japanese cultural commodities have been adopted by Taiwanese society at different times and under different political-economical conditions. But the cultural proximity between Taiwan and Japan, which stems from their shared colonial history and close geography, has allowed Japanese popular culture to successfully usurp American culture. Japanese *trendy dramas*, films, *Manga*, music and computer games have now permeated into all aspects of everyday life in Taiwan. A huge community of *harizu* (哈日族, the Mandarin term for Japanophiles) has appeared in Taiwan (Lee 2004).

Due to the general popularity of all things Japanese, the *Kawaii* style has now been incorporated into Taiwanese popular culture. For example, outside Tokyo, Taipei has the highest concentration of *Purikura*<sup>1</sup> (プリクラ) in the world. Furthermore, the fundamental characteristics of the *Kawaii* style—juvenility, sweetness and innocence—are not only inherent in the commodities available on the market, but have also penetrated into people's everyday lives. It has become an embodied habitus shared by all Taiwanese people, particularly among young females. It is now also a style of emphasising petiteness and in adopting an infantile manner in Taiwanese society. This can be seen in the ways in which people communicate with each other (it is fashionable among young people to talk in an infantile and immature way), act (e.g., the widespread use of certain fairly immature mannerisms and gestures, such as the "V sign" when posing for photos), dress (e.g., wearing school skirts, which is currently a trend among young adult Taiwanese women) and eat (e.g., the availability of Hello Kitty cake). It can also be seen in Taiwanese people's preference for "small" narratives (e.g., the minor stories of ordinary people rather than epic stories of "heroes").

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<sup>1</sup> *Purikura* is a Japanese term, shortened from "*purinto kurabu*," which means "print club" in Japanese. It refers either to a specific type of photo booth, or to the photos produced in such booths. A *Purikura* photo booth can hold up to 5 people. After the money is inserted, customers pose for up to 10 snaps. After the photos are taken, customers can select which ones to keep and then customise them. A *Purikura* session usually costs between NTD100 to NTD300 (about GBP1.50 to GBP5) and takes 5 to 10 minutes. Reference from "Purikura." Wikipedia. 1 January 2007, 06:31 UTC.

## THE A-BIAN DOLL AND ACCESSORIES

The A-Bian Doll and accessories,<sup>2</sup> created and produced by the Democratic Progressive Party (民主進步黨, hereafter DPP) are tangible items that amalgamate material consumption, democratic values and Taiwanese identities. During the 1998 Taipei mayoral elections, the DPP created *Bian Mao* (扁帽)<sup>3</sup> and the A-Bian Doll as two trial political commodities. Surprisingly, they were both a huge success without any advertising (Bian-Mao Factory 1999), simply because they were emblazoned with the name "A-Bian" (阿扁), the nickname for Chen Shui-Bian. In later elections, the success in 1998 inspired the DPP to create the A-Bian Doll I, II and III as well as a range of other accessories. These A-Bian accessories are designed to promote the DPP alongside its other cultural commodities, campaign advertisements and campaign rallies. The entire range of cultural commodities (i.e., A-Bian Doll, accessories, campaign rallies, advertisements, etc.) produced between the Taipei mayoral election in 1998 and the Taiwanese presidential elections in 2000 and 2004, constitute what I call "A-Bian culture" (hereafter ABC). ABC prompted the appearance of "*Bian Mi*" (扁迷, or Bian fans),<sup>4</sup> who vehemently express their support for Chen, the DPP, democratic values and Taiwanese identities via their consumption of these goods. *Bian Mi* have many ways of expressing their support for the DPP, but virtually all buy and collect A-Bian accessories, pay close attention to the DPP's TV advertisements and regularly attend the DPP's electoral campaign rallies. It was the popularity of ABC that assisted the DPP and Chen to win the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections, and forced *Kuomintang* (國民黨, or Chinese Nationalist Party, hereafter the KMT) to relinquish its nearly half century dictatorial ruling power. The success of ABC infused a new campaign culture into Taiwanese society and forced the KMT to rethink its own rigid campaign style. In the face of the fierce change to Taiwanese society after this "open-up" of Taiwanese politics, the

<sup>2</sup> Please refer to Appendix for photographs of the A-Bian Doll and accessories.

<sup>3</sup> The words *Bian Mao* translated from Mandarin mean crochet beanie hat. In the 1998 Taipei mayoral election, the DPP used the word *Bian*, which coincides with the last character of Chen's name (Bian), and created a grass green (the DPP's colour) crochet beanie hat to further promote Chen Shui-Bian.

<sup>4</sup> *Bian Mi* indicates enthusiastic supporters of the DPP, especially fans of Chen Shui-Bian. The word *Bian* is the last character of Chen's name, and the word *Mi* means fans in Mandarin.

KMT itself faced the embarrassment of having to learn from the beginning how to campaign like the DPP.<sup>5</sup>

The A-Bian Doll III (see Figure 1), a 14 inch cotton-stuffed doll priced at NTD120 (about GBP2), was a hit commodity for the DPP in 2004. It was an upgraded version of the A-Bian Dolls I and II, which were created for the Taipei mayoral elections (in 1998) and the presidential elections (in 2000) respectively. A-Bian Doll I was just a plain sketch or logo (the doll to the right in Figure 2 is A-Bian I); it was then given a very distinct appearance and figure (see Figure 1). Model III was designed to look like a boy dressed in a baseball strip and sneakers. The doll has a small body, an over-sized head, doe eyes, a child-like smile and a rosy-cheeked, chubby face. There are three sizes, intended for different uses—a 27-inch doll for home display, a 14-inch doll for companionship (and cuddling), and a 1-inch mobile-phone accessory. There are also wide ranges of A-Bian accessories, including items to wear (such as a wide variety of t-shirts, jackets, hats, caps, ties, socks, scarves and aprons), kitchen utensils (including mugs, tea sets, lunchboxes, bowls and plates), and miscellaneous items such as purses, backpacks, pens, mouse pads, watches, alarm clocks, money boxes and personal organisers and their accessories. These all have the A-Bian logo (see Figure 2) emblazoned on them (and sometimes inside them). Prices also vary widely, from the expensive (e.g., the President Chen memorial gold coin costing NTD50,000 or about GBP800) to the cheap (e.g., mobile phone accessories costing NTD60 or about GBP1).



Figure 1: A-Bian Doll III<sup>6</sup>



Figure 2: Logo of A-Bian Accessories<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The KMT took notice of the DPP's campaigning tactics after DPP's success in several important elections. The success of the new approach to campaigning couldn't be ignored and soon the KMT was openly copying. For example, the KMT held a five-day workshop in the summer of 2002 to "learn campaign tactics from the 'enemy'—the DPP." This covered: 1) how to instigate the crowd and how to organise protests in the street; 2) how to give a speech; 3) how to debate; 4) how to use grassroots language when approaching the people; 5) how to produce campaign advertising for the party; and 6) how to imitate the DPP's campaign rallies (See Liu 2003).

<sup>6</sup> From the website of *Bian Mao* Factory.

<sup>7</sup> From the website of A-Bian Family.

## REPRODUCING KAWAII IN TAIWANESE POLITICS

As distinct from other cultural icons, which are either completely fictional (e.g., Barbie) or entirely real (e.g., the former British Prime Minister, Tony Blair), the A-Bian Doll combines the artificiality of a toy with the actuality of a real politician, interweaving the amusement-value of a "plaything" with the seriousness of *Realpolitik*, and occupying an ambiguous space between entertainment and politics. If "fantastic icons are capable of releasing people's imaginations from the constraints of their culture's definition and requirements" (Rogers 1999: 3), then the A-Bian Doll builds a platform for the remapping of Taiwanese politics. The ambiguity allows meanings to be displaced, transformed and reproduced—features of Taiwanese and Japanese, and the meanings of democracy and popular culture, shift and intermingle on the site of the A-Bian Doll.

The following words of Lo Sheng-Shun (羅勝順), the general manager of the Bian-Mao Company, show how the A-Bian accessories were designed and produced only after very thorough investigation. Technically, the production of the A-Bian Doll involved appropriating the kinds of business thinking used in an American-style consumer society, where politics and popular culture overlap. Aesthetically, the design of the A-Bian Doll was based on cultural elements drawn from Taiwan and Japan.

"I think the success of the A-Bian accessories is because we positioned them as personal commodities rather than electioneering products. This was a breakthrough in Taiwanese politics.

All different kinds of accessories were developed by a design team. We not only used a sense of marketing, but also consulted lots of pop magazines. The design team even went to Japan to study their successful commodities. Every single commodity was created after a process of investigation, discussion, design and production. Only then could it get on the shelf.

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<sup>8</sup> Interview done on 14 December 2004.

According to studies of Taiwanese toy and fashion markets, and based on my business experience, Japanese *Kawaii*-style commodities are still the most popular sellers in Taiwan, rather than American or European. In fact, we invited different companies from Taiwan, Japan and America to design sample commodities. Then we chose the current *Kawaii* style."<sup>8</sup>

Lo describes how the A-Bian accessories were positioned as "personal commodities rather than electioneering products." Every single accessory was created "after a process of investigation, discussion, design and production" before it arrived on the shelf, and was produced "according to studies of Taiwanese toy and fashion markets," influenced by Lo's business experience. Here, we can see how consumer-oriented "personal commodities" reconfigure the dramaturgy of public life, and how the alchemy of consumer society (i.e., its marketing tactics) dominates the campaigning for democratic elections.

It might be an overstatement to claim that the success of ABC was due to the DPP's intentional appropriation of marketing tactics in order to gain more votes. However, it is a fact that the DPP has particularly benefited from the formation of consumer society, which, as discussed, sustained democratisation. The DPP successfully promoted itself after being inspired by the speedy and labour-intensive production used in the formation of consumer society, since "[w]hat ties individuals to society today is their activities as consumers, their life organized around consumption" (Bauman 1987: 168). The A-Bian accessories were a new form of cultural commodity—one which was tied to people's consumption practices and designed specifically to promote the DPP and Chen.

The DPP's adoption of marketing tactics when producing ABC was not an arbitrary decision: it was grounded in the broad politico-economical context that had been influenced by U.S. culture from the time of the post-war alliance until the present day. Throughout this period, American-style democracy and popular culture have continued to influence Taiwan; in particular, when the boundary between politics and popular culture, or between democracy and consumerism, in American society has

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<sup>9</sup> BBC. "How the Public Brand Bush and Kerry." BBC News, 3 September 2004.

been blurred, then the configuration of Taiwanese campaign culture has also been influenced and changed.

A survey carried out by the WPP Group during the 2004 U.S. presidential elections showed that American voters were inclined to associate presidential candidates George Bush and John Kerry with specific brand images. Bush was associated with Ford, IBM and Dunkin Donuts because of his leadership, stature and "plain-speaking" image. John Kerry was associated with Starbucks, BMW and Apple, which were considered to be fanciful brands catering to a niche market. A BBC report concluded that this survey showed that the "U.S. presidential contenders [were] selling themselves like breakfast cereals or washing up detergents."<sup>9</sup> It was further proof that, in today's consumer society, everything can be considered a commodity, including democracy. Given that, over the last couple of decades, consumer society has made consumers dependent upon it (Bauman 1987: 163), commodities have come to constitute the reality of everyday life and "reality is the reality of capital" (Large 2004). Even spirituality is "stuffed" with commodities, and of course, children in contemporary consumer society will enter a shopping mall long before they go to primary school. In consequence, a "consumerist syndrome" (Bauman 2004) is produced, in which materiality directs spirituality and the brand image of commodities guides the perception of reality.

Bauman's theory (1987, 2004) explains why American voters put their commodity choices (Dunkin Donuts/Starbucks; Ford/BMW; IBM/Apple) before their political choices (Bush/Kerry): consumer culture now overrides democracy. People build their consumer identity (when they enter shopping malls) before citizen identity (when they go to primary school). Their perceptions of both the physical and immaterial world and especially of democracy, are packed with commodities, since people consume commodities much earlier than they vote for American presidents.

ABC arose in a modern Taiwanese society: a society heavily influenced by U.S. consumer-driven forms of democracy. The blurred borderline between politics and popular culture in American society, as seen in the election of former Hollywood star Ronald Reagan as president and in the saxophone performance of former president Bill Clinton on TV, is like *déjà vu* for today's Taiwanese people. The intermingling of democracy and consumption in Taiwanese society (which has exceeded what has occurred

in the U.S.), determined how ABC was to be created and produced, and shifted the terrains of both democracy and consumption in Taiwan.

Stuffed with cotton, the A-Bian Doll III was also "stuffed" with three main cultural elements—*Kawaii* style, baseball culture and the features of President Chen. Aesthetically, as Lo explained, the design for the A-Bian accessories was borrowed from the cultural elements of Japanese toys and fashion commodities. The Japanese *Kawaii* style was chosen after comparisons made between Taiwanese, Japanese and American samples. The style of the doll appealed to people's obsession with *Kawaii*, which helped to integrate the doll into the everyday life of *Bian Mi* (see latter discussion).

The second ingredient of the A-Bian Doll III was baseball culture, demonstrated by its green-and-grey baseball strip. For Taiwanese people, baseball culture represents the spirit of Taiwan. Tapping into baseball culture made good use of its significance in Taiwanese history—baseball is a symbol of Taiwanese society's colonial experience, national pride and collective memory. The colour green was used because it is the DPP's representative colour (like the red of the U.K. Labour Party). Borrowing from baseball culture and mixing it with the symbols of the DPP empowered the A-Bian Doll III to connect the DPP with people's collective social experiences. Thus, the A-Bian Doll helped the DPP to represent the spirit of Taiwan.

The third ingredient of the A-Bian Doll III was its likeness to President Chen himself. Unlike other forms of representation, such as portraits or wax figures, the A-Bian Doll III did not replicate Chen's features exactly. Instead, it depicts Chen in a *Kawaii* style. The production of the A-Bian Doll is a form of re-creation involving both invention and simulation: appropriating preexisting elements (i.e., Chen's image), mimicking certain fashions (i.e., adopting a cartoon, *Kawaii* style) and mixing them together in an unfamiliar way (i.e., combining Chen's real features with a stuffed dolls' material form in the toy market) to create a new text (i.e., the A-Bian Doll). Therefore, the A-Bian Doll is a hybrid of parodic practices. In Fredric Jameson's term (1991), this hybridity is "pastiche," which is more than "the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style" (17). It is "the cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion" (18). The A-Bian Doll pastiche allows a

reconfiguration of the perceptions of who Chen is and how a doll should function. The A-Bian Doll not only glosses the actual (rather severe) image of Chen, but also inscribes a doll (which would, normally, only be a toy) with political meaning.

The A-Bian Doll, "stuffed" with Japanese *Kawaii* style, baseball culture and Chen's real-life features, is thus a representation of the collective colonial experience of the Taiwanese people, baseball history in Taiwan and Chen's life story. It offers a juxtaposition of meanings and timeless historical fragments for different collectors' interpretations and imaginations. Moreover, by means of a massive-scale system of mechanical reproduction, the A-Bian Doll was produced in unlimited numbers, and so the meanings it represented were boundlessly magnified. Reproducibility made the A-Bian accessories widely available, providing unlimited possibilities for interpretation and imaginative interaction among *Bian Mi*.

According to Benjamin (1936/1968), quantitative mechanical production dethrones art by drawing in mass participation and destroying all sense of authenticity. The politics of mass reproduction and popular involvement effectuated the decay of the "aura." Modern mechanical production transforms art into highly accessible copies and commodities, and brings these commodities "'closer' spatially and humanly" into people's life (ibid.: 223). This is a historical shift, a revolution which did not occur in the museum, but in everybody's living rooms (Hall, Baudrillard and Virilio, 1988).

Benjamin observes that modern mechanical production demythologises art, with the result that it has lost its traditional aura. In these terms, the mechanical production of the A-Bian Doll reinforced A-Bian's proximity to the people, making him more familiar. For most people, the chance to meet the real President Chen and interact with him is very rare. Except for Chen's aides and staff members, ordinary people cannot easily experience the effect of talking with Chen face to face or shaking his hand. However, the mechanical production of the A-Bian Doll has allowed ordinary people to experience interacting with Chen in their living rooms. The accessibility of the A-Bian accessories has decayed the aura surrounding Chen, and diminished the distance between Chen, his staff members and the ordinary person.

The ubiquity of the A-Bian accessories intervened in the configuration of *Bian Mi's* living rooms, acted as a recurrent reminder of the DPP's TV advertisements, and repeatedly brought ABC into their everyday life. These accessories appear in the form of ordinary objects such as dolls, clothes, tableware, mouse pads, alarm clocks and money boxes, etc., and surround *Bian Mi* in their living rooms, bedrooms and kitchens. The A-Bian accessories enter what Daniel Miller (2001: 107–122) describes as the design and ordering of people's homes and material culture, which can be regarded as an expression of their history and identity. These commodities are inserted into people's everyday life, where they are not only consumed, but more specifically, "used and lived with" (Dant 1999: 38). All these commodities, along with other things that exist in the same space, "have been personalised through use" (ibid.). It is "a genuinely self-productive relationship between persons and objects" (Miller 1987: 121), a "process of familiarity rather than learning" (ibid.: 104), in which acts are consciously or unconsciously repeated and the same order of artifacts is continually inter-reinforced. The A-Bian accessories thus constantly assert their material presence and symbolic meaning in *Bian Mi's* everyday life. They are displayed on the TV set, placed with other dolls or set beside the telephone. The package offered by the A-Bian accessories (i.e., an aesthetics of Taiwanese-ness, a *Kawaii* style and a popularised image of a politician) all occupy a specific place inside *Bian Mi* living spaces with one specific political purpose: Securing power. Whenever the DPP's TV advertisements are on the TV, the value of the A-Bian Doll or accessories is reinforced. Whenever the TV is not switched on, or the DPP's advertisements are not on the TV screen, the A-Bian accessories displayed in the living room act as a reminder to *Bian Mi* of the DPP's advertising.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, I focus on how *Kawaii* is represented and reproduced in Taiwan politics. I argue that *Bian Mi's* consumption of ABC commodities is in a continuing dialogue with staffers' production of these commodities. I also argue how *Bian Mi* relate to and draw upon ABC commodities as a

resource for building and expressing their national identity and participating in democracy.

The community of *Bian Mi* is formed through the familiar concept of *Kawaii* conveyed by A-Bian accessories. Commodities are consumed, possessed and used as meaningful markers of social relations (Douglas and Isherwood 1979). "It is in acquiring, using and exchanging things that individuals come to have social lives" (Lury 1996: 12). As "the visible part of culture" (Douglas and Isherwood 1979: 66), the material forms of A-Bian accessories allow *Bian Mi* to consciously and subconsciously borrow, use and transform the meanings of these commodities in their everyday life. *Bian Mi*'s original familiarity with *Kawaii* and their consumption of *Kawaii* A-Bian accessories, which are distributed in a wide array of genres and forms, unfold a landscape mediating between staffers and *Bian Mi*, and between one *Bian Mi* and another.

The part played by the *Bian Mi* is especially intriguing. They are consumers of ABC commodities and, at the same time, supporters of the DPP and Chen. They consume ABC commodities as a means of expressing their pro-Taiwan political positions. For *Bian Mi*, ABC commodities which appear in the form of popular cultural commodities offer a very accessible means of political participation. There is no need for policy debates or protest activities, and no need to read difficult articles. Participating in politics can consist of buying and displaying dolls and flags in the living room, wearing T-shirts and caps, watching TV advertisements and having fun at campaign rallies. Politics itself is no longer restricted, but available for everyone to take part in now. The material forms of ABC commodities emancipate politics from being an exclusive arena shared by the so-called elite, to a marketplace where everybody can purchase and consume a series of tangible, visible, audible and sensible cultural commodities.

It must be remembered that *Bian Mi* consume, use and watch ABC commodities simultaneously alongside with other (cultural) commodities, such as the latest iPod, Japanese *trendy dramas*, Yankees' baseball merchandise, etc. In other words, they are "textual poachers" (de Certeau 1984; Jenkins 1992) who borrow, embrace, interpret and mix many types of cultural commodities in order to reproduce their own culture.

By consuming ABC commodities, however, one *Bian Mi* is drawn into an imagined alliance with staff members and other *Bian Mi*. This

imagined alliance consists of shared lifestyles (using Bourdieu's term) and the national-popular collective will (Gramsci's term), which are both promoted through ABC on the personal and collective levels. On the personal level, ABC commodities are made into ordinary objects representative of certain lifestyles, so as to intervene in *Bian Mi's* everyday life. These commodities either appear in the form of personal possessions, such as the A-Bian T-shirt or dolls, or in the form of symbolic representations, such as TV advertisements which both appeal to *Bian Mi* as they operate at the level of *Bian Mi's* personal references. The "looseness of reference" (Frith 1996: 121) of ABC commodities allows *Bian Mi* to weave the DPP's advertisements into their own lives, or put A-Bian T-shirts onto their own bodies. On the collective level, ABC commodities set up an obvious framework for gaining political power, because they bring *Bian Mi* together to express their collective identities and to actualise the national-popular collective will.

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## APPENDIX

### A-Bian Doll I, II, III and Accessories

#### 1. A-Bian Doll I and Accessories

From the website of A-Bian Family <<http://www.akibo.com.tw/home/gallery/a-bian.htm>>



#### 2. A-Bian Doll II and Accessories

From the website of eBay Taiwan



### **3. A-Bian Doll III and Accessories** From the website of Bian Mao Factory

