

# SQUARE WATERMELONS

## The Japanese innovative mind

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What do these three things have in common?

### Square watermelons

In 2001, I was working in Brazil as a language adviser. One day I was watching the news on TV in my office with my colleagues. It was showing square watermelons produced in Japan and my colleagues were laughing at the news. One of them asked me, "Why do Japanese people try to make watermelons square? As long as they taste good the shape doesn't matter, does it? They are investing a lot of money for this. They are crazy!" We might look crazy but the passion towards innovation is in our blood. If watermelons were square, we would be able to stack them easily. That would result in reduced transport costs.

### Doraemon

Doraemon is a cartoon character famous in Japan and other Asian countries. He is a cat-like robot with lots of tools in his magical front pocket. Those tools have fascinated Japanese kids for many years. As you can see, a small propeller sits on his head. This tool is called take-koputaa, a combination of a Japanese traditional toy take-tonbo (bamboo-dragonfly) and herikoputaa (helicopter). Using this tool, everyone can fly. These tools are all imaginative and something kids can dream about. The Japanese obsession about innovative gadgets might be nurtured in Doraemon's pocket.

### Karaoke

Karaoke is a famous Japanese invention. The inventor was awarded the Ig Nobel Peace Prize in 2004. Since the prize started in 1991, 11 Japanese scientists have received this "honourable" prize. (The Ig Nobel Prize is a parody of the Nobel Prize and is given to 10 achievements that "first make people laugh and then make them think", each year. See <http://improbable.com/ig/> .) In 2004 the prize was presented to Daisuke Inoue of Hyogo Prefecture, Japan, for inventing karaoke, thereby providing an entirely new way for people to learn to tolerate each other.



Inventive: Doraemon, karaoke and square watermelons are products of the Japanese innovative mind.

These three things are the products of the Japanese innovative mind.

But the biggest innovation in Japanese history was, I think, hiragana and katakana - Japanese phonetic symbols.

Ancient Japanese language didn't have any letters or symbols for writing like most other languages. But neighboring China had developed ideograms, Chinese characters. The Japanese adopted Chinese characters as a writing tool. If Chinese characters had been phonograms such as the alphabet, the Japanese wouldn't have had such difficulties as creating new a phonogram such as hiragana and katakana out of the ideogram.

Chinese characters



Japanese hiragana "A"

あ

The Japanese innovative mind was destined to develop from the ancient times of our history.

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