

was clear that they were working very hard to entertain their fans. Each member has her own sparkling presence, yet looks accessible and not pretentious. I think I figured out the secret of how they are steadily grabbing the hearts of fans in Japan.

### Working for their breakthrough

Momoland members all come from a TV audition show in South Korea. They waited for their chances while honing their artistic skills as trainees at an entertainment agency, some of them longer than others.

"I was a trainee for a long time and wondered when I'd be able to make my debut," Nancy said. "Because it was my dream for such a long time, I was almost perplexed when my debut became real."

"My trainee period was relatively short," said Ah In. "I couldn't dance as well as now, so I thought it would take more time."

The situation was different for each member, but they were equally delighted when they stood on the starting line.

"I was really thrilled thinking how I'd be able to show myself to fans," Hye Bin said.

Yomiuri Shimbun photos  
From left: Jane, Joo E, Ah In, Hye Bin, Nancy and Yeon Woo of Momoland



The group's name, Momoland, derives from Michael Ende's novel "Momo." It expresses the members' wish to offer excitement and soothing experiences to busy and exhausted people. Of the nine members, Daisy and Tae Ha are not taking part in "I'm So Hot" and Na Yun could not make the interview because of health reasons.

The K-pop group made their debut in 2016 in

South Korea with the mini album "Welcome to Momoland." There have been tough times, though: After releasing the debut album, there was a long gap before their next opportunity.

"I almost wondered whether we really debuted or not. I felt like I was back to being a trainee," Hye Bin recalled.

Everything changed with the mega hit "BBoom BBoom," which was released in

2018. With simple sounds and an easy-to-remember melody, the song easily became an earworm. The members' dance moves in the song's music video are cute, hot and playful, exhibiting their intriguing charms. The video has been played more than 300 million times on YouTube.

"When 'BBoom BBoom' became a hit, I started hearing the song on the street, in res-

can talk in Korean. It's great," Nancy said. "I'm So Hot," the group's third single in Japan, is doing very well. The video for the Japanese version has a setting like a classroom in a Japanese school. All the participating members play different, distinct characters, doing various things like taking a nap and playing games. The video has a warm atmosphere that makes you smile.

"The setting is that we are all students of the same homeroom class," Hye Bin said.

Their busy days go on, yet they aim to continue going forward. They also never forget to be grateful to their fans.

"After we made our debut, we've gained fans not only in South Korea but also in other countries. It's such a pleasure for me to meet all the fans," Joo E said.

"It makes me happy to hear our fans' voices onstage," Jane said in fluent Japanese, smiling.

Another great thing about Momoland is the happy and fun atmosphere of the group.

"I was really glad that I could make my debut together with the other members. They all have distinctive personalities," Ah In said. "There's nothing better than being able to laugh with them."

## Latest collection of 'Neko Pitcher' on sale

The Yomiuri Shimbun

The ninth volume of the "Neko Pitcher" comic strip collection in its original Japanese is now on sale.

The manga by Kenji Sonishi is carried in the Sunday supplement of The Yomiuri Shimbun and the English-language version runs in The Japan News on Saturdays.

The star of the manga is Miitaro, pro baseball's first feline pitcher. It features his extraordinary feats as well as adorable bloopers.

The latest collection published by Chuokoron-Shinsha, Inc. retails for ¥800 plus tax. The whole series has had a print run of more than 700,000 copies.



The cover of the ninth volume of "Neko Pitcher"

## 'Freej' is an exhilarating, eye-opening tale about 4 grannies in Dubai

By Kanta Ishida  
Yomiuri Shimbun Senior Writer

"Freej" is the United Arab Emirates' first domestically produced animation. I started watching it on Tokyo MX as a topic for conversation and without too many expectations. Turns out it's surprisingly entertaining.

The lead characters are four grannies living in Dubai. When you think of Dubai, you imagine an international city with many skyscrapers. However, until recently there were areas cramped with small, rammed-earth houses.

Genuine UAE nationals who respect a traditional religious lifestyle are called Emiratis, and this animation sharply satirizes modern Dubai from Emiratis' viewpoint. It became an instant history-making hit when TV broadcasts of this work started during the holy month of Ramadan in 2006.

The title "Freej" means "neighbors." The four leading ladies are: Um Saeed, a sarcastic coffee addict; the computer-savvy Um Allawi, almost pathologically forgetful Um Saloom; and Um Khammas, a sucker for moneymaking. The quartet are always wearing impressive gold burqa masks over their faces.

These four women are really charming. You'll probably say, "There are aunties like them in Japan, too!" In particular, Um Khammas' sharp tongue and wild personality are exhilarating. The strong, tough characters are all women, while men don't have much of a presence. This is a comedy that overturns our perceived notions about Middle East culture.

Director Mohammed Saeed Harib,



who comes from Dubai, wrote to The Yomiuri Shimbun in an email interview.

"Back when I started in university [in the United States], it was a project, they wanted me to choose a superhero that is from my culture," said Harib, 41, explaining how it all began.

"My culture was very much a male-dominant culture — they have big stories of Alladin, and Alibaba of 1001

nights and also all of these heroes are men ... I saw that back then grandmothers were superheroes."

About his own grandmother, he said, "She raised 10 kids, she had to go outside [to] work for a living. There was no electricity when her husband was away for six-seven months [fishing for pearls]."

The burqa, the four ladies' signature garb, not only makes women's eyes look beautiful but also has a practical function of protecting women's faces from intense heat.

Now that air-conditioners are widespread, the masks are apparently not seen anymore. Yet Harib discovered a new hero in the grannies, who are special in their appearance as well as their personalities. Shouldn't we say he's got a great talent?

The UAE's first domestic animation was produced with support from a government subsidy. Most of the members of the creative team for the first season were virtual amateurs, according to Harib. This reminds me of "Tetsuwan Atom" (Astro Boy) in 1963, Japan's first domestically produced TV animation. It's always the power of young people's reckless passion that breaks new ground for the future.



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The four leading ladies in "Freej," with Um Khammas on the far right

Harib said he was greatly inspired by Japanese animation, such as "Captain Tsubasa" and works directed by Hayao Miyazaki. Seeing "Freej" broadcast in

Japan is therefore very special for him. "Animation is a beautiful tool of cultural exchange. I am happy that it's now a two-way street," Harib said.