

Japan's Quest for "Soft Power": Attraction and Limitation

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Abstract Japan is seeking to project its "soft power" through the allure of *manga* and *anime* in its public diplomacy. The production, diffusion and global consumption of *manga* and *anime* are driven by market forces and consumer tastes and not by the Japanese state. However, the latter is seeking to harness this popular culture to burnish Tokyo's international image. Despite the attractiveness of Japanese pop culture and other more traditional forms of public diplomacy, Tokyo's pursuit of "soft power" and a good international image is undermined by its failure to overcome its burden of history.

Keywords *Anime* · Cultural diplomacy · *Manga* · Public diplomacy · Soft power

Japan still has an image problem in East Asia today-sometimes as a country lacking in remorse for its past militarism and other times as a predatory and protectionist "economic animal". However, the country has recently acquired a new "hip and cool" benign image which co-exists uneasily rather than supersedes the negative images of the past. Indeed, there is a bifurcation in the attitudes of East Asia toward Japan. On the one hand, East Asians especially Chinese and Koreans view negatively Japanese war atrocities, Prime Minister's visits to Yasukuni Shrine and the Abe Administration's prevarication over the "comfort women" issue. On the other, East Asian consumers have embraced things Japanese such as sushi, *karaoke*, rock garden, *zen*-inspired architecture, J-pop (popular music), J-fashion, electronic gizmos and games (Sony PlayStation 3 and Nintendo), television dramas, *manga* (comics) and *anime* (cartoons).

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Japan is burnishing its international image through the popular medium of *manga* and *anime*. These cultural products appear to have the best of both worlds: distinctively Japanese in style and yet have universal appeal among the young.¹ Tokyo's *Diplomatic Bluebook 2006* noted: "Japanese culture is currently attracting attention around the world as 'Cool Japan'. In order to increase interest in Japan and further heighten the image of Japan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) is working with the private sector through overseas diplomatic establishments and the Japan Foundation to promote cultural exchanges while taking into consideration the characteristics of each foreign country".² This article examines why the Japanese state is seeking to project its "soft power" through the allure of *manga* and *anime* and their efficacy in public diplomacy. The central claim is that Tokyo places emphasis on "soft power" because of its pacifist constitution and residual pacifism among the Japanese. The production, diffusion and global consumption of *manga* and *anime* are driven by market forces and consumer tastes and not by the Japanese state. However, the latter is seeking to harness this popular culture to burnish Japan's international image against the backdrop of a rising China (which is also seeking to project its "soft power" globally). Despite the attractiveness of Japanese pop culture and other more traditional forms of Tokyo's public diplomacy, Japan's pursuit of "soft power" and a good international image is undermined by its failure to overcome its burden of history.

This article will first examine the interest of the Japanese state to recognize and promote *manga* and *anime* at the heart of its new public diplomacy. It will then analyze the concept of "soft power" and how it became popular and subsequently embraced by the Japanese state. Following that is a scrutiny of Tokyo's motivations to pursue "soft power". It will then examine the instruments of Japan's public diplomacy. The article will conclude by considering the attraction and limitation of Japanese "soft power" as the extension of politics by other means.

The Japanese State: Embracing Pop Culture

In April 2006, Foreign Minister Aso Taro proposed that *manga* and *anime* could be the way to China's heart. Addressing students at the University of Digital Content in Tokyo's Akihabara district (the Mecca of Japan's electronic gadgetries), Aso noted: "If you take a peek in any of the shops in China catering to the young *otaku* (nerdy)-type *manga* and *anime* fans, you will find the shops' walls lined with any and every sort of Japanese anime figurine you can imagine.We have a grasp on the hearts of the young people in many countries, not the least of which being China".³

¹ See Matt Thorn, "Japan: The Hollywood of Manga", *Japan Echo*, April 2006 and the special feature titled: "Manga Mania" in *Japan Plus: Asia-Pacific Perspectives*, Vol.4, No.11, March 2007, pp.3-21. Interestingly, Kyoto Seika University has established the nation's first faculty of *manga* in 2006. The Kyoto International Manga Museum has also been set up in the same city.

² Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, *Diplomatic Bluebook 2006*, p.208

³ "Japan pitches pop culture for diplomacy", *Reuters*, 28 April 2006. <<http://news.scotsman.com/latest.cfm?id=id=638972006&format=print>> (Accessed:15 February 2007). See The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "A New Look at Cultural Diplomacy: A Call to Japan's Cultural Practitioners: Speech by Minister of Foreign Affairs Taro Aso at Digital Hollywood University", 28 April 2006.

Aso continued: “What is the image that pops into someone’s mind when they hear the name ‘Japan’? Is it a bright and positive image? Warm? Cool? The more these kinds of positive images pop up in a person’s mind, the easier it becomes for Japan to get its views across over the long term. In other words, Japanese diplomacy is able to keep edging forward, bit by bit, and bring about better and better outcomes as a result”.⁴

In November 2006, the Council on the Movement of People across Borders, an advisory council to Foreign Minister Aso, proposed that Japan should tap on the rising popularity of *manga* and *anime* especially among the young abroad.⁵ Headed by Cho Fujio, the chairman of Toyota Motor Corporation, the Council suggested the awarding of a “Japan *Manga* Grand Prize” to target foreign artists, and also appoint cultural ambassadors of *anime* to promote Japanese pop culture overseas.⁶

Subsequently, Aso, in his policy speech to the Diet (parliament) in January 2007, adopted Japanese pop culture as a diplomatic tool. He said: “What is important is to be able to induce other countries to listen to Japan. If the use of pop culture or various sub-cultures can be useful in this process, we certainly should make the most of them”.⁷ Ironically, being “cool”, “fun” and “hip” have now become serious business for the Japanese state.

The appeal of Japanese cultural products in Asia and beyond is not a recent phenomenon. Long before the present wave of Doraemon (the robot cat), Hello Kitty (the cute and ubiquitous cat) and Pokemon (pocket monster) captured the hearts and minds of many kids of this generation, Astro Boy, Ultraman and Godzilla had already done so in the previous generation.⁸

The creativity and non-conformity of Japanese artists and market forces have given rise to the success of these cultural products; the catalyst was not the Japanese state. However, the Japanese state today is trying to bandwagon on these products and harness them for its “soft power” even though that was not the original intent of the producers of *manga* and *anime*.

“Soft Power” Thesis in Japan: Origins

The “soft power” concept gradually gained currency in Japan after Professor Joseph S. Nye (former Dean of the Kennedy School of Government and ex-US Deputy

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “Pop culture takes center stage in Japanese diplomacy”, *Kyodo News*, 22 December 2006.

⁶ “Aso eyes comic-book heroes to rescue diplomacy”, *Asahi Shimbun*, asahi.com, 8 January 2007. Besides *manga* and *anime*, J-pop, video games, fashion and TV serials are also popular among Asian youths.

⁷ See the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Policy Speech by Minister for Foreign Affairs Taro Aso to the 166th Session of the Diet”, 26 January 2007.

⁸ On Japanese cultural icons, see Saya S. Shiraishi, “Japan’s Soft Power: Doraemon Goes Overseas” in Peter J. Katzenstein and Takashi Shiraishi (eds), *Network Power: Japan and Asia* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997) and David Leheny, “A Narrow Place to Cross Swords: ‘Soft Power’ and the Politics of Japanese Popular Culture in East Asia” in Peter J. Katzenstein and Takashi Shiraishi (eds), *Beyond Japan: The Dynamics of East Asian Regionalism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006). For a special issue on *anime* in the world, see *Wochi Kochi*, Vol.13, October 2006, a publication of the Japan Foundation.

Secretary of Defense, Clinton Administration) coined and popularized the term in the 1990s. According to Nye, “soft power” is to get others to want what you want through cultural attraction and ideology without resorting to coercive and costly military force.⁹

Apparently, a catalyst to Japanese intellectual and political circles embracing the “soft power” concept was Douglas McGray’s article titled “Japan’s Gross National Cool”.¹⁰ McGray argued that, despite the so-called “lost decade” when Japan sank into economic stagnation in 1991, the country’s pop culture is vibrant, charming and “cool”, and has gone on to take the world by storm. McGray’s “Japan Cool” thesis became a hit in Japan and joined the nation’s mainstream discourse.¹¹

A cheerful “Japan Cool” thesis from the West which validates Japanese culture, albeit pop, is certainly reassuring and ego-boosting to many reeling from the country’s economic stagnation against the backdrop of a rising China and the negative portrayal of democratic postwar Japan as unrepentant and militaristic by the Chinese and Koreans. To many Japanese, it feels nice and good to be liked, emulated and acknowledged in the world as leading a hip “lifestyle” and a “cultural” superpower.¹²

Motivations for Japanese “Soft Power”

It is perhaps no coincidence that Japan’s new emphasis on its cultural products as a vehicle for its “soft power” is also made against the backdrop of a rising China and the establishment of its Confucian Institutes globally. It appears that the two great East Asian powers are locked in a rivalry for the number one spot in the region and

⁹ Joseph S. Nye, Jr. wrote on the concept of “soft power” in his book *Bound To Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990) pp.188-201. Apparently, the book was a response to Paul Kennedy’s thesis that great powers (including the US) are susceptible to “imperial overstretch” and the resultant inability to meet the competing demands of “butter and guns”. Simply put, history shows that all great powers face inevitable decline. However, Nye rejected Kennedy’s thesis and argued that the US is bound to lead because it is also underpinned by “soft power” including the universal appeal of its culture and ideology. The term “soft power” became popular only after Nye wrote about it explicitly in the influential *Foreign Affairs* and subsequent books and articles. After September 11, 2001 and the Bush Administration’s botched occupation of Iraq, Nye argued for a more balanced approach in US foreign policy: greater reliance on “soft power” and less on coercive and destructive military power. See Joseph Nye, “The Decline of America’s Soft Power”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.83, No.3, May/June 2004.

¹⁰ Douglas McGray, “Japan’s Gross National Cool”, *Foreign Policy*, May/June 2002.

¹¹ See, for example, Watanabe Yasushi, “sofuto pawa ron saiho” [Revisiting soft power], *Wochi Kochi*, Vol.13, October 2006. See also comments by Kato Norihiro, professor at Waseda University, “Kato urges Japan to use soft power”, *Nikkei Weekly*, 6 March 2006. For a special issue on the theme of “Cool Japan”, see *Gaiko Forum*, June 2004.

¹² However, Aoki Tamotsu warned: “While we should welcome the description ‘Cool Japan’, ‘cool’ can be an ephemeral concept. I happened to hear that McGray who kicked off the thinking about Japan’s cool two years ago, is now interested in India. ... If Japan is to be more than simply a passing fad, politicians, bureaucrats, scholars, and ordinary citizens have to make a concerted effort to add new dimensions to our cultural power and, looking ahead to a global era of soft power, devise a ‘cultural strategy’ for Japan in the twenty-first century”. See Aoki Tamotsu, “Toward Multilayered strength in the ‘cool’ culture”, *Gaiko Forum*, Summer 2004, p.16.

the mutual pursuit of “soft power” is merely an extension of politics by other means.¹³

Yoshizaki Tatsuhiko proposed that Japan should market the Japanese brand and enhance its international image while facing China’s challenge. He noted: “The challenge thrown down by China, however, has made Japanese diplomacy realize the necessity of making appeals for what it has to offer today. In the post-Cold War world, the opportunity to deploy real military or economic power has decreased, and the roles played by instruments of soft power such as culture and image have grown larger. Many of the confrontations in this era will take place through the interchange of words and ideas. It will be an era when the battles among countries are virtual ones. ... It is necessary to employ as many different routes as possible to create a broad base of Japan fans”.¹⁴

However, the China factor in Tokyo’s quest for “soft power” should not be exaggerated. With or without China as a consideration, Japan, like other big powers, has been pursuing cultural diplomacy long before Nye popularized the term “soft power” and the hype over China’s rise. What is new is the latest incarnation of Japanese cultural diplomacy: the use of *manga* and *anime* as novel instruments of global outreach and appeal.

As early as 1923, Tokyo adopted cultural diplomacy when the Diet created a Special Account, based largely on the country’s share of the Boxer indemnity to fund cultural activities related to China.¹⁵ In the same year, the Diet passed further legislation to establish the China Cultural Affairs Bureau within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. However, Japan’s cultural diplomacy toward China was unraveled in the 1930s after its occupation of Manchuria and the Marco Polo Bridge Incident which triggered war between the two Asian countries.

Following its Second World War defeat, Tokyo concentrated on economic reconstruction and reentry into the international community by addressing issues of reparations and normalizing diplomatic ties. After settling some of these legacy issues, and becoming an economic superpower by the early 1970s, Tokyo was able to channel more resources and attention to cultural diplomacy such as establishing the Japan Foundation for global outreach.

From the 1970s, Tokyo has placed emphasis on cultural diplomacy toward the US and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) - the former because the US-Japan Alliance is the cornerstone of Japanese foreign policy and the latter because of markets and energy security - most Japanese oil tankers go through Southeast Asian waters and anti-Japanese sentiments have to be addressed in the region.

Shocked by violent anti-Japanese riots in Bangkok and Jakarta against then Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei’s 1974 visit to the region, Tokyo became more conscious of

¹³ The flying geese pattern of East Asian economic development (with Japan as the lead goose) has become obsolete with the rise of China. The two East Asian great powers are also competing for turf in Southeast Asia especially over the forging of bilateral and multilateral free trade agreements with the region.

¹⁴ Yoshizaki Tatsuhiko, “Japan, The Quiet Genius: Towards a Strategic Public Diplomacy”, *Gaiko Forum*, Vol.7, No.1, Spring 2007, p.26.

¹⁵ See Heng Teow, *Japanese Cultural Policy Toward China – 1918-1931: A Comparative Approach* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Asia Center, 1999).

maintaining a good international image. Subsequently, Japan codified the Fukuda Doctrine with the pledge to foster “heart to heart relations” with Southeast Asia and also maintained Japan Foundation offices in Bangkok, Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur and Manila to pursue cultural diplomacy.

Post-war Japan cannot exercise hard military power to coerce other states. Shackled by constitutional restrictions (the no-war clause of Article 9) and mass pacifism after the nation’s catastrophic defeat in war, Tokyo has to adopt a soft approach like foreign aid and cultural diplomacy in its foreign relations. In this regard, Japan today is different from other great powers which wield both “hard” and “soft” power - it lacks the will and capability to exercise “hard power”.¹⁶

Cartoons also helped to make the Self Defense Force (SDF) in US-occupied Iraq appear non-threatening and friendly to the locals. Japan’s 600 non-combat troops in Iraq painted a popular soccer cartoon (Captain Tsubasa in Japanese and Captain Majed in Arab countries) on their water trucks.¹⁷ Apparently, softening its military’s image in Iraq via cute cartoons mitigates potential backlash from the public in the Arab world against Japan.

A Japanese diplomat who promoted Captain Tsubasa in Iraq noted: “Captain Tsubasa is famous throughout Iraq and the Middle East. The Iraqi people didn’t know he was Japanese - they thought Tsubasa was Saudi Arabian. But I was sure that Tsubasa would cheer up Iraqi kids when they see his logo in the streets ... Tsubasa became the symbol of our goodwill”.¹⁸

Conceivably, the new emphasis on cultural products may also mask the nationalistic and rightwing agenda of the Abe Administration. Prime Minister Abe has upgraded the Defense Agency to the Ministry of Defense and hopes to pass legislation that will permit a national referendum to revise the Constitution and transform the country into a “normal state” which engages in collective security. If this were to come to pass, Japan will no longer be constitutionally constrained to exercise only “soft power”.

Tokyo’s new emphasis on cultural diplomacy is agreeable to most Japanese across the ideological spectrum: to the left, a non-militaristic approach to international

¹⁶ Germany is perhaps the only other great power today which eschews hard power due to its defeat after World War II. However, Germany has dispatched ground troops to Afghanistan while Japan did not. Tokyo’s SDF ground troops were deployed only for non-combat peacekeeping operations within the United Nations framework or “humanitarian” assistance to its US ally’s occupation of Iraq. For the US, “soft power” is merely the velvet glove that covers the iron fist; Japan only has a satin glove without an iron fist.

¹⁷ A newspaper noted: “Some have even suggested that Captain Majed was the reason the Japanese were not attacked during the two and half year mission there”. See “Japan’s government counting on cute cartoons to raise overseas profile”, *Mainichi Interactive*, 18 February 2007. It is hard to say whether cartoons actually contributed to a kinder and gentler image of the SDF in Iraq. That they were not attacked by the Iraqi insurgents could simply be due to the fact that the SDF was not deployed to a hot spot, was protected by other forces from the “coalition of the willing”, actually provided humanitarian assistance to Iraqis, and perhaps was just plain lucky.

¹⁸ Okazaki Shiori, “A Japanese Comic Hero cheers Iraqi Children”, *Japan Now*, Vo.1, No.8, 1 December 2005. Foreign Minister Aso noted: “The Japan Foundation concluded an agreement to provide the largest Iraqi television station free of charge the third season of the Captain Tsubasa anime series — a total of 52 shows — dubbed into Arabic”. See The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “A New Look at Cultural Diplomacy: A Call to Japan’s Cultural Practitioners: Speech by Minister of Foreign Affairs Taro Aso at Digital Hollywood University”, 28 April 2006.

relations is desirable; to the right, it is great for the world to appreciate various aspects of the Japanese culture. Simply put, there is a national consensus on the pursuit of “soft power” for different reasons.¹⁹

According to the editorial series of the liberal and dovish *Asahi Shimbun* (reputedly the most intellectual newspaper in Japan and ranked number two in national circulation), Japan should pursue “soft” rather than “hard” military power in its national strategy. The *Asahi Shimbun* noted that Japan “became obsessed with hard power in the Meiji era (1868-12). *Fukoku kyohei* - the belief that a nation must have a strong army to prosper - was the Meiji government’s core policy. The nation’s subsequent defeat in World War II made Japan abandon its military ambitions and seek economic growth instead. However, Japan’s economic power has peaked out, and the challenge today for this country is how to polish and best its soft power”.²⁰

The *Asahi* continued: “But only other countries can decide what soft attributes will make Japan attractive as an ally. Being perceived as forcing values on others would only work against Japan’s interests. If the international community comes to truly appreciate Japan’s culture and values, adopting them as ‘international public property’, Japan could perhaps achieve an honored place in the world ... As the world is increasingly shifting to the use of soft power to settle problems through peaceful coexistence and cooperation, rather than by military might and economic supremacy, Japan may earn higher recognition if it can help through soft power of its own”.²¹

Instruments of Japanese “Soft Power”

Long before *manga* and *anime* were co-opted by the Japanese state to promote its public diplomacy, it has relied on the Japan Foundation, The Japan Exchange and Teaching Program, Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteer program and Official Developmental Assistance. Encouraging foreign students to study in Japan is another approach to invest in a younger generation and hope that they, as beneficiaries of the Japanese educational system, will return home as cultural ambassadors and build friendship bridges between their countries and Japan.

Established in 1972, the Japan Foundation is a key institution to promote Japanese language education overseas and also art, cultural and intellectual exchanges between the nation and the world.²² This foundation has a budget of US\$146.5 million in fiscal year 2005-6. With 19 overseas offices in 18 countries, the Japan Foundation is represented in Asia, Oceania, the Americas, Europe, Middle East and Africa. Hitherto, the Japan Foundation has often promoted traditional art

¹⁹ However, there are thoughtful Japanese who have doubts about “soft power” in Tokyo’s diplomacy. See, for example, Ogoura Kazuo, “The Limits of Soft Power”, in *Japan Echo*, Vol.33, No.5, October 2006.

²⁰ “Soft power: Strive to be a ‘caring’ nation so as to help others that are less fortunate”, *Asahi Shimbun*, 23 May 2007.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² See Japan Foundation, *Annual Report 2005-06*.

forms like the austere Noh theater, Ikebana (stylized flower arrangement), *ukiyo-e* (woodblock prints) and the Zen-inspired tea ceremony - exquisite, refined and quaint but of limited mass appeal. However, the Foundation is likely to move in tandem with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to promote pop culture like *manga* and *anime* for greater international outreach.

In May 2007, Tokyo established the International Manga Award and the First International Manga Award Executive to honor *manga* artists who contribute to the promotion of *manga* abroad. The Committee comprises the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the President of the Japan Foundation, and the members of the special committee for pop culture of the Council on the Movement of People Across Borders.²³ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs also roped in the Japan Cartoonists Association to send renowned *manga* artists to the Selection Committee of this award.

The International Manga Award attracted 146 entries from 26 countries and regions globally. Interestingly, the largest number of entries came from the Chinese speaking world - 24 from China (including Hong Kong) and 11 from Taiwan. Ethnic Chinese also captured the top prize in June 2007: Lee Chi Ching (best work) from Hong Kong; Kai (runner up) also from Hong Kong and Benny Wong Thong Hou (runner up) from Malaysia.²⁴ The Japan Foundation then invited the winners to Japan for a ten-day visit that included the award presentation ceremony, meetings with Japanese *manga* artists, and visits to related organizations. Conceivably, ethnic Chinese may win the International Manga Award in the next few years because of the huge base of ethnic Chinese *manga* artists and fans but it remains to be seen whether the allure of *manga* can melt the hearts of the Chinese people toward Japan given the lack of historical reconciliation.

The Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program is another important arm of its cultural diplomacy (see Appendix 1). In 2005, JET invited 5,853 youths from 44 countries to teach in Japanese schools, and foster international understanding and goodwill.²⁵ By that year, JET has cumulatively sponsored more than 43,000 participants in this youth exchange program (see Appendix 2).

Tokyo also has an equivalent to the US Peace Corps known as the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteer (JOCV) program comprising volunteers between the ages of 20 and 39 to assist the socio-economic development of local communities. Since its establishment in 1965, the JOCV has dispatched more than 22,000 volunteers to third world countries.²⁶

Another pillar of Japanese “soft power” is Official Developmental Assistance (ODA) (US\$6.24 billion in 2007) extended to win the goodwill of developing countries. In lieu of military power, Tokyo, more than any other great powers, relies on ODA as carrots to “purchase” power.²⁷

²³ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Establishment of the International Manga Award”, 24 May 2007.

²⁴ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “First International Manga Award”, 29 June 2007.

²⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, *Diplomatic Bluebook 2006*, p.204.

²⁶ See the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Evaluation study on the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV) Program”, 2001.

²⁷ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Japan’s ODA budget”. <<http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/budget/index.html>> (Accessed: 4 March 2007). David Arase argues that Tokyo utilizes ODA to “purchase” power. See David Arase, *The Political Economy of Japan’s Foreign Aid* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1995).

Accepting foreign students to study in Japan and promoting a network of friendly alumni is another means to enhance goodwill toward the host country. The numbers of foreign students studying in Japan have climbed from slightly over 40,000 in 1990 to 121,812 in 2005.²⁸ Promoting the study of the Japanese language abroad is another way to enhance an understanding and appreciation of Japan. Interestingly, the number of foreign students studying the Japanese language in 1990 (just before the bubble economy burst) was 981,407 but climbed to 2,356,745 in 2003 despite the so-called “lost decade”.²⁹ Apparently, many students from the bubble years studied the Japanese language for economic reasons but more students today are studying the language because of their fascination and love for *manga* and *anime*. In so doing, they may end up with a better understanding of Japan.

Limits to Japanese “Soft Power”

While Foreign Minister Aso is flattered that many foreigners are mesmerized by *manga*, the reality is often just the opposite. The Chinese media has noted that certain *manga* promote anti-China sentiments.³⁰ Indeed, notorious rightwing artists, especially Kobayashi Yoshinori, have sold millions of copies of *manga* which portrays Imperial Japan as fighting a righteous war to liberate Asia from Western colonialism. While *manga* and *anime* do beguile some foreigners, their attraction may be exaggerated especially for Asian countries with more conservative values and religion. They would consider certain adult *manga* and *anime* - often licentious and violent - to be anathema to the good morality of their societies.

Japan’s “soft power” has its limits. Without a historical reconciliation with China and South Korea, Japan is unlikely to truly win the hearts and minds of the Chinese and Korean people, notwithstanding the allure of its comics and cartoons. “Soft power”, assiduously cultivated over the years, can easily be undermined by the insensitive statements and clumsy behavior of a new generation of nationalistic leaders over politically sensitive issues pertaining to Japan’s past militarism. Prime Minister Abe Shinzo initially remarked that there was no evidence of coercion by Japan’s wartime government in using Asian women as sex slaves but then apologized to the “comfort women” to preempt a non-binding resolution at the US House of Representatives calling on Abe to formally apologize for Tokyo’s role in the “comfort women” issue.

To make matters worse, a group of Japanese right wing politicians (from both the LDP and the main opposition, the Democratic Party of Japan [DPJ]), academics, journalists and commentators took a full page advertisement in the *Washington Post* in

²⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, *Diplomatic Bluebook 2006*, p.206.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.208.

³⁰ The Chinese media noted that negative Japanese public opinion towards China has coincidentally been published “just as anti-Chinese and ROK ‘*manga*’ have been appearing on comic shelves in Tokyo”. See “Japan divided on neighborly ties”, *People’s Daily Online*, 9 January 2006. Bianca Bosker notes that some in China “already see Japanese *manga* as a tool of indoctrination”. She observes: “An article published by the Chinese paper *Global Times* in June 2006 accused *manga* of trying to ‘retell history’ to cover up Japan’s war crimes and infect Chinese children with Japanese values”. See Bianca Bosker, “Manga Mania”, *Wall Street Journal*, 31 August 2007.

June 2007 and indignantly denounced the “comfort women” issue as a gross distortion. This act of denial and petulance not only stiffened the resolve of many US politicians to support the resolution but also damaged the international image of Japan as a country lacking remorse and sincerity over its wartime aggression and atrocities. The comment of the *Asahi Shimbun* is apt: “It takes months, even years, to build up the respect that gives soft power - and all that is gained can be lost in a moment. When the Prime Minister or leading politicians make provocative remarks that stir mistrust or anger, for instance, Japan quickly loses its ‘attractiveness’ to other countries”.³¹

Other limits to Japan’s “soft power” include the lack of a CNN or BBC-like institution to project its voice globally, the reluctance of its universities to hire foreign faculty members beyond language teachers, the relatively closed nature of its society to foreign immigrants to maintain ethnic homogeneity and social order, and the fact that Japanese is not a global language. The best students in Asia would head toward the American Ivy League and Britain’s Oxbridge but not necessarily the Universities of Tokyo, Waseda and Keio.

Its unique sumo wrestling, while popular at home, has no large international audience unlike the soccer leagues of Western Europe. To be sure, sumo and Japanese martial arts such as judo, karate, kendo, jujitsu and aikido do appeal enormously to small circles of non-Japanese. Though judo and karate are sports featured in the Olympic Games they pale in global popularity in comparison to soccer and basketball. In contrast, the English Premier League, the Spanish Liga and the Italian Serie A matches are telecasted live into the living rooms of East Asia.³² Similarly, while Japan has succeeded in exporting small numbers of baseball players to the US and a few footballers to Europe, its domestic baseball and soccer leagues lack global appeal.

Moreover, Japan does not represent any universal values and ideals while certain Western nations, especially the US, champion human rights and democracy. Even though Tokyo recently adopted the rhetoric of democracy and human rights, other Asians do not necessarily view Japan as the paragon of these values given its poor treatment of ethnic minorities (Japan-born Koreans and the Burakumins) and memories of wartime atrocities among the Chinese and Koreans.

In November 2006, Foreign Minister Aso advocated a “value-oriented diplomacy” based on the “universal” values of democracy, freedom, human rights, rule of law, and market economy. A critic noted: “For Japan to be perceived as a legitimate proponent of democracy and human rights in Southeast Asia it must clearly and irrevocably cut its ties to its imperial past”.³³ Unfortunately, many politicians from the ruling LDP and the main opposition DPJ have failed to do so. Moreover, if the Abe Administration were to stridently champion democracy to forge an alignment based on shared values with the US, Australia and India, this strategy may backfire because it may exclude and alienate Asian countries especially China which do not subscribe to liberal democracy.

³¹ “Soft power: Strive to be a ‘caring’ nation so as to help others that are less fortunate”, *Asahi Shimbun*, 23 May 2007.

³² The British noted that its Premier League football is “shown in 195 countries around the world, to an audience of over 600 million, and it is estimated that 60 percent of Chinese men, with figures highest amongst young professionals, follow the British Premier League regularly. This illustrates not only the impressive reach of sport, but also the potential role and impact of non-Governmental organizations and of informal public diplomacy”. See Lord Carter of Coles, *Public Diplomacy: Review*, December 2005, p.31.

³³ David Fouse, “Japan’s ‘value-oriented diplomacy’”, *International Herald Tribune*, 22 March 2007.

Conceivably, Japan's domestic experiences in environmental protection and role in the Kyoto Protocol (which sets targets for countries to reduce carbon dioxide emission and global warming) can conjure an attractive image of an environmentally friendly nation. However, the Kyoto Protocol will expire in 2012. To ensure that Japan will lead in environmental protection in the years ahead, Prime Minister Abe has advocated the cutting of global greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 and would seek to forge an anti-global warming framework when Japan hosts the G-8 summit in Toyakocho, Hokkaido in July 2008. But Tokyo has stubbornly insisted on whaling for "scientific research" despite condemnation from international conservationists that Japanese whaling fleets are pushing some species to the brink of extinction. Being one of the few countries in the world that seeks to overturn the ban on commercial whaling gives Japan a bad international image in the environmental domain.³⁴

The commercial value of Japanese cultural products in the world was estimated at US\$12.5 billion in 2002.³⁵ Harder to assess is the efficacy of Japanese "soft power". Can Japanese ODA and cultural diplomacy sway the Asian countries to do what Japan wants? The answer is contextual. It really depends on what Japan wants and whether such desires and messages are acceptable to these Asian countries. Having large budgets for ODA, the Japan Foundation, JET and JOCV programs are no guarantee that others will do Tokyo's bidding.

Aficionados of Japanese cuisine will view it as refined, tasty and healthy but it is a fallacy to assume that most sushi lovers will support Japan's quest for a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council or the Prime Minister's visit to Yasukuni Shrine. Japanese state and society should not be conflated together. Indeed, a liking for Japanese society and culture is not easily translated into support for the Japanese state and its foreign policy goals.

Public opinion polls in the US and Asia toward Japan can reveal the efficacy of its cultural diplomacy. If the American and Asian public were to think poorly of Japan, it is doubtful that the latter has indeed conducted a successful cultural diplomacy. The 2006 Image of Japan Study shows that 91 percent of American public opinion leaders and 69 percent of the general public view Japan as a dependent ally.³⁶

According to various surveys, public opinion in Southeast Asia tends to view Japan very favorably while those in China and South Korea do not (see Appendix 3).³⁷ It appears that Japan lacks "soft power" toward China and South

³⁴ See David McNeill, "Japan and the Whaling Ban: Siege Mentality Fuels 'Sustainability' Claims" in *Japan Focus*, 13 February 2007. In the 19th century, American whaling hunted the sperm whale, humpback whale and the blue whale close to extinction. However, international norms have changed and the remaining pro-whaling countries are Japan, Norway and Iceland.

³⁵ Anthony Faiola, "Japan's animated culture of Cool turns into biggest export: reinvents itself after long slump", *Washington Post*, 4 January 2004.

³⁶ See the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "2006 Image of Japan Study in the US", August 2006.

³⁷ According to a March 2005 joint survey conducted by the *Asahi Shimbun* and the Institute of Sociology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 64.1 percent perceived Japan unfavorably; only 7.8 percent felt the opposite. See "Special research on Chinese attitudes toward Japan and other nations" in the Mansfield Asian Opinion Poll Database. <<http://www.mansfieldfdn.org/polls/poll-05-3.htm>> (Accessed: 4 March 2007). However, in a survey conducted jointly in seven Asian countries (including Japan) by the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, the *Korea Times* (Hankook Ilbo) and the Gallup group, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam viewed Japan very favorably. South Korea was the exception. See "Nihon no yakuwari takai hyoka" [High evaluation of Japan's role], *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 10 September 2006.

Korea due to historical problems and territorial disputes, notwithstanding the appeal of Japanese cultural products. While Koreans, like the Southeast Asians, also have an appreciation for *manga* and *anime*, these cultural products are necessary but not sufficient for Japan to establish an appealing image in Korea (see Appendix 4).

Beyond Japanese “soft power”

The utility of *manga* and *anime* for Japanese foreign relations is likely to be quite limited. For every Asian enamored and entertained by these cultural products, there is probably another who find such things to be rather infantile and frivolous and therefore unappealing. Moreover, in a globalized world, the Asian consumer is also bombarded with multiple images and cultural products from China, South Korea, India and the West and is unlikely to be attracted to only things Nippon.

It would be naïve to exaggerate the influence of Japanese cultural products if Tokyo were to pursue policies deemed by its neighbors to be against their interest. Indeed, all the cultural ambassadors and *manga* prizes from Japan would not be able to soothe the Chinese and Koreans if a Japanese Prime Minister were to visit Yasukuni Shrine again.

A difficult challenge for Japan and East Asia in the 21st century is to transcend parochial nationalism and jointly produce “East Asian” cultural products which can appeal to the West and the rest. If trans-national collaboration were to take place in movies, TV serials, music and theater performances among East Asian countries in the next few decades, it may not only reap a handsome profit but also pave the way for a nascent East Asian Community in which common cultural underpinnings are indispensable. Cultural products including *manga* and *anime* then will not merely be markers of a unique Japanese identity and pride but emblems of a greater East Asia - entertaining, appealing and profitable beyond its shores. If that scenario were to come to fruition, it will be more meaningful to talk about the “soft power” of East Asia and not merely that of China or Japan.

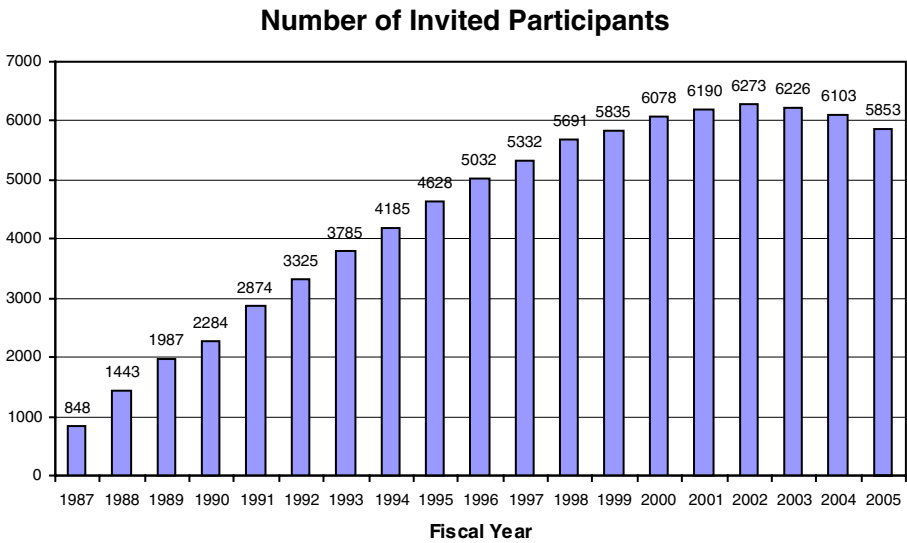
In March 2007, Japan and Singapore agreed to establish a Japan Center to disseminate Japanese popular culture in Southeast Asia. The Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs recorded: “Prime Minister Abe stated that the establishment of the ‘Japan Center’ (note: a proposal by Singapore to establish a base in Singapore to disseminate information about Japan, especially on cultural information) was of significance ... Prime Minister Lee (Hsien Loong) on his part stated that the ‘Japan center’ could serve as the foundation for Japan to exert its soft power in Southeast Asia, and proposed that the two countries jointly produce television programs that showcased information on Japanese culture and lifestyles for broadcasting throughout Southeast Asia and that the two countries collaborate in interactive media industry”.³⁸

Perhaps the Japan-Singapore model of cultural collaboration can be tried out in Japan’s relations with other Southeast Asian countries, and China and South Korea in the next decade. Rather than just a one-way street in which Tokyo seeks to

³⁸ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “The Japan-Singapore Summit Meeting (Summary)”, 20 March 2007.

promote its culture and “soft power” in East Asia, it should also explore joint ventures to encourage Southeast Asia, China and South Korea to establish their cultural centers in Japan. An acceptance and appreciation of the contemporary cultures of other East Asian countries by Japan will probably make them even more receptive to Japanese “soft power”. And if Japan can settle the history issue with its neighbors, Japanese “soft power” will be further enhanced in the region.

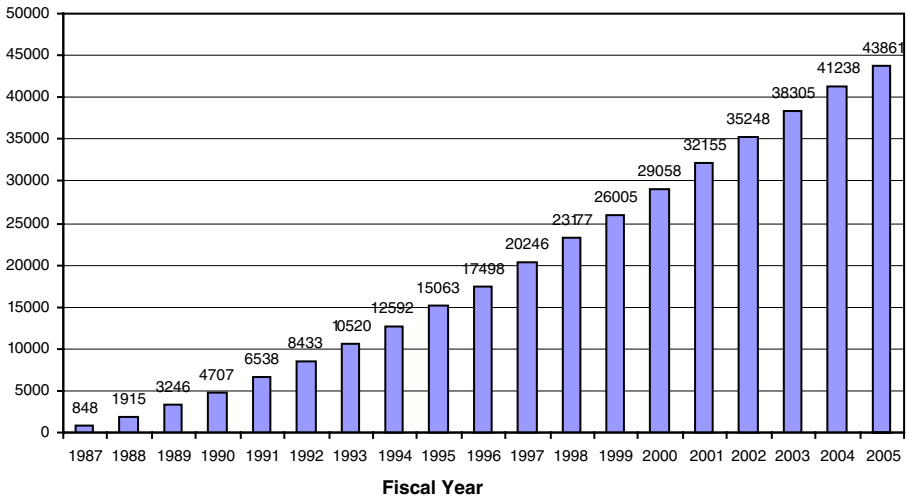
Appendix 1 Annual JET (Japan Exchange and Teaching) Participants



* The number of JET participants peaked in 2002 and then dipped due to the financial austerity practiced by the Koizumi government.

Appendix 2 Cumulative JET (Japan Exchange and Teaching) Participants

Accumulated Total Number of Participants



Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, *Diplomatic Bluebook 2006*, pp.204–205.

Appendix 3 Perception of Japan: 6 Asian Countries Question: Can Japan be Trusted?

Table 1 Perception of Japan: 6 asian countries question: Can Japan be trusted?

	Can be Trusted	Cannot be Trusted	Don't Know
1. Thailand	92.2%	5.7%	2.2%
2. Indonesia	87.8	10.8	1.2
3. India	83.4	13.7	3.0
4. Malaysia	77.5	18.7	3.8
5. Vietnam	75.4	12.7	11.3
6. South Korea	10.9	88.6	0.5

Source: *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 10 September 2006

Appendix 4 Attraction to Japanese cultural products

Table 2 Attraction to Japanese cultural products

	Korea	Indonesia	Malaysia	Thailand	Vietnam
<i>Anime & manga</i>	25.6%	29.7%	31.5%	18.2%	12.0%
Japanese cuisine	17.2	17.3	20.7	25.0	12.6
Movies	9.7	21.7	18.2	19.1	16.7
TV program	8.5	20.0	24.6	16.6	13.0
Fashion	14.6	7.3	13.1	17.0	8.4
Popular music	5.8	7.8	12.4	9.1	9.2
Sumo & baseball	9.2	8.0	5.9	6.1	6.5
Traditional culture	2.4	8.3	7.9	10.1	9.8

Multiple answers

Respondents: aged 18 and above

* The outlook toward Japan is likely to be significantly higher for those between 10 to 17 years old, a generation more amenable to Japanese popular culture than the preceding ones.

Source: *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 10 September 2006

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