

“Cool Japan” as the Next Future of Post-industrial Japan?

Introduction

Japan has been a dominant economic power in Asia since its transformation during Meiji Restoration in the late 19th century. By the late 1980s, Japan had a GDP that was larger than the rest of the region combined¹, and was considered the economic powerhouse of Asia with its strong export manufacturing industries. However, its economy has been in stagnation since the early 1990s, when its stock market and property bubble burst. The situation worsened in light of recent international and domestic trends, such as an increasingly competitive global market, the rise of China and an aging population within the country. Japan used to make up 17.9% of the world economy in 1994, but its share declined to 8.8% by the end of 2011.²

The Japanese government has been struggling to find strategies to revamp its national economy. It has implemented a number of fiscal and monetary policies since early 1990s, but the country still continues to struggle to pull itself out of economic stagnation. “Cool Japan” was one of Japan’s latest strategies, which aimed to utilize its national soft power that fits into Japan’s post-industrial era.

The term “Cool Japan” was first coined by an American journalist, Douglas Macray, in his article titled “Japan’s National Cool”, published in 2002.³ Macray argued that Japan’s increasing cultural influence across the globe, termed “coolness”, should become its new national competitiveness. His article later gave rise to a “Cool Japan” boom via mass media across the country and NHK started a program named “Discovering Cool Japan”⁴ in 2005, which was still on the air currently. In July 2010, the Japanese government published a series of policies named “New Growth Strategy – Blueprint for revitalizing Japan” and included a chapter on “Intellectual Property, Standardization Strategy and Cool Japan’s Overseas Promotion”⁵. In 2011, “Cool Japan” was officially launched as a national project by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI). It aimed to sponsor relevant businesses and to improve the connections between foreign retail and domestic small and

¹ Joseph Babatunde. Fagoyinbo, *The armed forces: instrument of peace, strength, development and prosperity* (Bloomington: IND., 2013).

² Kalim Siddiqui, "Political economy of Japan's decades long economic stagnation," *Equilibrium* 10, no. 4 (2015): , doi:10.12775/equil.2015.033.

³ Douglas Mcgray, "Japans Gross National Cool," *Foreign Policy*, no. 130 (2002): , doi:10.2307/3183487.

⁴ Original name in Japanese is “COOL JAPAN～発掘!かっこいいニッポン～”. The program interviews around 8 foreign residents who have just come to Japan every week, aiming to rediscover Japan from foreigners’ perspectives. The program was also made available via NHK Online TV in English from 2005.

⁵ “新成長戦略～「元気な日本」復活のシナリオ～”, (New Growth Strategy – Blueprint for revitalizing Japan) 首相官邸ホームページ (Home page of Prime Minister’s Official Residence), June 18, 2000, accessed January 31, 2018, <https://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/sinseichousenryaku/>

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medium enterprises (SMEs) in the content⁶, fashion, cuisine, and traditional craftsmanship industries⁷. One of the most important goals of the project was to raise the revenue of creative industries from 8 trillion to 11 trillion Japanese Yen (JPY) by 2020. METI also established the Creative Industries Promotion Office in 2010 and allocated JPY50 billion in the 2013 national budget to the office to promote Japanese culture overseas.

However, while the government has stressed on the economic benefits of the project, there have been scepticism towards the idea of "Cool Japan", including the concerns over the conservation of authentic culture. This case study examines the project and its implications from different dimensions.

Background

The lost decade

At present, Japan was the 3rd largest world economy, and it was also the largest exporter of raw materials in the world. Japan used to have the fastest growing economy in the OECD region after WWII, with an average annual growth rate of 9% (compared to just 3.6% for the U.S. and 4.7% for Western Europe on average).⁸ It was considered a success story for economic development and an example for its peer economies to emulate until the late 1980s.

However, since mid 1980s when labour force growth slowed and the number of labour unions increased, the export-oriented industrialization that had been taking place across Japan started to lose its international competitiveness. In 1985, Japanese yen doubled in value against US Dollar according to the Plaza Agreement (a five-country treaty allowing for the depreciation of the US Dollar), which severely reduced the competitiveness of labour-intensive exported goods from Japan⁹. This was especially impactful on the country because the export sectors had been the major ones contributing to the growth of the Japanese economy. Since the 1985 Plaza Agreement, the manufacturing industry began to decline, and people started to speculate in the real estate and financial markets, which subsequently gave rise to the Japanese bubble economy that lasted six years until 1991. After the bubble burst, Japanese economy was caught in deflation and extremely slow economic growth and the decade since has been labelled the "lost decade".

During the "lost decade", Japanese output per capita growth rate was as low as 0.5%, when the global average was 3.2% and that of U.S. was 2.6%. What's more, the unemployment rate in 2002 surged to 5.4%, more than twice of the rate in 1990.¹⁰ Between 1992 and 1995, the JPY appreciated by more than 50%, which led to another huge decline in export

⁶ According to METI Japan, content industry refers to the production and distribution of videos (movies, animation, TV programs), music, games, books, etc.

⁷ Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, "Cool Japan / Creative Industries Policy," Cool Japan / Creative Industries Policy (METI), July 2012, accessed January 29, 2018, http://www.meti.go.jp/english/policy/mono_info_service/creative_industries/creative_industries.html.

⁸ Kalim, "Political economy of Japan's decades long economic stagnation"

⁹ Mike Douglass. "Transborder Intercity Networks in East Asia: Regionalizing Globalization for Economic Resilience."

¹⁰ Julen Esteban-Pretel, Ryo Nakajima, and Ryuichi Tanaka, "TFP growth slowdown and the Japanese labor market in the 1990s," *Journal of the Japanese and International Economies* 24, no. 1 (2010), doi:10.1016/j.jjie.2009.11.002.

competitiveness. Furthermore, Japan lost another quarter of its exports to other east Asian countries during the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 when other regional currencies depreciated sharply.¹¹ The stagnant economic growth hurt the national confidence and gave led to a decline of the cities that used to be manufacturing hubs.

The macroeconomic policies and urban strategies

The main power driving the contemporary is still its manufacturing industry such as consumer electronics, semiconductor and optical fiber. Japanese government has been supporting these traditional industries as well as subsidizing SMEs since 1990.¹² In addition, in response to the drop of export market as well as the collapse of economic growth, the Japanese government implemented a series of monetary measures including raising the interest rate to dampen speculation and adjusting fiscal spending. The government also decided to subsidize the private sector in order to stimulate the national economy, but found that the subsidies had the unintended effect of sustaining “zombie” companies that were no longer competitive. Furthermore, the subsidies discouraged the development of new businesses especially in the industries where “zombie” companies were prevalent, such as construction. Nevertheless, few policies seemed to work to cure the stagnant economy, and many economists indicated that the problem could not be solved merely through macroeconomics policies, but would require a comprehensive structural reform.¹³

Apart from the monetary policies, the central government of Japan also took a series of anti-deindustrialization strategies to revitalize the city regions that used to be manufacturing hubs. These cities were experiencing a decline together with the manufacturing industries, which were relocating to Southeast Asia. This “technopolis” strategy was a major part of the plan and aimed at upgrading the existing industries and generate new technology sectors in secondary cities outside Tokyo. However, the central government failed to provide enough tax breaks and special loans for the candidate cities and eventually the program was ended in 1998 with little progress.¹⁴

“Cool Japan” as the National Project

The drivers behind the national strategy

As a matter of fact, there has been no clear definition of Cool Japan since the invention of the term by Douglas Macray in 2002, and what the Cool Japan national project included has also been constantly changing since its launch. Nonetheless, it is not hard to see from the mission of METI that the primary motivation driving the national project was economic growth. METI indicated in a report in 2012 that Japanese content industry played an even more important role than automobile or electronics industries in terms of sales and employment. However, both foreign and domestic demand in the creative industry had been shrinking since the turn of the century and it was found that the sales of Japanese

¹¹ Kalim, "Political economy of Japan's decades long economic stagnation"

¹² "Japanese Government Earmarks 46B Yen in Subsidies for SMEs," Japan Industry News, August 18, 2017, accessed March 30, 2018, <https://www.japanindustrynews.com/2017/08/japanese-government-earmarks-46b-yen-subsidies-for-smes/>.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Douglass. "Transborder Intercity Networks in East Asia"

manga had halved since 1995.¹⁵ Hence, since the launch of Cool Japan the Japanese government also established the Japan Brand Fund which aimed to support business activities as well as cultivate overseas demand for Japanese products or services that showcased the unique characteristics of Japanese culture and lifestyle.¹⁶

Secondly, Cool Japan also aimed to enhance Japan’s international cultural stance within the region. Neighbouring South Korea began media liberalization in 1988 and in 1999, then-President Kim Dae Jung established the Basic Law for promoting cultural industry and allocated 1.15 percent of the national budget to the project.¹⁷ Having witnessed the increasing prevalence of Korean TV dramas such as *Winter Sonata* across Asia at the beginning of the 21st century, the Japanese government was determined to enlarge its national influence in the media industry and project its cultural power in the international stage through the promotion of Cool Japan. Therefore, apart from a broad capitalization of Japanese culture, reinforcing Japan’s global cultural power and standing of the country (especially within east Asia) was another important purpose of the project.

Furthermore, Cool Japan was also expected to revitalise the national pride that had been flagging since the economic stagnation of the lost decade as well as since the earthquake and tsunami in Tohoku in March 2011. Japan Tourism Agency (JTA), affiliated with the Ministry of Land Infrastructure and Transport and Tourism, initiated a tourism campaign named “*Japan, Endless Discovery*” and designated *Arashi*, then the most popular idol group in Japan and East Asia, as the ambassador for the project. The ambassador group took trips to different regions in Japan to rediscover the country while interacting with local people and showcasing local products. JTA then published a book about these episodes and distributed it among elementary, middle, and high schools in Japan, trying to make the younger generation proud of their country. In the concluding remarks, the book wrote, “*Japan is very beautiful. Japanese people are very kind. Can we communicate our feelings to everyone? We want to know more about Japan where we are living.*”¹⁸

“Soft power” as a national strategy

Why did Japan decide to take the “soft” approach among all the different policy alternatives? As it suggests, soft power is the opposite of hard power that usually refers to military capability and economic might. Soft power, on the other hand, is “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments”.¹⁹ In the context of international relations, Joseph Nye coined the term “soft power” in 1990 to refer to a diplomatic approach that was reinforced through media culture, respectful foreign policy, and attractive democratic values. Japan is not the first state to realize the potential of soft power. The UK set the precedent in developing and branding the national soft power through “Cool Britannia” in 1990s, in order to reposition itself as one of the superpowers across the world.

¹⁵ Geoffrey Cain, “Will Korean manhwa replace manga?” Public Radio International, May 30, 2010, accessed January 30, 2018, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2009-11-28/will-korean-manhwa-replace-manga>.

¹⁶ Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, “Cool Japan Initiative”

¹⁷ Yunuen. “The Politics of Selling Culture and Branding the National in Contemporary Japan”

¹⁸ Yunuen. “The Politics of Selling Culture and Branding the National in Contemporary Japan”

¹⁹ Jonathan Reed Winkler and Joseph S. Nye, “Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics,” *International Journal* 61, no. 1 (2005), doi:10.2307/40204149.

Media culture has been the preferred resource for the UK as well as many other countries when it came to building soft power. For Japan, developing soft power (especially through media culture) is relatively low cost and could be a substitute for its lack of military hard power because of the post-war constitution imposed by the US.²⁰ Japanese popular culture has a solid base in the domestic market, which has been well-developed since 1950s. This enables the country to promote these cultural industries overseas around 20 years earlier than its neighbours whose domestic markets developed later in the second half of the 20th century²¹. For example, Japanese TV series had been exported in China and actresses such as Yamaguchi Momoe were popular idols across China in the 1980s. In addition, Japanese “cuteness” (*kawaii*) was influential in western markets as well, where it was perceived as a genre of fashion and products and an alternative to the American notion of “Sexiness” and “Coolness”.²²

Apart from an existing base of Japanese cultural industry overseas, it is also natural for people to think of food, music, and TV as “soft power”²³. Therefore, upon realizing the business potential of these content industries, Prime Minister Taro Aso indicated that:

Japanese content, such as anime and video games, and fashion draw attention from consumers around the world. Unfortunately, this soft power is not being linked to business overseas. By linking the popularity of Japan’s soft power to business, I want to create a 20–30 trillion yen market by 2020 and create 500,000 new jobs. (Quoted in McCurry 2009)

Asahi Shimbun, one of the most respected newspapers in Japan, also pointed out in 2007 that as the best time for Japanese economy has passed, Japan needed to focus on polishing and making the best of its soft power moving forward.²⁴

Overseas Projects

Cool Japan Fund, founded in November 2013 as a private-public fund, declared that its three aims were to take Japan’s appeal to the world, to create successful business models, and to broadcast the Japanese brand.²⁵ It selected target enterprises and supported them with risk capital to facilitate their expansion overseas. It had three investment criteria including alignment with policy, profitability and performance, and wider influence. With a seed capital of JPY69.3 billion, it invested in platform projects, supply chain projects, and regional SME support projects in industries including media and content, fashion and lifestyle, and food and services.²⁶ By the end of February 2014, there were 2,564 content holders that applied for the sponsorship of the project and 1,570 of them were approved and sponsored

²⁰ Heng, Yee-Kuang. "Beyond 'kawaii' pop culture: Japan's normative soft power as global trouble-shooter." *The Pacific Review* 27, no. 2 (2014): 169-192.

²¹ Nissim Kadosh Otmazgin, *Regionalizing culture: the political economy of Japanese popular culture in Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014).

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Asahi Shimbun (2007), 'Soft power: Strive to be a "caring" nation so as to help others that are less fortunate', 23 May.

²⁵ Cool Japan Fund Inc., "What is Cool Japan Fund," Cool Japan Fund, 2013, , accessed January 29, 2018, <https://www.cj-fund.co.jp/en/about/cjfund.html>.

²⁶ Ibid.

to holding events or to exporting cultural products overseas.²⁷ For example, Japanese content companies participating in the Asian Film Market in Korea, the China International Licensing show, and the Anime Festival Asia in Singapore were sponsored by the fund for Cool Japan. One successful example was the retailing of Japanese apparel in Singapore. 15 clothing shops from Harajuku district in Tokyo collectively presented their products in a mall in Singapore and generated more than JPY20 million in three months. The team of Harajuku suppliers was consequently granted a distribution channel to Singapore subsidized by the Japanese government.²⁸ In this way, METI has been funding small and middle sized Japanese businesses to export their products overseas while stimulating the demand for Japanese soft power industries in other countries.

Another project of a larger enterprise that was given shape by the Cool Japan Fund was the construction of Isetan the Japan Store at the heart of Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia. Unlike other department stores merely funded by Japan, Isetan the Japan Store gave customers an authentic, first-of-its-kind experience of Japan with Japanese craftsmanship, technical know-how, and aesthetic sense.²⁹ It not only offered products from Japan, but more importantly a Japanese cultural experience under the theme of "Wa" (or "harmony" in Japanese), through Japanese pop culture, lifestyle exhibitions, and unique workshops. The department store gained increasing popularity among the locals in Kuala Lumpur, with many customers coming back for repeat visits.³⁰

Furthermore, Japan Expo, the largest convention promoting Japanese culture taking place in Paris every year, attracted more than 245,000 people in 2015, up from 3,200 in 2001.³¹

Rise of Tourism in Japan

One of the most prominent benefits brought about by "Cool Japan" was the soaring revenue reaped from the tourism industry. In 2010, Japan Airlines (JAL) decided to use the music of Arashi, the tourism ambassador of Japan, to serve three important domestic destinations. JAL also printed the image of the group on one of its planes because they want to send a joyful message from Japan via the face of Japan's tourism.³² This was considered a successful collaboration among government, business, media and cultural producers as part of the "Cool Japan" project.³³ While statistics on the overall revenue of creative industries could be unreliable due to the fuzzy boundaries between creative industries, strong data on

²⁷ Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, "Cool Japan Initiative," METI, July 2014, accessed January 30, 2018, http://www.meti.go.jp/policy/mono_info_service/mono/creative/file/1406CoolJapanInitiative.pdf.

²⁸ Kazuaki Nagata, "Exporting culture via 'Cool Japan'," *The Japan Times*, May 15, 2012, accessed January 29, 2018, https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2012/05/15/reference/exporting-culture-via-cool-japan/#.Wm_2mpP1WPQ.

²⁹ Yuki Mizutani and Megumi Okabe, "Delivering "Wa" with Unified Hearts via Enthusiastic Shouts of "Team Wa", " *Projects Report Vol.7 | Our Practice | Cool Japan Fund*, September 25, 2014, accessed January 29, 2018, <https://www.cj-fund.co.jp/en/investment/project/vol7/.2>

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Japan Expo, "The history of Japan Expo," *Japan Expo Paris*, January 2, 2017, accessed January 29, 2018, http://www.japan-expo-paris.com/en/menu_info/history_475.htm.

³² JAL, "JAL Arashi Jet," *JAL Flyer*, September 4, 2010, accessed January 29, 2018, <http://www.jalflyer.com/2010/09/jal-arashi-jet.html>.

³³ Mandujano, Yunuen. "The Politics of Selling Culture and Branding the National in Contemporary Japan: Economic Goals, Soft-power and Reinforcement of the National Pride." *Scientific Journal of Humanistic Studies* 5, no. 9 (2013).

the tourism industry as a whole was available and shed light on the economic effect of tourism development since the launch of the project. It was estimated that around 19.7 million foreign tourists visited Japan in 2015 (more than three times the number in 2011) and spent a total of JPY3.5 trillion.³⁴

In addition, Tokyo was voted as the most satisfying tourist destination in 2013 according to a survey conducted by Trip Advisor. Out of 37 major cities of attraction including New York, Paris, and London; Tokyo was ranked as the top choice based on the standard of local friendliness, neatness, services, transportation quality, and overall impression. With duty-free shopping and English service provided in an increasing number of department stores, Tokyo made the shopping and traveling experiences easier and more enjoyable for foreign tourists.³⁵ However, it would also be fair to argue that it is not clear how much of the progress has been brought about solely by the “Cool Japan” project.

Controversies over the Project

While the success of overseas project and the boom of national tourism have been frequently stressed by the Japanese government, several controversies surrounding the project attracted attention across the country as well as the world. This section explores three most critical ones including the lopsided focus on manga, public perceptions, and the contestation between economic value and authenticity.

Lopsided Focus on Manga

Among all the native cultural products exported, manga was considered the most promising given the success of classics such as Pokemon. In addition, it also seemed that manga and anime were the most prevalent and trusted cultural products among the Japanese public. According to a survey by Rikkyo University, more than 80 percent of people think of anime and around 68 percent think of manga when they hear the term “Cool Japan”. In addition, more than 72 percent of the respondents ranked anime as the most promising and more than 61 percent choose manga in terms of their export potential.

³⁴ Tomoko Okabe, "Visitors to Japan surge to record 19.73 million, spend all-time high ¥3.48 trillion," The Japan Times, January 19, 2016, accessed January 30, 2018, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/01/19/national/japan-sets-new-inbound-tourism-record-2015-comes-just-short-20-million-target/#.WnAP9SOp33Q>.

³⁵ "Tourists rate Tokyo top city," The Japan Times, May 31, 2014, accessed January 30, 2018, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2014/05/31/editorials/tourists-rate-tokyo-top-city/#.WnARKCOp33Q>.

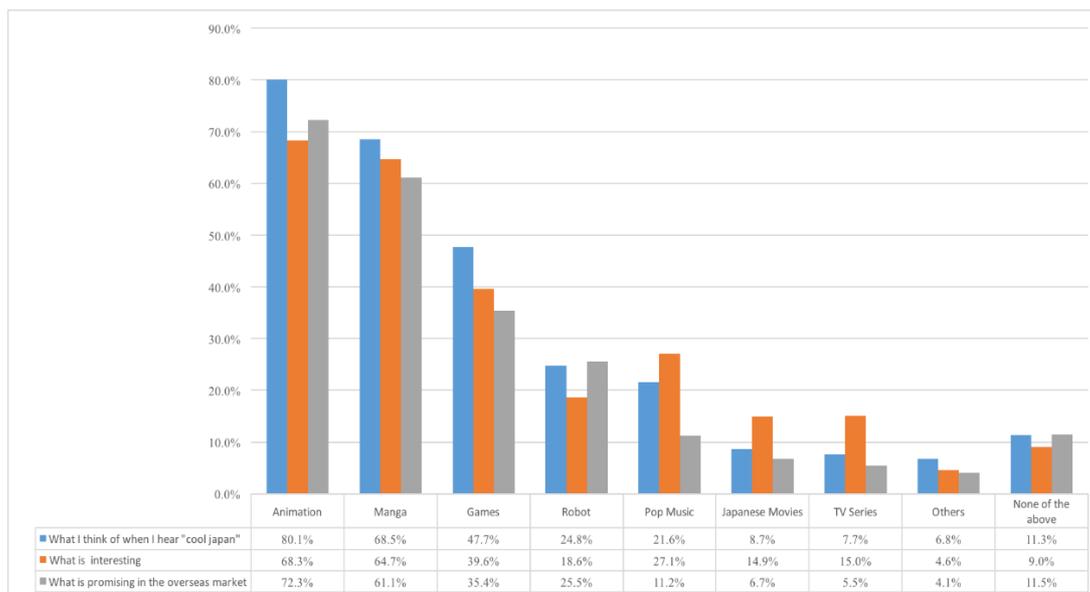


Figure 1 - Survey on perception of cultural products from Japan³⁶

According to a survey by Tokyo Polytechnic University, in response to the question “what do you want to introduce to the world as a representative of cool Japan”, more than 50 percent of the respondents gave the answer of either Manga or its derivative anime regardless of their age group.

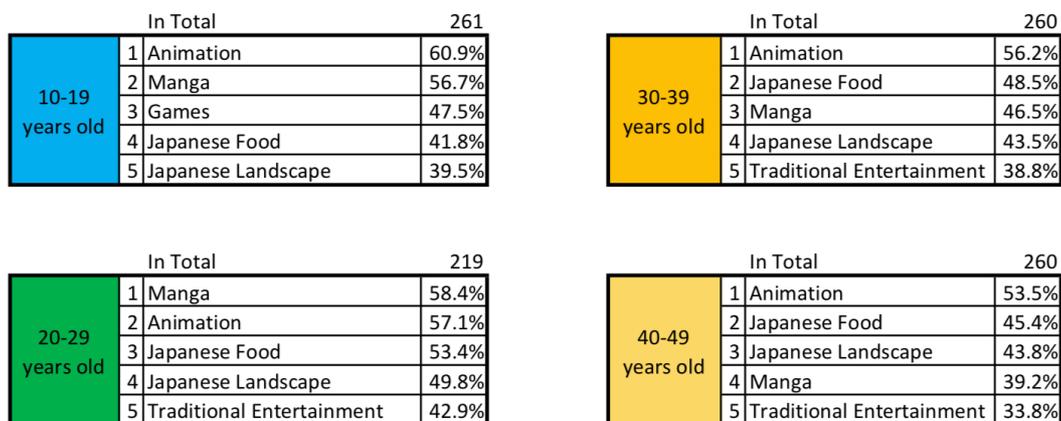


Figure 2 - Results of *What do you want to introduce to the world as a representative of Cool Japan?*³⁷

³⁶立教大学 (Rikkyo University), "クールジャパンに関する調査,"(Investigation about “Cool Japan”) その手があったか (There is such as way), August 26, 2015, , accessed January 30, 2018, <https://www.neo-m.jp/investigation/211/>.

³⁷東京工芸大学 (Tokyo Polytechnic University), "東京工芸大学の「クール・ジャパン」調査," (Investigation on “Cool Japan” by Tokyo Polytechnic University) お客様を海外から呼ぼう！ テンカイジャパン (Let’s attract foreign customers to Japan!), May 24, 2010, , accessed January 30, 2018, <http://www.apalog.com/kurita/archive/815>.

However, one concern that arose was that with most of the focus skewed to manga and anime, the original target of promoting creative industry in general, together with cuisine, customs, TV-series, and other popular culture, could be compromised and Cool Japan was even interpreted by many as a project to make foreigners purchase more Japanese manga.³⁸ Japanese traditions and Japanese cultural practices such as Buddhism and Shinto might well have been overlooked for lack of immediate economic returns.³⁹

Public awareness, confusions and misconceptions

Another criticism of the promotion of the project is that Cool Japan may have stopped at an institutional level and did not sufficiently engage the public. Many people showed confusion and lack of awareness of the project when asked about how they think about Cool Japan as shown in the official promotion video released by METI.⁴⁰ Tokyo Polytechnic University conducted a survey on the public awareness of the project among 1000 individuals between the age of 15 to 49 in 2011 and has found that around 71 percent of the respondents had no idea about Cool Japan and 24 percent of them had only heard about the project but were not aware of what it was about.

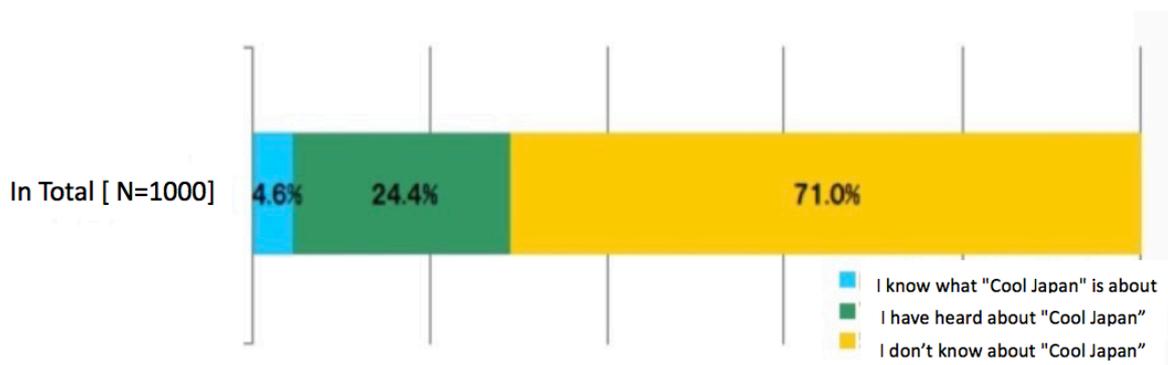


Figure 3 - Survey on public awareness of “Cool Japan” by Tokyo Polytechnic University⁴¹

One reason for the failure to familiarize the Japanese public with the project among the citizens was the lack of information and updates on social media. While social media had become a crucial platform for information exchange, the Japanese government did not fully utilize this approach to promote Cool Japan among the public. There was no official Twitter account by METI to update on the progress of the projects. On the other hand, while there was a Facebook page created by an NHK program known as “Cool Japan”, it mainly featured the cultural experiences of individual foreign tourists in Japan and its correlation with the national and city project was ambiguous. Such insufficient participation of general public could hurt the development of the project in the long term.

³⁸ Nagata, "Exporting culture via 'Cool Japan'"

³⁹ Alisha Adkins, "Religion and Religious Identity in Modern Japan," Owlcation, June 24, 2017, , accessed January 31, 2018, <https://owlcation.com/humanities/Religion-in-Modern-Japan>.

⁴⁰ Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, "Cool Japan Initiative"

⁴¹ 東京工芸大学, "(Tokyo Polytechnic University) 東京工芸大学の「クール・ジャパン」調査" (Investigation on “Cool Japan” by Tokyo Polytechnic University)

On the other hand, an investigation conducted by Rikkyo University in Tokyo showed a more promising side of the public perspective. In response to the question “whether you think the business promoted in “Cool Japan” will become important to Japanese economy”, around 42 percent of the respondents gave a positive answer and another 41 percent were more reserved but believed that the relevant business would become somehow important.

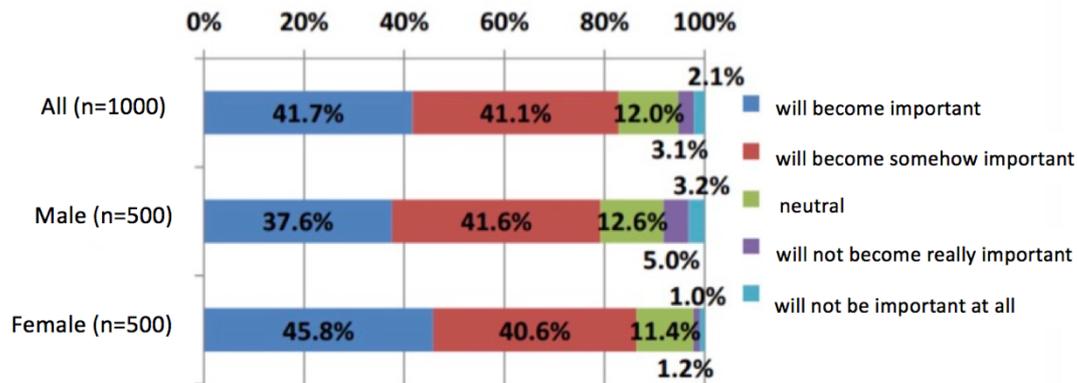


Figure 4 - Answer distribution of the survey on whether the relevant business will become important to Japanese economy⁴²

Apart from awareness, proper understanding and support from the public would also be crucial to the national project. Nonetheless, while the term Cool Japan has been widely used in mass media since its emergence in the beginning of 2000s, ‘Coolness’ pursued as a goal of national project has been controversial among the public. “It is not cool to claim yourself as cool”, said some Japanese popular online reviews. The rationale behind this seemingly cynical comment is not hard to understand: such proclamation to be “cool” would have been more convincing from external parties.

Not only the Japanese public, but also foreign experts have expressed their doubts on the success of commercializing what is considered cool. The fashion industry in Japan has always been deemed as cool in the field as many global brands turned to Japan for muse and inspiration. According to an interview of a Toyo-based fashion expert by CNN, brands such as Timberland and Lacoste would go on tours in Tokyo to explore street trends as the inspiration for next season’s fashion.⁴³ However, one such expert has expressed his concern about transforming the Japanese “cool” into commodity and indicated that the attempt to commercialize the creative industries was likely to harm the cachet of Japanese fashion. He pointed out that the lack of awareness of business and sincerity towards beauty was what made the Japanese fashion cool and unique, and an artificial modification catering to commercialization in the global market would make it the opposite to the previous “coolness”.⁴⁴

⁴²立教大学 (Rikkyo University), “クールジャパンに関する調査”, (Investigation about “Cool Japan”)

⁴³ Mairi Mackay, “Can Japan profit from its national cool? - CNN.com,” CNN, November 20, 2010, , accessed January 30, 2018, <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/asiapcf/11/19/japan.cool.money/index.tml>.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Economic value vs. authenticity

The commercialisation of Japanese culture might have been at cross purposes to the conservation of its authenticity. In order to cater to a broader segment of consumers and to increase the overall export revenue of the creative industries; The producers of manga, games, and music have to inevitably tailor their products to the tastes of overseas audiences. While such modification could be inspiring for some, it was doubtful that such foreign market-oriented approach would encourage real innovation of Japanese creative industries in a long term.⁴⁵ In other words, the commodification of culture may spread it to a larger audience, but it may well damage the depth and the innovation of the work, especially in the case of manga.

While many Japanese manga and anime such as Hello Kitty and Pokemon were popular among and relatively well understood by the foreign consumers, the majority of manga was more deeply rooted in local contexts and closely related to Japanese culture. Such manga and anime that were more "technical" would have been better directed at a small group of people particularly keen on this genre. One representative group of such consumer was the Otaku, which refers to people who preferred to stay at home and who were extremely obsessed with manga and anime.⁴⁶ On the other hand, it could be expected that these manga and anime are very likely to be unfriendly to the foreign consumer audience who would have difficulty understanding the language and local contexts of the works.

Partially because of the possible difficulties embedded in the works, many creative products have some meanings lost in translation when modified and exported to overseas markets. Japanese manga is attractive because it is both realistic and visionary, and it appealed to both children and adults.⁴⁷ However, the more sophisticated meanings could be downplayed in the process of adapting them for commercial export viability. It is not hard to imagine readers overseas paying more attention to the gorgeous scenery, delicate details, and most often, an interesting taste of exotic life in Japanese manga. It would be ironic if the projects aiming to promote culture and transform culture into soft power actually had negative impacts on their subjects.

Discussion: Is "Cool Japan" a promising future for post-industrial Japan?

Soft power has been increasingly valued by countries as an important approach to economic growth and global influence. It is illuminating to explore how Japan, as one of the most creative countries in the world, would utilize and develop its inherent soft power for national revitalization⁴⁸, in terms of both the economy as well as national pride. The Cool Japan project has enhanced the international influence of Japanese creative industries and

⁴⁵ Walter Sim, "Will Japan's Creative Appeal Last?" *The Straits Times*, February 11, 2017, accessed March 30, 2018, <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/will-japans-creative-appeal-last>.

⁴⁶ Jakob Nobuoka, "User innovation and creative consumption in Japanese culture industries: the case of Akihabara, Tokyo," *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 92, no. 3 (2010), doi:10.1111/j.1468-0467.2010.00348.x.

⁴⁷ Kinko Ito, "A History of Manga in the Context of Japanese Culture and Society," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 38, no. 3 (2005), doi:10.1111/j.0022-3840.2005.00123.x.

⁴⁸ Norbert Gehrke, "Creativity & Innovation in Japan – Norbert Gehrke – Medium," Medium, July 15, 2017, accessed March 30, 2018, <https://medium.com/@norbert.gehrke/creativity-innovation-in-japan-e1bf07e25a4>.

brought about many positive effects for the economy, but it has also faced many challenges as discussed above.

1. How promising do you think “Cool Japan” is as a national strategy to revitalize the post-industrial Japan?
2. Will the country realize a further cultural projection to the world through a wider and more in-depth exportation overseas, or will it lose its true glamor that lies more in the traditional craftsmanship and the creative and hardworking spirit of the people?
3. What do you think is the key to the success of a soft power program? How do you think the government should tackle the challenges in the process of promoting its national soft power?

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