

## From Imperial to Cool: How Japan's Image Rebrand Expands its Soft Power

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**ABSTRACT:** Japan's current image is in part the result of a two-decades long rebranding campaign by the Japanese government. Facing post-war, post-industrialization economic stagnation, the government made a move toward becoming a more intellectual property-based nation. The "Cool Japan" public relations strategy was developed to increase popular culture exports and make Japan appear more friendly internationally. First, this study explores the evolution of this strategy within its historical context. Second, it provides an analysis of Japanese government documents and strategies, focusing on the 2018 "Nihon-Gatari-Sho," or Guidelines for Narrating Japanese Culture. Third, the effectiveness of the strategy is assessed; this study compiles survey data from a decade of public opinion polls. One quantifier of Japan's "Cool" strategy is the success of its pop culture in South Korea and China. Survey data show a rise in positive sentiment toward Japan in China and South Korea over the past decade. This study investigates the impact of the strategy and reception of cultural exports (such as popular manga and anime) on Japan's soft power, focusing on South Korea and China. Finally, it is evident from analysis of government documents, governmental strategies, and survey data that the "Cool" Japan strategy has been an effective way of growing Japan's soft power.

**KEYWORDS** - Cool Japan, Japan, soft power, popular culture, imperialism, China, South Korea

### I. INTRODUCTION

What some current consumers of Japanese media and pop culture may not know is that the post-war rebranding of Japan's image and focus on intellectual property are due to a very intentional image-based endeavor on the part of the Japanese government. Following the fall of the fascist regime of World War II, Japan heavily industrialized, becoming one of the world's leaders of industry. This economic momentum ultimately led to an effective platform for the exportation of popular culture, as well. Simply put, Japanese pop culture revolutionized in the years following industrialization. Today, Japan's pop culture is booming around the world and Japan has a largely positive image internationally. In addition, since Japan lacks military power compared to many nations, it is successfully using its cultural influence to grow its soft power and international influence. Through the intentional government promotion and exporting of culture and pop culture, Japan has managed to effectively rebrand itself, and increase its soft power worldwide over the past two decades. The effectiveness of this rebrand and "Cool" strategy can be assessed through Japan's relations with its neighbors, specifically those with which it has had a turbulent past, most notably South Korea and China. Before exploring the "Cool" campaign that has changed Japan's image worldwide, it is first necessary to provide context and recall some of the aspects of Japan's imperialist past and human rights violations against both South Korea and China. We may then see a stark contrast between Japan's past image and its twenty-first century cool, harmless image. This study demonstrates that there has been a significant impact of this rebrand on South Korea's and China's positive sentiment toward Japan, particularly over the last decade. Thus, worldwide polls on perception of Japan reveal that on some level, the "Cool" strategy is working.

### II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To begin with, it is key to consider Japan's economic and cultural strategies to increase its influence in the decades following WWII. Soft power (a term coined by Joseph Nye) is essentially international influence gained through means other than military force, which is understood as hard power. Nye uses Japan as an example of a country gaining influence through economic gains (154) [1]. In general, economic gains are the primary way to grow soft power, since more money and more goods increase a country's capacity for international influence. Nye states that soft power through cultural means is just as effective as hard power through militaristic means. According to Nye's well-known theory: "If a country's culture and ideology are

attractive, others will more willingly follow” (10) [1]. Making Japanese pop culture attractive and something that others might follow are goals of the Japanese government’s “Cool” strategy, as discussed below. Nye says that although it adopted effective manufacturing technology in the mid-twentieth century, which makes for a good source of soft power, Japan was still lacking in cultural influence (in comparison with countries such as China and the United States, because of the global spread of both countries’ cultures). Nye claims that Japan in particular sought further “internationalization” and broader outreach in the late twentieth century (162-170) [1]. While Nye’s observations of Japan were valid upon publication in 1990, they are currently outdated; the present study builds on Nye’s views of Japan’s soft power, combined with more recent data and updated analyses. The Japanese government has since noticed its potential for increasing cultural soft power, which was especially needed toward the end of the twentieth century. In addition, the anime and manga industries had just begun to develop in 1990, and Japan’s potential for cultural soft power has revolutionized in recent years. With Nye’s concept of soft power as it applies to Japan in mind, we turn briefly to the earlier historical context that led Japan to rebrand itself.

### III. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND REFRAMING THE NARRATIVE

Post WWII, the Japanese government played a large role in the (re)making of the image of the country and its culture, both domestically and internationally. The global rehabilitation of Japan’s image was necessary for several reasons, in an attempt to remedy older negative perceptions that were based on wartime actions. Before analyzing the official “Cool Japan” strategy, it may be helpful to recall that some scholars argue that the impact of fascist Japan’s actions in WWII was so significant that it may have exceeded some of the destruction in Europe; this is in part because Japan used opium to finance puppet governments, used biological and gas warfare, and inflicted a scorched earth policy on China (48) [2]. Furthermore, Japan began its imperial undertaking in Korea, with many human rights violations, including the forced prostitution of over 200,000 Korean, Chinese, Filipino, and other nationalities of women by the Japanese army, labeled under the euphemism “comfort women.” For China, the major event that tarnished Japan’s reputation would be the Rape of Nanjing, a massacre of civilians in which the total number of people killed is still disputed. Imperial Japan also used China for biochemical experiments, attempting to infect whole cities. Japan’s prisoner of war policy was often in violation of the Geneva Convention (which it signed but did not ratify), with mistreatment of prisoners resulting in many more thousands of prisoner deaths than Germany and Italy had in WWII (48) [20]. The Geneva Convention also prohibits biological warfare, which imperial Japan also violated (47-50) [2]. For reasons such as these, Japan had to address its history and negative global image as it has recovered from the war and rebuilt its infrastructure and its international reputation, particularly with China and South Korea.

Japanese imperial history tends to be revisionist. In some contexts, the war is not portrayed as something that is only horrible on Japan’s part, and aspects of it were viewed as “something Japan should be proud of” (157) [3], as evidenced, for example, by the goals of and materials showcased by a war museum funded by the Japanese government. It is different from a traditional war museum, because it omits explicit mention of human rights violations or war crimes. When this controversial museum was preparing to open, officials shared a concern that they would have to “apologize for the war,” something they were strongly against (157) [3]. Conversely, many government-sponsored historians disagreed with this museum’s approach and resigned in protest.

As with the example of the war museum, the Japanese government is a lead player in the crafting of the country’s image since the war and in the (re)telling of history. Going as far back as the late 1800s, the Japanese government has approved or created its own history textbooks, for instance. This issue of government oversight on history has been taken to court, in which the Japanese Supreme Court ruled that the Ministry of Education does have the authority to control the information put in textbooks (184) [3]. There has been a continuous narrative in Japanese textbooks framing Japan as the victim of many historical events. A coherent historical narrative has been carefully crafted, and has served as a pillar for Japan’s postwar national identity (687) [4]. This narrative, framing Japan largely as a victim, has contributed to a pacifistic identity, which has been reinforced by the government, and bolstered by its later cultural exports, eventually contributing to the “Cool” image-rebrand that we see today.

The post-war years brought an end to Japan’s isolationism, forcing it to confront the West’s higher living standards. This motivated many Japanese people to increase their saving rate in order to raise the country’s standard of living. Western countries also opened up trade with Japan after WWII, and the U.S. allowed Japan to implement corresponding barriers to protect its domestic industries. The U.S. recognized that if Japan’s economic situation worsened, it would affect the whole region. Japan then saw low levels of unemployment, high economic growth, and low interest rates. Japan caught up to Western countries technologically very quickly, due to the influx of human capital. More people were going to universities, and the population’s health improved (73-76) [5]. The U.S. also gave rebuilding assistance to Japan at the same time as the Marshall Plan in Europe (216) [6]. A trade imbalance developed between the U.S. and Japan because of the automobile industry, peaking at \$87 billion. Japan’s industry had grown so much that it had overtaken the U.S. in production of automobiles, and was even threatening U.S. businesses, as Nancy

Stalker reminds us (362-363) [7]. However, Japan's economy grew stagnant in the 1990s, which is referred to as "the lost decade," a difficult time in which Japan knew it had to change something (349-363) [8]. The government took action to sell Japan as "Cool" and to increase exports of its pop culture.

#### IV. "COOL" JAPAN

"Cool Japan" is a long-term strategy that endeavors to expand soft power. The "Cool" strategy is a government-promoted image of Japan that reflects what it deems to be its best and most representative contemporary cultural exports. Compared to the postwar period of industrialization, in which Japan grew as an international captain of industry, current Japan is not regarded as only an industrial and technologically-based country. Rather, it is widely associated with its intellectual property and pop culture that has helped reinvent its whole image. From art, dance, and music to animation, television, and graphic novels, the content industry became a priority and a vehicle for the message of "Cool Japan." This solidified the connection between Japan's pop culture and its soft power, helping to define the industries of anime and manga as a viable source of soft power. The narrative began to shift. For instance, as Japan aimed to become cooler in the eyes of the world in the new millennium, the old stereotype of the exhausted white-collar worker "salaryman," or サラリーマン, so pervasive throughout postmodern Japanese literature, was left aside, in favor of fresh imagery and updated character types (247-248) [9].

Outside of Japan, the term "Cool Japan" was originally defined by Douglas McGray, an American journalist, as "Japan's Gross National Cool," (251) [9], referring to the value of its pop culture exports in its Gross National Product. McGray further defines the concept as "a growing cultural presence" (53) [10]. He equates this "gross national cool" to Nye's concept of soft power, stating that these cultural presences, seen worldwide in other countries as well, can "serve political and economic ends" (53) [10]. Again, as a country's culture—and therefore, its international influence—grows, its ability to accomplish more political and economic goals increases, as more international allies and capital are available.

The first draft of the official "Cool Japan" strategy in 2002 emphasized intellectual property, or, more specifically, pop culture. The document acknowledged that Japan was facing more competition in industry and technology, and could not be regarded as the powerhouse it once was for manufacturing in the post-war era. The Intellectual Property Policy Headquarters, established in 2003 by Japan's Cabinet Office, began to define this strategy. The original strategy was for media exports to make Japanese products more appealing internationally. Here, Japan was using popular culture in advertising to increase sales of products, and production and manufacturing were an area in which Japan already excelled. There was a clear goal to enhance the country's soft power and influence abroad with its media and exports as early as 2004 (255) [9].

Global implementation of the "Cool Japan" strategy officially began around 2005, when Japan switched focus from media-boosting-industry, to promoting media, art, and popular culture. This new image of Japan, based on exports of mainly cultural products, has been argued by scholars such as Michal Dalot-Bul to be "attractive... ahistorical... [and] radically different from anything else" (253) [9]. Popular culture has been integrated into Japanese diplomacy, beginning with a 2005 proposal by the Council for the Promotion of Cultural Diplomacy. Remarkably, a fictional anime character was appointed as Japan's official "Anime Ambassador" in 2008 by Japan's Foreign Minister. The particular character, Doraemon, a cartoon cat, helps to portray Japan as a cute, harmless, and fun country (259) [9]. The use of a cute character as a symbol of Japan internationally recalls earlier strategies to popularize Japan's "cute," or "kawaii," culture globally in the late 1970s and 1980s, which helped lay the groundwork to develop the current "Cool" strategy and initially assisted in rebranding Japan's image.

#### V. KAWAII CULTURE

Possibly the most famous aspect of Japan's "kawaii" culture is Hello Kitty. Invented in 1974, Hello Kitty and the Sanrio brand grew exponentially in international popularity, which Japanese industries capitalized on; there was a growing market for these "cute" products, both domestically and internationally. In creating more of these characters and products, recent harsh post-war memories were replaced by these cute characters (9) [11]. This friendly image has helped to improve relations with countries, such as China, that have negative associations with images of imperial Japan. Hello Kitty (a cute kitten wearing a bow) is the official ambassador for tourism to China, which would be more well-received than, say for instance, a samurai (a warrior with a sword), due to the history between the two countries (685) [12]. Kawaii culture is inherently associated with femininity, thereby helping to market Japan as "harmless" (686) [12]. Hello Kitty, Sanrio, and kawaii culture, though born earlier than the "Cool" strategy, were a preliminary aspect of it. Scholars studying kawaii culture have noted that it "dominated Japanese popular culture" from the 1970s-1990s, before the anime industry had developed to how we know it as today (220) [13]. Daniel White maintains that kawaii culture is not just a popular product or aesthetic, "but also a political asset" (105) [14]. Thus, kawaii culture also aimed to rebrand Japan's image in softer, friendlier terms internationally to increase soft power. In terms of intentional exportation and image branding of Japanese pop culture, the Japanese government does not always differentiate between "Cool" and "kawaii"—and in a way, kawaii is now a subset of the "Cool" strategy. The 2008 cat "Anime Ambassador," is a cute character, and it can be argued that the character is more representative of

kawaii branding. However, no distinction is necessary when discussing Japanese soft power; further distinction and division is appropriate within a subcultural and domestic youth culture setting. In the 2000s, the Japanese government built on previous kawaii culture and rebranding and created further branding guidelines on how to “narrate” and “edit” Japan for consumption abroad. Cute and cool pop culture exports both serve to increase soft power.

## VI. GUIDELINES FOR NARRATING JAPANESE CULTURE

What exactly does Japan want to narrate for the world? The “Nihon-Gatari-Sho” 日本語り抄, *Guidelines for Narrating Japanese Culture* is a document created by the Japanese Cabinet office in 2018 that discusses how to “narrate” Japan and how to conduct “Japan editing” in today’s art and pop culture exports. This document has not yet been studied at length by social scientists so it is helpful to give a brief analysis of its principal content and messages. The *Guidelines for Narrating Japanese Culture* document highlights what it deems to be at least six major concepts in its cultural exports and gives examples of them in different cultural exports (ranging from art, to fashion, to cuisine, to literature, to martial arts, to manga, etc.). Below is a synthesis of six major aesthetic concepts suggested by the official *Guidelines*, with a partial translation of each term and a few illustrative examples from the culture industry:

- *Kiwa* (edges, margins) as seen through text message stickers, similar to emojis, adding an extra layer to text message communications;
- *Marebito* (stranger, visiting gods) as seen through the Niino Snow Festival, a traditional performing art;
- *Musubi* (knots, mixing; a combination of two words meaning to birth, spirit) as seen in design and in popular keychains students put on their bags, similar to bells that were traditionally carried to ward off evil spirits;
- *Awase* (matching, contrasting) “is a four step concept that may be the most characteristic feature of Japan’s editing style. *Awase* matches and compares two contrasting objects or ideas by positioning them apart on two sides of a partition – left and right, or east and west” (18) [15]. *Awase* may be seen through the Pokémon trading card game and in various manga and anime;
- *Kabuku* (excess) as seen through eccentric or unique fashion subcultures such as *lolita* and *yanki* styles;
- *Wabi* (simplicity) as seen through the dish *ochazuke*, or tea on rice, a simple yet satisfying and aesthetically pleasing meal.

The official *Guidelines for Narrating Japanese Culture* include further examples and provide exemplary images to further illustrate these concepts and how to incorporate them into other future cultural productions. In addition to these six core aesthetic concepts, in suggesting how to move forward with “editing Japan,” the government *Guidelines* underline the ideas of “analogy” and “rising from the margins of chaos,” which are vital to the “Cool Japan” strategy (30-32) [15]. Throughout, the strategy emphasizes “analogy, arrangement, and association,” and it generalizes that Japanese style values the analogical over the logical (30-31) [15]. It explains that in editing Japan, cultural exports must remain mindful of today’s challenging global climate of “VUCA,” an acronym that stands for “volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity” (31) [15]. The *Guidelines* do not place restrictions on artists. In addition, the “Nihon-Gatari-Sho” document suggests putting the concept of the various “extremes” in the spotlight through the arts and pop culture: “Japan can be punk—flashy and noisy. Or, it can be bluesy—deep and tranquil. Add to flash, the *kabuki* way. Subtract to refine, the *wabi* way. Just don’t hold back—go to the extreme. Either way, it’s Japan,” (20) [15]. Pop culture, particularly manga and anime, reflect these extremes and encourage this flexibility in what qualifies as “Cool Japan.”

“Editing Japan” is the term used in the *Guidelines* and it aims, in part, to create a cohesive new branding for the country and its cultural exports, including the six concepts it outlines; according to the document, “re-editing will be necessary so that what appeals in the top layer [will] be described in relation to the cultural background that exists in the middle and deep layers,” (33) [15]. Essentially, the government is saying that there is more to Japan than meets the eye, and that its contemporary pop culture is inherently connected to deeper, more historical cultural aspects of Japanese society. The document seeks to bridge a contemporary gap between pop culture and historical, traditional culture.

In addition, the *Guidelines* also address the historical-cultural past of Japan. The document does not talk about the negative aspects of the past (similar to the controversial war museum and textbooks mentioned above); rather, the *Guidelines* delineate what the government and its culture experts view as the best or most representative elements, for example, traditional architecture, tea ceremonies, and other historical or traditional images that should be exported. White believes that Japan’s soft power strategy is not rooted in its propounding of its contemporary pop culture, rather in “understanding... the present’s relationship to the past” (112) [14]. Although the *Guidelines* were published in 2018, three years after White’s research in 2015, he draws similar connections between traditional aspects of Japanese culture and contemporary youth culture and pop culture. These connections were therefore visible before the *Guidelines* stated them explicitly as part of a strategy.

The *Guidelines* also refer to relations with China, past and present, by discussing history such as the arrival of Buddhism in Japan from India, to China, the Korean peninsula, then Japan. The document also

acknowledges how aspects of Japanese language (the Kanji script) and some Buddhist dishes and types of noodles are of Chinese origin but have over time had a Japanese “spin” placed on them. In mentioning China, the *Guidelines* are especially conscious of one country in their target audience and of the need to reinforce positive sentiments and connections with China in particular as part of the overall strategy.

The anime and manga that the *Guidelines* choose to discuss take up several of the above mentioned six major concepts, and because they are so popular around the world, have the tendency to increase awareness and understanding of these concepts, especially *awase* and *marebito*. The document seems to qualify certain examples of manga and anime (such as *One Piece*, *Attack on Titan*, and *Naruto*) as the best representatives of its core concepts and values, and even mentions their adaptation into traditional Kabuki live theater productions. On the whole, this Cabinet document sees the benefits of exporting pop culture, such as anime and manga, as further opportunities for rebranding, and for showcasing Japanese values and design concepts globally.

*One Piece*, now very popular worldwide, is both a manga and an anime series (and is now also a live action series adapted by Netflix). *One Piece* shows the value of leadership and teamwork and depicts an imaginary golden age filled with pirates and swashbuckling adventurers. Moreover, the *Guidelines* have selected *One Piece* because it supports the notion of “combining strength” (19) [15]. In *One Piece*, aesthetic concepts and core values are echoed, as “Members carry out work for the team, according to their respective territory and status. Crucial to understand here is the concept of *bun*—a person’s capacity, role, or quality— most apparent in words like *ji-bun* (myself), *bun-zai* (social standing), *mochi-bun* (responsibility), *wake* (*bun*)-*mae* (share) and so on. A person is stronger, more capable, when his or her *bun* is flexible and dynamic. Japan’s teamwork is about the combining (*awase*) of *bun*” (19) [15]. The manga *One Piece* is given as a prime example of depicting the value of *awase*, the fourth concept in the *Guidelines*. It is about the adventures, teamwork, combined strength, camaraderie, and achieved goals of a group of pirates. *One Piece* is just one small example of the suggested pop culture that may be used to export core Japanese concepts in order to bolster its image and increase soft power abroad. It has been successful indeed.

In addition to the 2018 *Guidelines*, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs website has a specific page under “Public Diplomacy” dedicated specifically to what it terms “Pop-Culture Diplomacy,” outlining aforementioned strategies, such as the “Anime Ambassador” and the “International Manga Award.” The page also mentions the recent growth of cosplay, a popular worldwide phenomenon in which fans of anime dress up as characters; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs encourages this fan behavior, and even awards a “Foreign Minister’s Prize” to an attendee every year at the World Cosplay Summit. The World Cosplay Summit is “the biggest annual cosplay event in Japan,” notably started in 2007, in which Japan began to further prioritize the expansion of its pop culture [16].

## VII. IMPACT OF “COOL JAPAN” STRATEGY

Over a decade before the *Guidelines* were released, in 2007, economist Yoshizaki Tatsuhiro highlighted the threat of China as a rising economic, international, and regional power, asserting that Japan needs to focus on what it does well, meaning not hard power and military strength, rather, on soft power and pop culture. “Cool Japan” was thus, at its origin, a way to remain strong and competitive. Pop culture was officially integrated into Japanese foreign policy in 2007 via Minister of Foreign Affairs Taro Aso’s speech to the Japanese Diet, which was a defining moment for perceptions of Japanese identity abroad as well (349-363) [8].

“Cool Japan” is more than a government website and a published booklet of guidelines covering anime, manga, food, music, dance, visual arts, architecture, design, fashion, games, martial arts, and more, as outlined above. It is also a sizable, sustained financial investment in cultural exports, including pop culture such as manga and anime. The Cool Japan Fund was established in 2013 to financially support the strategy and to ultimately seek “a 21st-century-style postindustrial comeback” [17]. The fund supports the anime and manga industries (and other artists) through advertisements and general promotion abroad. Since establishment, the fund has grown from an initial ¥37.5 billion to ¥126.3 billion as of October 2022, with the Japanese government providing ¥115.6 billion (242) [18], [19]. According to the official website of the Cool Japan Fund, it has invested at least \$1,352,000,000 into the promotion of the “Cool Japan” strategy [20].

The Japanese government has established many projects to expand the popularity of anime and manga worldwide. For example, awards shine an international spotlight on Japanese popular culture, as with the International Manga Award, established in 2007, judged by “the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the president of the Japan Foundation, and the special committee for pop culture of the Council on the Movement of People Across Borders” [21]. The fact that there is a special governmental committee for pop culture, and that official government business includes reviewing submissions of manga, reveals a lot about the importance of pop culture to the Japanese government. This award was originally the idea of Minister of Foreign Affairs, Taro Aso, who believes that since Japan is physically limited in military power, it must turn to cultural power, as economic influence alone is not enough for a strong international presence (85) [22].

Most existing scholarship about the economic impact of the “Cool Japan” strategy is outdated, as the anime and manga industry has boomed in the past few years internationally and is only continuing to grow. In 2021, the anime industries (comprising TV, movies, merchandising, videos, internet distribution of media, music, and overseas profits) made ¥2,742.2 billion. Anime and manga only continue to grow more popular internationally, minus a pause in production due to COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020 (2) [23]. Internationally, the anime and manga industries show no sign of slowing down and will likely continue to further grow in popularity. The effectiveness of this project can be assessed in many aforementioned ways, such as profit made by the anime industry, but in terms of the rebrand from imperial Japan to modern “Cool” Japan, its relationships with South Korea and China must be analyzed. Looking at recent perceptions of Japan in South Korea and China gives insight into the strength of Japan’s soft power and the effectiveness of its “Cool” strategies.

### VIII. PERCEPTIONS OF JAPAN IN SOUTH KOREA AND CHINA

A quantifier of Japan’s successful “Cool” strategy is the success of its pop culture in South Korea and China. Based on the historical context above, these two countries have historical reasons to be skeptical of Japan or to report negative perceptions of Japanese culture. Up until 1998, in South Korea, a ban on Japanese cultural imports had been upheld for 53 years. Moreover, after WWII, South Korea wanted to assert its own identity, and part of this building of a national identity was to drive out all Japanese influences. For all of these reasons, the present study focuses on Chinese and South Korean perceptions and consumption (other countries are outside the scope of this analysis).

A spike in anti-Japanese sentiment in both China and South Korea rose in the 2010s, stemming in part from public opinion surrounding the issue of the oppression of “comfort women” resurfacing in Chinese media. Japan had claimed publicly to have “already apologized” for “comfort women,” but South Korea and China, and the many other groups of people, including Filipinos, Indonesians, and Asian Americans (who are affected by this issue and trauma in the collective memory) believe that the apology was not sufficient. Japan has been actively suppressing “comfort women” in its own history attempting to do so internationally by trying to get rid of memorials to comfort women abroad and removing the issue entirely from textbooks [24]. In 2007, former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe basically retracted the apology Japan had given in 1993 over “comfort women,” leading the United States Congress to call upon Japan to apologize again, which did not happen. Similarly, in China, Shinzo Abe caused a resurgence of anti-Japanese sentiment, with some Chinese netizens even celebrating his assassination [25]. After this incident, Chinese public opinion of Japan dropped even further, with 69% of respondents in a Pew Research poll viewing Japan negatively [26].

Despite this history, Japanese media later saw great success in both countries, particularly with anime. In 2000, shortly after the South Korean ban on Japanese culture was lifted, the Japan Patent Office found that South Korea was responsible for the reproduction of 17.6% of pirated Japanese products, and China 33%. As of 2010, around 80% of comic books bought in South Korea were originally in Japanese (52) [22]. The rise in piracy of cultural products indicated consumer demand and an enthusiastic fan base despite a ban. Clearly, during this period, public perceptions of Japan were changing and demand for its pop culture was growing.

In China, Japanese anime is widely popular, with the industry making over \$38 billion a year as of several years ago [27]. The previously mentioned Foreign Minister of Japan, Taro Aso, has specifically stated that anime and manga are the way to improve Japan’s image in China. In 2006, when he first gave this statement, he claimed that “we have a grasp on the hearts of the young people in many countries, not the least of which being China” [28]. Furthermore, survey data on public perceptions of Japan and the consumption of Japanese pop culture in China shows positive sentiment increasing in general. Moreover, from analysis of the data, it is evident that Japan’s rebrand and increased pop culture exports have helped to increase positive sentiment bilaterally. Recent data show the rise in positive sentiment in both countries (for 2014-2023; data are not yet available for 2024). For example, the data from the Japan-China Joint opinion survey shows a growing positive sentiment toward Japan, only disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which also halted anime production. Since 2021, it has begun to grow once more, in a comeback coinciding with the revitalization of the anime industry. This dip in positive sentiment in 2020 is also seen in South Korea’s opinion toward Japan. Since their primary cultural industries paused due to lockdowns and restrictions, there were fewer positive factors mitigating the history between the two countries. Due to Japan’s revisionist historical practices and refusal to both issue and maintain a sufficient apology, relations between Japan, China, and South Korea tend to be precarious annually. This is something the “Cool” strategy seeks to counteract, and without an active anime industry, the “Cool” strategy cannot continue raising positive sentiment nor mending relations. Positive sentiment has been on the rise for the most part in China and South Korea over the last decade, as seen in Fig. 1.:

## Positive Sentiment Towards Japan in China and South Korea by Year

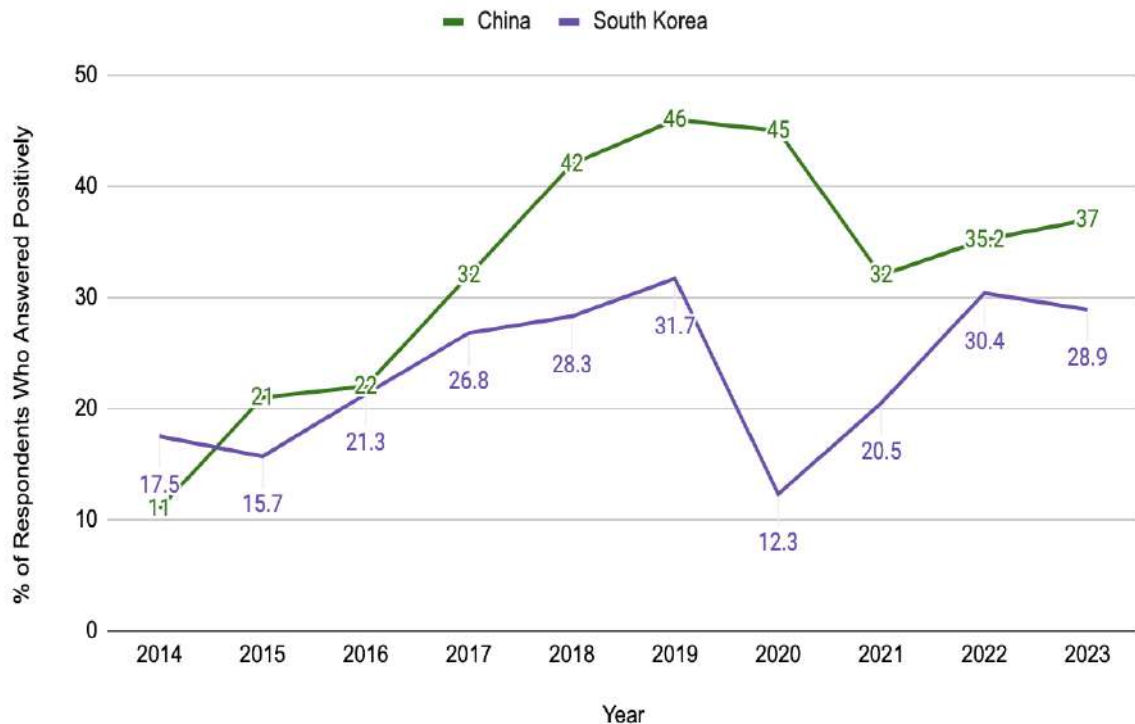


Fig. 1 [29-39]

There is a general upward trajectory of positive sentiment toward Japan over the last decade (as demonstrated in the nine years of available survey data compiled and visualized in Fig. 1). Despite this positive trend, there remains the minor question of any given portrayal of imperial Japan by an individual author or artist, which if included may not always be well-received in China or Korea. Chinese media outlets frequently pick up on any nationalist undertones of popular anime and manga series, which can lead to a general boycott of a certain series in China or even in Japan. One such example is Hajime Isayama, the author of *Attack on Titan*, a very popular manga and anime series internationally. Though the rumors about Isayama's politics are speculative and cannot be confirmed, Isayama based a character off a general in the imperial Japanese army, which for some, speaks to his alleged imperialist beliefs [40]. This has led to a decreased popularity for *Attack on Titan* in South Korea, and it was even banned in China (this ban is due in part to depictions of violence but is notable as a ban nevertheless) [41]. Though imperial Japan being glorified in particular cases or an individual author's extreme politics may become an issue, this occurs with a very small minority of manga or anime series. The broad popularity of most series in South Korea and China far outnumber any problematic cases.

It is important to note that the first manga series mentioned in the *Guidelines* is *Attack on Titan*, which the Cabinet office equates with the Japanese concept of *marebito*, or "visiting gods," represented by the titular "titans" in the story (11) [15]. This is done, despite the author's rumored political beliefs. The *Guidelines* were published in 2018, well after *Attack on Titan* became an international phenomenon, and Isayama's rumored opinions had been publicized, yet still chose to use it as a series that was representative of Japan and Japanese culture. This is possibly due to its extreme popularity in Western countries, such as the United States, where negative sentiment regarding imperial-era Japan is not as salient to consumers.

### IX. JAPAN'S SOFT POWER INTERNATIONALLY

In order to understand the impact of Japan's soft power internationally (in addition to South Korea and China), we may again turn to survey data. The polls selected for use in this study are *The Global Survey on Japan's Soft Power* [42] and *The World Service Poll* [43], although there are many other existing polls that fall outside the scope of the present study. These two recent international polls show increasingly positive sentiment, or even specifically that Japan is perceived as "cool." *The Global Survey on Japan's Soft Power* was conducted at the Council on East Asian Studies at Yale University. Researchers found that Japan has a positive image internationally, and that many participants believe that Japanese culture is "cool" (1) [42]. The poll also found

that the majority of participants from each region of the world surveyed (Africa, Asia, Europe/North America/Oceania, Latin America, and the Middle East/North Africa) want to cooperate with Japan on security and trade. Since soft power also includes trade, this finding shows that Japanese soft power is effective. It is important to note that this study was also funded by the Japanese Consulate in Boston, further demonstrating how important Japan's soft power and image (and measuring its "cool" factor and success of rebranding efforts) remains to its government.

Finally, looking around the world, in the most recent iteration of the BBC World Service Poll, from 2017, Japan ranks as the third most positively viewed country in the world (out of the 19 countries surveyed). The only country that had a strongly negative view of Japan was China; however, Japan's favorability grows in China each year of this survey (and in other surveys, such as the Chinese-specific data cited above) [43].

## X. CONCLUSIONS

After a broad examination of Japan's imperial and recent economic history, it is no wonder that Japan's image appears to have reformed so effectively—the government had a major hand in doing so. Since Japan lacked international influence without a military and with a stagnant economy, the government recognized that they needed to change angles. This is best summarized again by former Minister of Foreign Affairs Taro Abe, "What is the image that pops into someone's mind when they hear the name 'Japan'? 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 long-term," (349–363) [8]. The government recognized the inherent gain that could be achieved from their unique industries of anime and manga, and put resources into their development and promotion. In order for their pop culture exports to be effective and consumable, Japan had to first rebrand to a "cool" or "warm" country, as Aso describes.

In the process of rebranding, a specific, recommended strategy for "editing" or "narrating" Japan was implemented by the government, emphasizing how contemporary pop culture is directly derived from, or representative of, traditional Japanese culture. Even before the "Nihon-Gatari-Sho" *Guidelines* document was published, scholars had already observed how Japanese pop culture was inherently rooted in tradition and history—though a revisionist history (112) [14]. This strategy has been extensively funded by the Japanese government, with over \$1.3 billion invested to date. Though the direct effects of this strategy are hard to measure, international opinion polls, as well as sales of anime and manga, offer strong indications.

Japan's rebrand has proved to be effective, as it is now the third most positively viewed country worldwide, despite its history. Even China and South Korea—two countries that, for valid reasons, historically hold the most negative views on Japan, are significant consumers of anime and manga, and Japanese pop culture is extremely popular in both countries. As of 2022, the annual Anime Industry Report by the Association of Japanese Animations, the three countries with the most contracts for anime and manga series licensing as well as merchandise distribution, were Taiwan, China, and South Korea. Though consumption of pop culture is not the only indicator of the "Cool" strategy's effectiveness, it is significant that the overseas revenue for anime also grossed over ¥1.4 billion in 2022 (8) [23]. Moreover, at the 2024 Annecy International Animation Film Festival, representatives of the anime industry discussed its growing global popularity. An executive with the anime streaming service Crunchyroll said there are approximately 800 million active anime fans worldwide. He also discussed how quickly the anime industry has grown in the past few years, with it "projected to generate \$37 billion in 2025, against \$14 billion a decade ago" [44]. Thus, anime's popularity and potential for rapid international growth (and not only in Taiwan, China, South Korea, and North America) is expected to increase. The "Cool Japan" strategy might therefore be expected to continue to be successful far into the future, particularly related to the anime industry. Though anime and manga are not the only cultural products in the "Cool" strategy, their worldwide consumption continues to increase and reflects core concepts and values outlined in the official *Guidelines*. Japan now has much more soft power and international influence than when it was a primary captain of industry postwar, thanks to the flourishing anime and manga industries, and to the government's long-term strategizing. As Japan's cultural industries continue to grow bigger and bigger each year, so does Japan's soft power.

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