

# ***Background of the Creation of East Asian Pop-culture and Its Global Impact: A Case Study on Japanese Anime's Origins and Its Influence on Japan's Soft Power Disclosure***

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**Abstract:** In today's era of globalisation, East Asian popular culture has increasingly become an international craze that has garnered soft power disclosure for China, Japan, and Korea. Among them, Japan was the earliest to wield cultural soft power to gain significant benefits, namely through its anime industry, setting the example for China and Korea. Not only did Japan accumulate huge economic benefits through anime, but the soft power it gained through culture dissemination critically allowed Japan to reshape its national image in the western world and even across Asia, where Japanese wartime aggression had remained an unsolved political issue over decades. This paper hopes to study the emergence, development and reception of Japanese anime and its impact on Japan's international soft power disclosure, serving as a model for the current development of other East Asian popular cultures.

**Keywords:** East Asian study, Pop-culture, Cultural globalisation, soft power, anime culture

## **1. Introduction**

Anime, a Japanese way of saying animation, has long been a cultural phenomenon whose popularity has prevailed across the globe. The general reception of Japan as a nation was subsequently associated with the popularity of anime culture, which shifted its national image positively. Such a shift in cultural and political disclosure was the result of Japan as a wielder of the 'soft power', an idea developed by American political scientist Joseph Nye, which is described as the non-coercive approach for a nation to insert its influence globally, usually through cultural industries [1]. To achieve soft power disclosure in the context of western-led, or more specifically, US led globalisation and modernisation, Japan underwent a strategic cultural reconceptualisation to develop an 'odourless' pop culture that can be easily accepted by most global cultures, expanding its commercial values [2]. This allowed an effective dissemination of Japanese anime across the globe, engendering crucial soft power disclosure for its ultimate political and economic benefits.

This topic is worth studying, as by analysing Japanese anime's global impact, we are able to explore the connection between cultural diplomacy and East Asian country's soft power disclosure in a world dominated by western narratives. It is particularly relevant for modern-day China and Korea that closely interact with and are shaped by Japanese pop culture, providing insights into the influence of Japanese pop culture on its neighbouring countries and possible lessons that can be taken

on by China and Korea to develop suitable and effective pop culture policies to increase their soft power disclosure.

This investigation will be conducted first by exploring the historical context that shaped the narrative of Japanese animation popular culture, from pre-war to post-war reconstruction, then by analysing the coming about of Japanese anime influence as a cultural phenomenon with respect to Japanese economic policies. Finally, by investigating the reception of Japanese animation by domestic and foreign audiences, this essay will discuss Japanese anime's global impact on Japanese soft power disclosure and national image to form an evaluation of the lessons that can be learned by countries in general to utilise such soft power for political disclosure.

## 2. Origins and development of Japanese anime

The earliest animation works found in Japan dated back to the 1910s, such as Namakura Gatana (1917). However, the early works were mostly destroyed in the Kanto earthquake 1923, leaving little significance for the later development of Japanese anime [3]. Due to the cultural nationalism that had started enforcing in the 1930s, anime ingrained with nationalistic views were encouraged by the government while non-political related films were highly censored [4]. Nevertheless, in the post-war decades, content and culture behind Japanese anime underwent a series of drastic changes due to both strong external influences and domestic needs.

The external influence was pivotally laid during the US Occupation of Japan (1945-1952), when Japan was militarily occupied and administered by the US [5]. The value of democracy and the US lifestyle entered Japanese society through politics, education and entertainment. In particular, Japan's animation industry was alleviated from its wartime propaganda role and was assisted by the Americans to develop to become 'Disney of the East' [3]. For instance, Chinese tales that were censored during the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) were brought back to public views, such as the White Snake Enchantress which received huge public popularity [3]. However, the most important impact of the Occupation period on the animation industry was not about freedom and creativity, but a critical shift in Japan's national policy that shaped the trajectory of anime thereafter. This period allowed Japan to recognise that modelling its culture and policies in favour of US standards is the most beneficial under the context of the US as a dominating global power [2].

The post-US occupation saw a rapid domestic and global development of the Japanese anime industry. Anime TV series emerged in response to public needs for longer TV programmes, allowing anime to become a major aspect of Japanese daily life. Anime series Astro Boy gained astonishing popularity both domestically and overseas [2], being watched by 40% of Japanese who owned TV and translated to be aired in the US. The success of Astro boy's 'global' genre pivotally prompted Japan to put anime at the centre of its cultural policy, developing a general strategy for anime themes and narratives to maximise its reception, hence to gain international market. The strategy, as scholar Allison observed, is not primarily based on its 'Japaneseness'[2]. In support of scholar Allison, scholar Iwabuchi suggests Japanese anime's 'odourless culture' is imperative for its unprecedented global success [2]. Specifically, Japan's strategic restraint of its cultural principles made Japanese anime easily comprehended and resonated with global audiences, assisting its effective dissemination. It particularly targeted capitalist western audiences through the generalisation of urban daily life, which can be seen from the globally famous Sailor Moon, which sets scenes in Japan, but centres around fantastical themes of magic and the galaxy of western culture, successfully taking over the European market in the late 90s [6].

Hence, under the context of growing ownership of television, Japan's strategic genre allowed European and American audiences to enjoy anime without knowing Japanese culture and take on Japanese culture while personally connecting with the anime. This underlined the structural phenomenon of Japanese anime, which effectively capitalised on the growing trend of globalisation,

precipitating Japanese anime to become a global phenomenon in 1980s, holding strong global popularity that paved the way for Japanese anime cultural dissimulation in the new era of internet 1990s onwards.

### **3. Japanese Anime as a Cultural Phenomenon**

In the 21st century, new media like computers and the internet allowed for a greater assimilation of Japanese anime, opening up a new pathway for Japanese anime to garner not only economic benefits but political power for Japan. By the beginning of the 21st century, anime had amassed huge revenue for Japan, establishing it as a leading economic power in the global animation industry. According to Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry in 2003, Japanese anime made up 65% of the world's production of animated cartoon series, and held an annual sale of estimated US\$17 billion', demonstrating the substantial economic strength wielded by Japanese anime. This solid commercial base for Japanese anime in the global market set the foundation for wider cultural dissimulation in the age of mobile devices and internet, eventually forming a cultural phenomenon that allowed Japan to change its national image and extend its cultural impact on global countries [6]. Anime that shows more 'Japaneseness' and cultural authenticity began to gain worldwide popularity.

A typical example can be found in director Mizayaki's movies. From the Princess Mononoke (1997) to Spirited Away (2001), Miyazaki raised awareness of environmental issues and current social issues as a remembrance of Japan's cultural folklore, with no signs of anime's usual cyberpunk themes or postmodern settings [7]. Yet both movies received enormous domestic popularity and academic recognition, with Spirited Away even receiving the Academy Award from the US. Such popularity was exactly culminated through Japan's decades-long anime exports, which steadily connected Japanese culture with the world. Hence, the growing curiosity of Japanese culture in the context of the highly accessible internet initiated a rapid change in Japan's role from a commercial power to a political and cultural soft power at the start of the 21st century.

#### **3.1. Impact on Japan's modern image and disclosure power**

Most notably, the anime fostered a growing change of global reception towards Japan's national image, primarily through evoking sympathy. Through the frequently appearing theme of postmodern destruction and annihilation, Japan was able to remind the world of the atomic bomb dropped on Japan's Nagasaki and Hiroshima in 1945. This theme constantly presents the substantial fear that was ingrained into Japanese people's life, reflecting Japan's unfortunate position as victims of nuclear bombs, evoking international sympathy for Japan. Critically, however, this cultural expression of war trauma contributed to the reshaping of Japan's national image from an imperialist aggressor who ruthlessly invaded numerous Asian countries and attacked the US to a victim of the Second World War. For instance, the "Hello Kitty" concept is purposefully created to disguise Japan's war criminal image from the western audiences and alleviate anti-Japanese sentiment in Korea, the Philippines and China by presenting Japan as a 'cute' and peace-loving state [8]. More significantly, this sympathetic national image as a soft power was crucial in assisting Japan's overseas diplomatic aims [6]. It increased Japan's international disclosure on the nuclear affair and allowed the US and western world to condone its refusal to apologise for its war crimes in Asia, and assisted Japan's diplomatic relationship with Asian countries despite the ungiven apologies.

However, Nye's soft power concept regarding culture as a carrier and spreader of subconscious values and ideologies, is notably absent in Japanese anime. Priority in anime is placed on economic values, with any diplomatic advantages seen as secondary.[6]. Nevertheless, regardless of the strategic intention behind anime exports, Japanese anime as its pop culture proliferated its influence

in reshaping a beneficial national image aside from garnering billions and trillions of dollars for its national revenue [8].

### **3.2. Impact on other East Asian countries**

Additionally, Japanese anime as an East Asian cultural phenomenon also had a major impact on reshaping its image among other East Asian countries.

Contextually, economic conditions in the 1990s assisted Japan's cultural exports. In the two decades prior, the surge in regional economic growth and consumerism in East Asia has significantly expanded the global marketing for Japanese popular culture. Notably, even in China, where Japanese products were once politically impermissible, Japanese pop culture items swiftly populate major cities' market, delving into the nation's burgeoning cultural market [6]. However, policies against Japanese influence across Asia due to Japan's aggression in World War Two against many Asian countries and other reasons continued to challenge the infiltration of Japanese anime in the early years. In South Korea, for instance, Japanese popular culture import remained forbidden until 1998 [6]. Yet, most of these bans were elevated in the 21st century due to reconciliation policies, the ease of diplomatic tensions, and the expanding Japanese-East Asian cultural market. Moreover, the development and high accessibility of the internet also dismantled the political obstacles preventing cultural exchange and broadened Japanese cultural dissemination even beyond.

Furthermore, Japan created an advanced image through both importing high quality anime and the modern Japan image shown in anime. This impression was not only due to Japan's actual high development standards but also to the positive image of Japanese products shown by its popular culture. Through various media, Japan's social advancement and its 'modernity' has fascinated numerous students of China and Korea to study in Japan. According to statistics, the count of foreign students enrolled in Japan amounted to about 12,410 in 1984, surged to 53,847 by 1995, and reached 117,302 by 2005 [6]. This particular significant growth in numbers of international students highlighted the crucial role of Japanese anime culture in creating an international positive image, particularly among the younger generations, who are more exposed to pop culture through the internet. These students contributed to the further assimilation and internationalisation of Japanese culture by spreading Japanese culture back to their families and their country, creating a virtuous cycle that develop the 'modern' and positive Japan image across East Asia, effectively diluting Japan's war crimes that were held among Asian countries for almost a century.

As a result, the Japanese popular culture industry's endeavours and their dissemination have created a potent mechanism that continuously circulates fresh portrayals of Japan. Regarding the development of Japanese pop culture influence, Douglas McGray suggests that Japan has transformed from an economic power to a culture superpower since the 1980s as a result of growing pop-culture influence [9]. In evaluating, this was particularly convincing, as Japanese anime, in the context of the internet and new media, was able to disseminate Japanese culture and the positive image of Japan globally at an unprecedented level, making Japanese culture an inseparable part of the new global culture. It therefore transformed into a cultural soft power that allowed Japan's other industries to indirectly benefit from the positive and modern image created by Japanese pop culture, assisting Japan's political disclosure subtly.

### **4. Inspiration from Japanese anime as East popular culture**

Japan's successful cultural export through pop culture serves as a model example for other East Asian countries to replicate its success. As the internet provided opportunity for more rapid and widespread dissemination of cultural products, as well as allowing more commercial opportunities, Japanese anime's success became a shared mechanism for China and Korea, to an extent competing against

Japan's dominant role as the strongest East Asian cultural exporter, leading to a new era of East Asian cultural exports through various pop culture.

#### 4.1. Implantation of ethnic factors

The dissemination of Japanese cultural elements through anime not only gained Japan soft power disclosure in terms of positive national image, but also strategically created a knock-on effect that facilitated high popularity for tourism in Japan and overseas Japanese business. For instance, the frequent appearance of Japanese Gyoza, a Japanese variation of the Chinese dumplings, has been gaining huge popularity in western countries, solidifying a strong market despite its functional overlap with dumplings. More commonly, Japanese Sushi and ramen garnered extremely high popularity globally due to global citizens eagerness to explore authentic Japanese life, assisting successful Japanese business ventures supported by huge popularity among locals without relying on overseas Japanese. Additionally, another equally important political gain Japan achieved through global popularity of anime was gaining disclosure on its rightful identity. By repeatedly and publicly showing certain elements through anime, Japan consolidates the cultural image and ingrained a powerful claim of Japanese culture among the global audiences, which could be seen by the rising recognition of Gyoza over Chinese dumplings in favour of Japanese products.

In parallel, Koreans took on the similar mechanism of creating 'odourless' cultural products for commercial uses and positive global receptions. The so-called 'Korean wave' of Korean television dramas and idols in East Asia has trended since the 2010s, ingraining cultural elements like Korean hanbok, cuisines, and even beauty standards that swiftly took over the global market [6]. Such rapid success was the combined product of the high accessibility of the internet and the appeal to western culture at the core of this 'Korean wave'. World-famous K-pop idols like Blackpink and BTS, for instance, dress in American styles, always interweave English words in their songs, praise individualism and encourage self-affirmation through the lyrics. Such 'globalised' gestures towards the western world and modern principles allowed it to reach phenomenal popularity even further and more rapidly than Japan with the assistance of social media and the internet. Capitalising on its pop culture popularity, Korean pop culture catalysed a wave of Korean product appreciation like Japan in the last century, aiding the high popularity of Korean commercial products like food, makeup products and tourism.

Essentially, through implanting cultural elements within the anime, Japanese anime creates a mechanism of knock-on commercial effects on its other industries, inspiring other east Asian countries to follow using a similar combination of a surface 'oriental' appeal and western core to gain commercial opportunities, wider economic gains, and cultural recognition as a form of soft power.

#### 4.2. Government assistance

The popularity of anime and its cultural soft power were inseparable from the assistance of the Japanese government. Supporting anime as a cornerstone to enhance Japanese soft power, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) assumed a significant role as a primary sponsor for global Japanese pop-culture events. Typically, it assisted the launch of the World Cosplay Summit in 2003, serves as a nexus for fostering international cultural exchange and friendship through Japanese popular culture, encompassing anime, manga, music and fashion [10]. This highlighted government assistance in promoting Japanese anime worldwide, making the 'popular' anime a national image of Japan.

In a broader context, general pop culture promotion has always been central to Japan's national policy. Beginning in 1988, during the Takeshita government's tenure [6], Japan initiated several measures showcasing governmental support for cultural exports, particularly in the media sector,



exploring the plausibility of television program exportation. Subsequently, in 1991, the Japan Media Communication Center (JAMCO) was established by MOFA, which subsidises the export of television programs to developing nations like China and Korea, conducting the translation of 586 programs into English and their exportation to 35 other nations [6]. Concurrently, the Japanese Foundation in collaboration with MOFA also exported Japanese television programs to 29 countries [11].

It can therefore be seen that government policies in promoting anime crucially aided the dissimilation of Japanese culture worldwide, as the anime industry was given financial support and government-assisted marketing to produce numerous high quality works to be exported. The close collaboration between the cultural industry and government assistance certainly inspired Korea's pop culture, which has received worldwide popularity in the past decade. As mentioned previously, K-pop music often incorporates English phrases and American fashion within the 'Koreaness' to assist the reception of global audiences, in particular western audiences.

However, the government's role in fostering Japan's cultural industry has been limited. More importantly, government intervention was not the primary force behind Japanese cultural products' global competitiveness. Instead, this competitiveness is mostly driven by the anime industry's independent development[9]. This raises doubts about the effectiveness of government involvement in cultural matters, given the unique dynamics of popular culture. If this hypothesis holds true, it prompts us to explore whether there exist distinct market networks or structures inherent to cultural markets, differing significantly from those seen in traditional industrial sectors. The Japanese experience could serve as a cautionary precursor for East Asian governments who are embedding huge government endorsement within its cultural export [9]. Essentially, what can be directly taken from the model of Japanese anime is the spirit of always aiming for better quality and sincerity.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Japanese anime has emerged as a potent force shaping not only Japan's international image but also influencing global perceptions and cultural trends. From post-war reconstruction to its modern-day status as a global cultural phenomenon, anime has played a pivotal role in Japan's soft power disclosure. By strategically crafting narratives and themes that resonate with western or global audiences, anime commercial success transcends cultural boundaries. Moreover, its success has inspired other East Asian nations to develop their own cultural industries with similar strategies, leading to the rise of phenomena like the Korean Wave. As globalisation continues to shape the cultural landscape, the influence of Japanese anime serves as a model for the development of East Asian pop culture and its impact on soft power dynamics. The limitation of this paper is mainly the lack of primary data, further research is needed to explore the ongoing evolution of East Asian pop culture and its implications for global discourse, particularly in the context of digital media and cultural globalisation.

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