

Comparing the Reconstruction of State Images of Germany and Japan in the Post-World War II Era in the Perspective of Political Symbolism Theory

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Abstract: National image has become an important factor in the competition for soft power among countries. Germany and Japan, as defeated countries in World War II, have both formulated a series of strategies and carried out actions on image reconstruction. This paper adopts the method of documentary analysis to disaggregate the strategic deployment and practices of image building in the two countries into different dimensions and place them under the theoretical framework of political symbols for systematic analyses. From this, it is concluded that there are significant differences between the two countries in terms of their strategic priorities, with Germany focuses methodologically on the cultural diplomacy and geographically on the Europe; and Japan prioritizes economic initiatives and the western community. This prioritization can be a reflection of the underlying attitude divergence between the two nations. In this way, the policies of the two countries in the field of foreign relations can be examined in an ontological and globalized perspective.

Keywords: political symbolism, systematic analysis, state image

1. Introduction

At the end of 1980s, American international relations theorist Joseph Nye first introduced the concept of “soft power”, with the definition that national soft power is the combination of three main resources: culture, political values and foreign policies [1]. With the ever-increasing scale of competition and corporation on the global stage, state image, which is generally recognized as the embodiment of the combined effect of the main resources, has become a key factor in the contest for soft power between nations and has therefore led to a corresponding variety of image strategies for different states. In today’s context of globalization, with the diversity of political subjects, communication media and group of audience, the shaping, spread and reception of state image are increasingly dependent on symbolic imagery. The factual logic of this symbolic imagery system in political discourse is that a certain attribute embedded in the state is formed and presented as a specific reality through the factual and value judgments of the audience. Such certain attribute is conveyed by the figurative vehicle represented by political initiatives, etc [2]. This allows abstract objects with attributes of a certain nation to be better identified and read through symbolic representation. At a time of increasing complexity of means by which state images are portrayed, a comparative analysis of the state’s strategy for shaping its image in the theoretical perspective of symbolism is necessary and significant.

This study is a comparative analysis using the document analysis method. The major focus of the study is the reconstruction of the national image of Germany and Japan in the post-war era, based on the theory of political symbolism and a combination of journalistic and political science approaches. It also focuses on a systematic summary of the priorities and sequences of their strategies in state image recovery. This study has the following values: on an academic level, it provides a new focus when comparing the two countries in the methodology of systematic analysis. As Germany and Japan share the similar historical backgrounds of defeat in the World War II and have both become major economic powers in the world today, there are a certain number of studies comparing the two. However, these studies largely concentrate on the image of the two countries in public view or on the comparison of the historical attitudes towards the war shown in political incidents, with a single political or journalistic approach. The academic value of this study is therefore that it clarifies the multiple dimensions of the construction of the image of the two countries through the analysis of policies and initiatives, on the one hand; and places them in a systemic framework in order to clarify the functioning of the integrated system by means of the position of each element. On a practical level, a comparative and systematic analysis of the different means and effects of image-building in the two countries can better reflect the core of their strategies and the subsequent underlying aims, while providing lessons for other attempts to maintain and improve the image of the country.

2. Germany's State Image Reconstruction Attempts

Germany's reflection on the Second World War did not stop at confession, but went through a progressive process of introspection, reconciliation and reversal. Germany has developed a gradual and multidimensional policy to ensure that it breaks away from the shadows of the Second World War, regains international trust and prestige, and reassumes its international responsibilities. In this part of the essay, Germany's state image reconstruction attempts will be divided into 3 phases according to chronological order.

2.1. Early Post-World War II Period: Reflections

In the early post-war period, the German government focused on war accountability, and inspiring national reflection, in order to present the international community with a sincere acknowledgement of guilt and a serious attitude towards introspection.

On the issue of the confirmation of war responsibilities, German media reported the Nuremberg Trials comprehensively and in detail, with the support of German government, revealing crimes of Nazi governance and publishing in-depth commentaries. Meanwhile, the German Federal Parliament (Bundestag) finally abolished the retroactive time limit for Nazi murderers in 1979 after a long debate, which greatly helped with the creation of an improved international public opinion [3]. Additionally, in 1969, Kurt Kiesinger, the former Nazi chancellor and the present prime minister of the Federal Republic of Germany, was replaced by Willy Brandt, an anti-Nazi fighter from the World War II, who spontaneously knelt down in Warsaw in mourning for the dead. The historical "Warsaw Genuflection" brought the international community to the realization of Germany's profound self-reflection and therefore laid the foundation for Germany's "New Eastern European Policy".

On the issue of national reflection, books and films exposing Nazi crimes and promoting anti-war ideas were widely distributed. Textbooks were required to include sufficient history of the Nazi period with sufficient explanation, and textbook committees were set up with Israel, Poland and other countries to provide informative anti-war education materials. Furthermore, commemorative activities and exhibitions were frequently held.

These all signalized Germany's in-depth reflection in the early post-war period and laid a solid foundation to future attempts in recovering its state image.

2.2. 1980s and 1990s: Reconciliation

Germany's efforts in post-war reflection were starting to bear fruit after a several decades of implementation, and the international community was gradually moving towards a renewed recognition and acceptance of Germany. After the German reunification in the 90s, Germany accelerated its quest for greater power in the political discourse with a solid financial base. In 1994, with the withdrawal of the four powers from Germany, Germany regained full sovereignty and made its call to become a "normal country" and to assume more responsibility [4].

At the international level, Germany actively pursued important roles in major international organizations and beard organizational contributions, for example at the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. It voluntarily participated in world affairs including but not limited to peace maintenance and economic aids to foreign countries.

At the European level, Germany's rapprochement with its Eastern European neighbors, who suffered the most from Germany in the war, opened the way for Germany to assume greater responsibility in the EU proceedings. Since then Germany had been steadily strengthening its voice and political influence in the European community by becoming the major bearer of the EU budget relying on its economic strength.

2.3. 21st Century: Reversal

As Germany entered the 21st century, its international position in both economic and political terms was generally secure and the focus of its national image strategy shifted to cultural diplomacy. In 2005, the German budget for foreign cultural exchange and the promotion of the German language amounted to €1.09 billion, or 0.42% of the federal budget [5]. Germany currently has 158 Goethe-Institut branches in 98 countries, which offers German language courses and organizes cultural events every year. Germany has cultivated a series of strong media, represented by the Deutsche Welle, which has become an effective way to convey the voice of the country and build a positive image. Meanwhile, Germany encourages overseas students and academic exchange, with free tuition fees at public universities and stipends for international students and visiting scholars.

Germany's cultural foreign policy has enabled it to reverse its international image, and in 2013 Germany was ranked as the most popular country in the world in the survey by BBC, with 59% of respondents rating Germany's image as "mainly positive".

3. Japan's State Image Reconstruction Attempts

After World War II, Japan defined the core of its recovery strategy as "pursuing the image of a responsible political power based on its economic strength" and has continued to implementing this strategy until today. To achieve the target of being a "responsible political power", Japan has developed and implemented a number of initiatives encompassing multiple dimensions. This section of the essay will divide Japan's attempts in reshaping the image into three separate but interconnected aspects: economic, political and cultural.

3.1. Economical Attempts

After the World War II, Japan was faced with a depleted domestic economy and the fear and apprehension of the international community, especially its Asian neighbors, about its image as a militaristic aggressor. To reverse this image, Japan chose to firstly boost its economy.

To achieve this economic boost, Japan took full advantage of US economic aids while at the same time the Japanese government took a strong independent leadership role to "go its own way", easing the food crisis, curbing inflation and achieving economic self-reliance [6]. There was an

unprecedented government-led unity throughout Japan in the economic work of post-war recovery and reconstruction, with the people actively devoted to work and obediently stabilized social orders. In particular, the outbreak of the Korean War gave Japan a tremendous opportunity for economic development, transforming Japan from a buyer's market in international trade to a seller's market for special war needs and commodity exports. Influenced by a combination of factors including the war, Japan had managed to create the "economic miracle" of post-war recovery, and economic development remained a strategic priority for decades afterwards.

It was noteworthy as well, that Japan always focused on building the image of environmental friendly industrial production and on the high quality label in its products. It attempted to pursue its goal of becoming a major political power by projecting an image of a country with high quality economic development. In fact, this strategic sequence was successful, as Japan's economic development did give him a solid foundation for political advancement.

3.2. Political Attempts

Like Germany, Japan's primary political effort was to repair its relations with its neighbors. Unlike Germany, however, Japan had been selective in both the targets and strategies of its relationship repair. Japan's official development assistance (ODA) has long been geographically concentrated in Southeast Asia. According to statistics, as of 1993, Japan had provided a cumulative \$27.5 billion in ODA to various countries in Southeast Asia, accounting for 35 per cent of its total over the years [7]. This assistance could be of great political benefit to Japan, and aid became an important feature of Japan's political and diplomatic strategy. In fact, the Southeast Asian countries soon became politically connected to Japan on the basis of economic cooperation, and Japan's image as an aggressor was reversed in Southeast Asia.

Meanwhile, in the international community, Japan actively participated in international affairs and tried to portray itself as a "member of the West". In a series of historical events, such as Japan's accession to the OECD, the hosting of the Tokyo Olympics and the Osaka World Expo, and the signing of the US-Japan Joint Declaration, Japan became confident that it had a higher status in the international community and in the Western camp [8].

In contrast, however, Japan's image building in Northeast Asia never made much progress, and its relations with its major neighbors such as China and South Korea remained antagonistic.

3.3. Cultural Attempts

Japan's cultural promotion strategy was to make full use of its own characteristics and strengths to enhance the image cognition and recognition of Japan in the exported countries. Japan's strategic target population was clearly selective, focusing mainly on the younger generation in East Asian, particularly in Southeast Asia, who had not experienced war. As a result, cultural propaganda in Japan took on a distinctly youth-focusing quality. The main means of this were the promotion of Japanese language learning, the encouragement of study in Japan, and the use of anime and manga as a medium for culture export. By doing so, the Japanese government hoped to show a "humane" side of Japan, to change the image of the "aggressor", and to make audiences feel that "Japan is a country with a unique charm" [9].

4. Comparative Analysis

From the above analysis, it is easy to see that Germany and Japan have a lot in common in their attempts to rebuild their images, for example, the pursuit of political discourse based on economics, the promotion of understanding through cultural diplomacy, etc. However, in terms of political symbolism, the transformation of the state image is a systematic process of symbolic production, a

process with specific structural levels and complex interactions between the various elements. The construction of the national image is correspondingly characterized by the fact that the various elements not only follow a certain sequence but also interact in different areas. In this section, therefore, the paper will concentrate on the differences in the strategic order and focus of the two countries.

4.1. Sequence of Image Re-branding Initiatives

Although the primary goal of both Germany and Japan in the early decades after the war was to build a new national economy out of the ashes of the war, once the economy had been revitalized there was a clear division in the order of initiatives between the two countries, i.e. Germany focused on culture and Japan always on the economy.

Defeat had left Germany in a state of international disrepute, which was deeply entrenched and difficult to reverse. It was therefore clear that military and economic means were not available, as these means were relatively more aggressive. Cultural diplomacy, with its gentle, gradual nature, was the best option at this time and helped Germany to develop a peace-loving international image [10]. Especially in recent years, this emphasis on cultural diplomacy has become increasingly transparent, for Germany consciously avoids economic, political, and military initiatives outside the frame of Europe but cultural diplomacy has reached to a variety of countries, including but not limited to Europe.

In contrast, Japan's strategic focus remained on economy, which also marked Japan's economic initiatives as politicized. For instance, the most commonly-used means of enhancing international impact is the official economic development assistance (ODA), which had firstly launched in Southeast Asia and later extended to the Middle East and North Africa. In recent years, non-economic factors in Japan's ODA investment and amount allocation have become increasingly evident, thus revealing Japan's political aim of making economic initiatives the core of its strategy. As opposite, Germany's foreign aid is more compensatory in nature, for it introduced massive reparations for the many people who had been persecuted by the Nazis shortly after the war, and later restrained itself within the framework of the European Union to avoid showing aggression.

4.2. Major Targeting Regions of Image Re-branding Initiatives

There existed differences in geographical focus between the two countries' initiatives, with Germany focused mainly on the European neighbors and Japan attached great importance to maintain the relation with the developed countries in the west community.

Germany always emphasized its "European identity" and identified itself as the "Germany of Europe". Germany consciously confined its leadership role within Europe and avoided acting separately from Europe. Furthermore, it repeatedly stated that Germany will not seek to be a world power, but "would rather be an engine of regional integration within Europe and be a good European" [11].

Japan, on the contrary, called itself "a bridge between Asia and the West" and did not emphasize its Asian identity but tried to be part of the West. On the one hand, this was due to the fact that Japan's diplomatic strategy in Northeast Asia had not been smoothly promoted due to various historical legacies and territorial disputes, and that it had been in constant conflict with its major neighbors such as China and South Korea. On the other hand, it was because Japan had strategically chosen to become an ally of the United States in Asia and to ride on the coattails to achieve political greatness. However, with growing economic frictions, Japan was questioned by the West as "heterogeneous" and some Western countries accused Japan of blind obedience to the US, leaving Japan in the uncomfortable position of being torn between East and West.

4.3. Underlying Attitude to Image Re-branding: A Systematic Analysis Perspective in Political Symbolism

When put in a systematic analytical discourse, the different focuses of initiatives of the two countries can reveal the different attitudes between the two countries: one with a deeper introspection and anti-war attitude, the other with a “pacifist camouflage”.

In the construction of a national image, the factual transmission logic is that policies are processed by state agencies, NGOs and the media to create symbols that can be recognized and accepted by the public, such as governmental initiatives, news, etc., and eventually a general impression of the national image is created through the superimposition of various symbols. But in systematic research, the logic of the study is reversed: by investigating into symbols available to the general public, such as organizational behaviour and the news, and excluding the processing of government, NGOs and the media, etc., the research can trace the national interest concerns behind its policies in essence. That is, the logic of deducing appearances to original images.

In the case of Germany and Japan, the appearance is that the two countries have different tendencies in terms of the order and geographical focus of their strategic deployment. In Germany’s image reinvention initiative system, the more aggressive and controlling elements are weakened and placed at the end of the system linkage. For example it emphasizes cultural diplomacy and confines its leading role within Europe. In contrast, Japan places aggressive element at the center of the system, such as economic intervention in form of aids.

Thus, while both countries have achieved great results in reshaping their images after the war, there are differences in their fundamental approaches to the legacy of the war. Germany’s moderate and gradual approach and the series of initiatives of a purely compensatory nature present a sincere and consistent introspection. Japan’s policy of reparations in the service of political gain, and its consistent avoidance of war guilt, casts a “pseudo- pacifism” over its post-war image [12]. Actions such as visiting the Yasukuni Shrine are indicative of Japan’s lack of strategic responses to face up to its history, and have contributed to Japan’s inability to remove the image of the aggressor in East Asia.

5. Conclusion

From the above analysis, it is clear that the sequence and regional focus of the two countries are of significant differences. The conclusion can be drawn that Germany’s post-war image reconstruction initiatives have compensatory nature and a high degree of self-regulation in proactively constraining the scope of their power. Meanwhile, Japan’s post-war initiatives, however, are subtly characterized by varying degrees of economic control and political expansion. The reason for this difference lies in the fact that Germany explicitly insists on the “never again” attitude after the war, and the pacifist ideology has deeply integrated into all aspects of the country’s domestic and foreign affairs. Instead, Japan has turned to a conservative neo-nationalism after a brief period of pacifist thinking. Conservatism, combined with the national sentiment of wanting the country to flourish, gives rise to a tendency towards non-recognition of war guilt and expansion based on the national interests.

The study is an innovative application of political symbolism theory in analyzing specific instances of national image building. At the theoretical level, it provides a theoretical perspective of political symbols for the comparison of the national images of the two countries mentioned above, and also provides an alternative new dimension for the analysis of the image building strategies of other countries. At the practical level, this study follows the strategy of symbolizing and concretizing complex concepts and combines the analysis of element-system relationships, which can provide an analytical approach to the future studies.

This study also has certain limitations: on the one hand, some elements are inevitably not included in the systematic analysis, which may result in some deviation from the overall state of operation of the system as well as from its balance and alteration. On the other hand, due to time and energy constraints, only some typical events in the post-war period of the two countries are selected as cases for this study, which may lead to a biased view of the overall layout and purpose of the image-building strategy of the two countries. In-depth analyses of the theoretical framework of political symbols and their use in practice in both countries require more theoretical knowledge and practical experience. Therefore, subsequent studies will continue to refine the theory and methodology. Further, in order to avoid a biased perspective in the analyses, the follow-up study will continue to expand the actual cases in a variety of aspects in order to provide a realistic, objective and credible research perspective.

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