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The State of Japan's Soft Power After the 2020 Olympics

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This article is part of a trilogy aimed at better understanding East Asia's most prominent powers, from a soft power perspective. In 2020, I attempted to demystify the state of China's soft power. This article covers Japan, and a forthcoming third one will deal with South Korea's burgeoning cultural appeal and beyond.

Japan is an island country (or should I say archipelago) in East Asia that is often recognized as quirky, fascinating, and somewhat 'exotic', even by some of its neighbors. These traits are what generally defines its international appeal. The capacity to attract foreign countries and their audiences can be referred to as soft power, intended as the activation of attractive national features through policies towards favored outcomes, or at least beneficial ones.

Japan has been called a soft power superpower in multiple instances, such as in comparison with the United States in a dedicated volume discussing the specific features and ability to attract internationally, or when recognizing its achievements as an "artistic, culinary and cultural superpower." In 2009, Foreign Policy published an article recognizing and praising Japan's "gross national cool." A term that eventually helped shaping Tokyo's policy—the "Cool Japan" strategy—to further promote the national appeal while strengthening the ability to take advantage from this attractive portfolio.

Before assessing whether this arguably formidable portfolio has actually been successful or not, it is necessary to have a look at what resources and tools define Tokyo's soft power. In other words, one needs to ask where the soft power of a certain country originates from. To do so, it is convenient to divide this portfolio in three subcategories—sociocultural, political, and economic, although it should be noted that this division is for the sake of simplification and in real life these categories are likely to overlap more often than not.

With that said, what are the most evident and discussed resources of Japanese soft power's portfolio? And which ones are less discussed but deserve more credit in defining the country's appeal? Japan is more widely known for its rich and varied culture, often seen as a masterful blend of traditional and modern features. These include aspects such as its globally renowned animation (anime), comics (manga), cuisine (sushi, ramen, ...), and reputation as a technologically advanced, innovative, and somehow futuristic nation in the main cities contrasting with the laidback countryside and ancient temples scattered around the archipelago.

Beyond these common features, some might also be aware of Japan's economic influence and the ensuing attraction. The country has been a major promoter of development across East and Southeast Asia and beyond, through aid and Foreign Direct Investments (FDI). The provision of scholarships, traineeships, technological know-how, and funds paired with the completion and supervision of critical infrastructure such as powerplants, bridges, and railways generally resulted in recognition and long-lasting goodwill towards Tokyo. To name one specific example, Japan has been advancing its Partnership for Quality Infrastructure since 2015 which was well received in the developing neighborhood substantiating the country's commitment.

The last category might be even less evident, especially to the general observer, but Tokyo's political influence through attraction is indeed present, just more nuanced. One manifestation of political soft power covered in the

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literature is Japan's International Democratic Assistance as a prominent aspect of the country's foreign policy since the 2000s in which values (re)acquired a central position. More broadly, Japan wants to present itself internationally as a Global Civilian Power, which can be seen as a pacifist force for good concerned with others while trying to detach itself from an overly nationalistic image.

The success of each of these categories of influence and attraction varies depending on the target audience(s) in each country, the objectives, and even the metrics of assessment, which can take the form of surveys or more tailored indicators, some of which will be discussed later in this article. Before addressing the results and potential, it should be kept in mind that resources alone can hardly result in the preferred outcomes without activating them, which generally takes the form of promotion. In order to do so, some communicative tools are needed. The most common umbrella term to refer to these promotional activities is public diplomacy, a concept that is sometimes confused with soft power itself, but it should be seen as an instrument of soft power instead. The Encyclopaedia Britannica describes public diplomacy as "all official efforts to convince targeted sectors of foreign opinion to support or tolerate a government's strategic objectives."

How does Japan do public diplomacy? At a basic level, it depends on how Tokyo decides to advertise its initiatives—planned and ongoing—its achievements and successes, and also the reception of these efforts. For instance, Japan can collaborate with private companies to produce some specific content, such as presenting the opportunities that the country offers to foreign talent or its lesser-known cultural features and technological innovations. Some of these activities are already advanced through the Japan Foundation. The country can also decide to collaborate with foreign governments and media providers to let people know that they have successfully completed a major bridge, a long-awaited high speed railway section, or comparable impactful developments. Similarly, if Japan's contribution is already recognized, the country can just let the voices of the benefitting entities speak for themselves, to show genuine appreciation for Japan's efforts and assistance, with the aim of generating long-lasting goodwill. Broadly speaking, some resources may not need much promotion to be widely appreciated—the word of mouth might have already spread broadly—some others instead need to be communicated to be acknowledged and appreciated, to eventually result in greater soft power. Japanese pop culture is an example of the former, while its assistance to developing countries could use some additional publicity.

Japan also boasts some less conventional resources and tools, such as the "use of Japanese military assets in a non-threatening manner to attract others into supporting Tokyo's policies," which can represent intriguing directions for future research to uncover less explored soft power dynamics of attraction in the region and beyond.

With that said, it is still useful to identify some more common resources and tools to investigate and juxtapose the portfolios, main strategies, and outcomes of major and growing powers, that are often competing for attraction and influence. Although competition is not always evident, nor necessarily the first thought in the minds of policymakers when devising strategies of attraction, it is not difficult to spot how competition could still be present. A customer may be able to appreciate and purchase cultural goods from multiple countries, a tourist may be able to visit several countries per year without the need to choose one or the other. Both instances will at least benefit the receiving country economically. Differently, most international students need to carefully pick their destination, in which they could stay for a brief exchange period but also for several years to complete a degree. This decision becomes even more complex when considering foreign talent. Attracting students could still result in economic benefits (e.g., tuition fees, living expenses) but the implications of both foreign students and talent also extend to integration through sociocultural interactions, expanded (business) networks, and overall bilateral relations.

So how does Japan compare to other neighboring and global players? Although soft power dynamics may become extremely complex and granular, there are still some macro indicators which can be used to compare the efforts and achievements of competing powers. For the sake of brevity, this article mainly considers the potential appeal of selected competitors through the results of a reputable and comprehensive index, the Global Soft Power Index. This index considers the global familiarity of a country, its reputation, influence, and portfolio comprised of seven categories of attractive features (Business & Trade, Governance, International Relations, Culture & Heritage, Media & Communication, Education & Science, People & Values).

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The Index has been published yearly since 2020 and an additional category–COVID-19 response–was added in 2021 and kept for the 2022 edition. In 2020, Japan was in 4th place, followed by China (5th), but preceded by the United States (US) (1st), Germany (2nd) and the United Kingdom (UK) (3rd). South Korea, a prominent and growing soft power player, was only 14th. In 2021, Japan occupied the 2nd place, Germany was 1st, the UK 3rd, the US dropped to the 6th place, China was 8th, while South Korea raised to the 11th spot. In 2022, Japan dropped a few spots to 5th, the US regained the top spot (1st), followed by the UK (2nd), Germany (3rd), and China for the first time surpassed Japan, earning the 4th place, while South Korea dropped to 12th. Several factors played a part in these rankings, of which nuances can be explored and debated at length, but the response to the pandemic have played a major role, and the post-pandemic speed of recovery of each nation is expected to greatly affect international perceptions in the coming years.

When investigating Japan's most recent scores in the 2022 Index, familiarity is highest (8.2/10), and its reputation is solid (7.3), but its influence is lackluster (5.9). China's familiarity is comparable (8.4), the reputation is mediocre (6.4), but the perceptions of influence are considerably higher (7.3). These trends are also evident in the yearly State of Southeast Asia Survey from the Singaporean think tank ISEAS. Respondents—a mix of policymakers, academics, researchers, businesspeople, media personnel, and civil society activists from Southeast Asia—generally see China's growth as concerning, particularly in the neighboring region, and would welcome a more proactive Japan calling for a more prominent position of leadership.

So far, resources and strategies have been addressed, paired with some outcomes, but it should be kept in mind that actions (and international conduct) speak loud too and can affect how a country is perceived internationally. Major sports events can be a topical example of soft power strategies at work. The Beijing's 2008 Olympics can be seen as a crucial moment for China's attempt to revamp its global image. In 2021, Tokyo eventually managed to host the delayed Olympics; what were the international reactions to this? Can it be seen as a success for Japan's international standing? Generally, there were grim predictions even long before the event happened and the way Tokyo initially handled it because of the ongoing pandemic seemed to foresee a disastrous reputational outcome. However, the games went on as planned—minus the crowds of spectators—and virus outbreaks were limited and did not cause any major disruption. Observers' reactions after the Olympics were mixed for the most part, but they at least recognized the merit in not cancelling the event.

Considering the turbulent times we live in, the legacy of the Tokyo Olympics seemed to have faded faster than usual, leaving space to other, more pressing international developments, such as drafting a post-pandemic recovery plan, navigating the China-US competition, and more recently dealing with the consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

All considered, Japan has been able to rebuild its image and reputation not once, but twice in modern history. The first time it had to overcome the belligerent and expansionistic image after being defeated in WWII. The second time it had to overcome widespread sentiments of economic imperialism to convince its neighbors of its good and mutually beneficial intentions to develop the region towards shared prosperity. Across Southeast Asia, Tokyo's efforts can arguably be seen as successful, as recognized in the literature and reiterated in regional forums. Japan is widely seen positively even beyond the region—as shown in the Index discussed above, but its efforts are rarely promoted as 'loudly' as its Chinese counterpart. This approach has led Richard Heydarian, a prominent scholar and analyst, to label the country a "stealth superpower." Sebastian Strangio, a journalist and author, describes this concept as a country that is "large enough to be helpful, yet not so large as to incite fear and anxiety." To what extent this is a successful strategy is still up for debate. Surely, Japan vaunts a remarkable reputation in many countries, but there are doubts regarding its conversion capabilities. In other words, how can a country with a formidable portfolio of attractive national features convert them into preferred outcomes? The potential is there, the expected results may not (yet) be.

Going forward, there are several challenges for Japan to effectively project its soft power, but also promising opportunities to create or refine channels of attraction and influence. When considering the challenges—beyond global geopolitical uncertainties and frictions—Tokyo was extremely cautious in reopening the country and this caused frustration not only with foreign tourists, but also among international students who were not able to return and

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resume their studies in person. The matter was covered widely in international media, affecting the country's image and perceptions of resilience and resourcefulness, but considering the demand and overall appeal, Japan certainly has the capabilities for a swift recovery. Other challenges, more rooted, include the need to address the perception that the country is unwelcoming to immigrants—particularly considering its shrinking population—and the growing demand for Tokyo to at least 'punch equal to its weight' in international politics, as it still is the third economic power (by GDP) and a leading innovator in various industries. When considering opportunities, instead, the single (but comprehensive) action that Tokyo leaders and policymakers can take is to double down on the efforts that defined Japan in the past decades: a responsible and pacifist actor who seeks shared prosperity in the region and beyond. How can this be achieved? A first, noteworthy step has been taken in early 2022 when Japan announced the "Asia-Japan Investing for the future initiative." This is largely based on ideas of greater connectivity affecting multiple dimensions such as tighter interconnections through physical and digital infrastructure and sociocultural ones through human-to-human interactions. Surely, China is also advancing a similar strategy through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), but "there are so many infrastructural needs [in the developing world] that there is ample demand for all players."

Ultimately, soft power dynamics rely on the presence of channels of attraction and influence, which represent the multiple dimensions of connectivity. In a difficult period in which borders are being shut and dialogue and negotiations are less and less present, Japan may have one more chance to detach from its cautious foreign policy to revamp its regional and global image and reputation through its actions, which should not be aimed at dividing, but at connecting.

About the author:

Daniele Carminati is a lecturer in International Relations and Diplomacy at the Beijing Foreign Studies University and holds a PhD in International Relations from the City University of Hong Kong. His research interest revolves around the sociocultural, economic, and political implications of globalization in East and Southeast Asia with a particular focus on soft power dynamics. Daniele is also a former commissioning editor at E-International Relations.