MANGA, JAPANESE COMICS; anime, Japanese animation; cosplay, Japanese role-play in which the young come together to perform for one another, wearing manga figures’ costumes. To many these may once have seemed eccentric or even frivolous symbols of a fin-de-siècle culture in Japan.

But they have taken root across the world, and increasingly they play a role in “cool Japan,” an important new adjunct to Japan’s concentrated effort to project so-called soft power across the world, replacing the hard power that the country had and then lost, first in World War II and later with the stagnation of its economic might in the 1990s.

The projection of soft power is a conscious, focused and highly prioritized effort by the Japanese government to exploit the country’s popularity among young people worldwide — multitudes of whom share a passion for Japanese fashions and fads — and to create a broader sympathetic image in the host country.

The effort is focused directly at young foreign nationals who have fallen in love with one or another of the cultural phenomena that originated in Japan. It could include classical interests such as Noh theater, the Japanese tea ceremony or haiku; or more modern forms of expression such as the films of Kurosawa or Kirano, fashion from Issei Miyaki or Kenzo, sushi and Japanese cuisine, and of course the world of electronics and computer games.

But in recent years the media have focused attention on the dominance of manga, anime and cosplay. Diplomats in business suits, including Seiichi Kondo, Japan’s past ambassador to...
Danish, are pushing these quintessentially youthful pursuits. “Personally, I prefer classical music and paintings, but I also like anime. Maybe not so much manga or cosplay, but I promote it if the Danes want it,” Kondo told the Danish daily newspaper Borsen.

For several years Kondo has been the Japanese Foreign Ministry’s undisputed expert on soft power. After two years in Denmark, he returned in 2010 to a senior post as “commissioner” at the Japanese government’s cultural agency. He is now responsible for heading Japan’s attempt to promote a more positive global perception of the country. “Art and culture play a vital role in globalization. It is a way to get your message across, an effective yet discreet way to create friends — opposite to the alarm and fear resulting from coercion,” Kondo said during a 2009 public lecture in Copenhagen.

“If you sneak a look into stores in China addressing young geeky manga or anime fans, you will see that the shelves are crammed with every imaginable Japanese anime character,” said former foreign minister Taro Aso in a 2006 speech. “What kind of picture comes into your mind when you hear the name of Japan? Is it a bright and positive image? Hot! Cool? The more positive the image that comes to mind, the easier it will be in the long term for Japan to have its views conveyed.”

THE GROWTH OF COOL JAPAN

Today this speech is seen as the unofficial kickoff for the Cool Japan campaign. While Japan has always used public funds to promote its highbrow culture, now the government wants to do the same with its noisy pop culture. Since 2005, it has sponsored an annual competition for cosplay fans from around the world in Japan. Since 2007, it has also awarded annual international prizes for the best manga artists worldwide.

Rumi Sakamoto, a lecturer in Japanese at the University of Auckland and an expert on comics and Japanese pop culture, sees the thread going back to prime minister Junichiro Koizumi’s 2001-2006 administration. “Since Mr. Koizumi and Mr. Aso, the Japanese government has been consciously promoting Japanese pop culture,” says Sakamoto. “It is taken seriously. At a time of economic recession, ‘culture’ and ‘Cool Japan’ are given the status of a new hope for Japan’s influence overseas.”

This effort by the Japanese is not only the expression of a struggle for a better global image. It is also an effort to provide concrete short-term benefits through the sale of cultural products and increased tourism. “If you look at some governmental documents that discuss ‘cultural diplomacy,’ it is clear that this is conceived in terms of economic gain via export as well as the improvement of the image of Japan by ‘branding’ the nation,” Sakamoto says.

“Yes, diplomacy is more active, and industries that produce the products can get help easier,” says Marie Roesgaard, an associate professor from the University of Copenhagen. “But it is the industry, and the consumers, who are the drivers. The state is merely trying to hang on and exploit something that is very visible, but difficult to translate into real influence in other spheres.”

MANGA SPREADS ACROSS ASIA

As an example, the comics sold in Taiwanese shops and markets may be designed and produced in Taiwan, but the style is unmistakably Japanese in origin. “The shelves in Taiwanese bookstores are full of not only manga translated from Japanese but also locally produced manga and manuals with instructions in how you yourself can improve that special Japanese drawing style,” says journalist Peter Harmsen, Taipei bureau chief for Agence France-Presse. “It is soft power when it is most efficient — or depending on the viewpoint, most dangerous. Manga is well on its way to becoming a pan-Asian art form instead of something specifically Japanese.”

Every year since 2007, when the manga prize was first awarded, a Chinese citizen has always won, for instance. “It is not surprising that East Asians embrace Japanese pop culture more readily,” Harmsen said, pointing out that although the spoken languages differ from each other, the written languages have a common anchor in Chinese characters. “The Chinese characters are more than aesthetically neutral meaning-bearing units. They represent a special joint Asian calligraphic tradition that is still being kept alive in the region’s schools, which mixes text and image in a unique visual style, with manga representing a modern spin-off. Japanese pop culture is more effective in Asia than in Europe and the US because it makes use of a cultural or social framework of reference that the Japanese have in common with most neighboring peoples.”

COUNTERACTING THE KEMPETEI

The result, Harmsen says, is that Japan is portrayed in positive light among East Asia’s young in a way that contrasts sharply with the feelings of their parents and grandparents, who experienced the Japanese Imperial Army’s aggression during WWII. In evidence, Harmsen points to the fact that about 80,000 Chinese students are currently studying in Japan, accounting for more than half of all foreign students at Japanese universities. It is unlikely, he says, that the figure would be so high if the only source of knowledge on the part of young Chinese were the Chinese government, which still remains focused on the brutality inflicted on China by Japanese soldiers. “Japanese pop culture and the positive image of the country that it has helped to project has undoubtedly been a major factor behind the decision by many Chinese to study in Japan,” Harmsen argues.

Pop culture attracts not only young students, but also young Asian tourists to Japan, says the American writer and comic researcher Roland Kelts, author of the influential book Japanamerica. “The inventive, playful and interactive nature of Japanese pop cultural products — anime, manga, cosplay, games, fashion and so on — seduces younger generations of Asians. In particular, those who have no recollection of the atrocities of World War II, or even Japan’s postwar image as a rather dreary, conformist manufacturing hub, formerly labeled ‘Japan Inc.,’ with salarymen marching and doing calisthenics in lockstep,” Kelts says.

This popularity is almost exclusively among East Asia’s young. For many older Asians, pop culture is a negative force. “For every Asian enamored and entertained by these cultural products, there is probably another who finds such things to be rather infantile and frivolous and therefore unappealing,” wrote Peng Er Lam, a senior research fellow at National University of Singapore in a 2007 article in the magazine East Asia.

Such a sentiment strikes a chord with Jørgen Oerstrøm Moeller, a former Danish ambassador and current visiting scholar in Singapore, who still sees a strong antipathy towards Japan. “Even the younger generation in China and Korea are strongly anti-Japanese, and they associate it directly to the Second World War,” he says.

Rumi Sakamoto believes younger Asians can make clear distinctions: “I think younger people are increasingly accepting of Japan and its cultural influence. This does not mean that they are not critical of Japan and its past.” Young people can be quite sophisticated, he says. “They do
Japan’s ‘peace constitution’ still prevents it from becoming a military power of any significance.

Second, its still enormous economic weight has been heading downwards for 20 years. It is no wonder that Japan, in that situation, looks to its soft power.

Japan can succeed on “soft power” as long as it withdraws from the field of traditional hard power. Primarily, Japan’s “peace constitution” still prevents it from becoming a military power of any significance. Second, Japan’s still enormous economic weight has been heading downwards for 20 years. This only seems to get worse as a result of an aging population. These two factors combine to mean that Japan has less and less hard power in comparison with neighboring countries. It is no wonder that Japan, in that situation, looks to its soft power.

But soft power takes a very long time to consolidate. “In contrast to hard military and economic power, soft power moves at a snail’s pace,” Harmsen says. “Often it takes such a long time between cause and effect that it may be impossible to identify any direct link between the two. In this sense soft power is rather reminiscent of slowly acting traditional Chinese medicine, while political and economic power is like Western medicine, providing rapid results, but often with unfortunate side effects.”

SOFT POWER’S INDEPENDENT VALUE

The conclusion is that Japan is unlikely to replace its lost hard economic power by projecting soft power. These are two wholly different fields of battle. Soft power works — but at its own pace. It is no compensation for loss of traditional hard power, but it can have its own independent value. In the longer term, Japan’s talented pop-culture producers have given the country the opportunity to build a strong soft power position, which might strengthen the country’s image in both east and west. Japan knows better than any other nation how a warlike national image can disable foreign policy.

The Japanese Foreign Ministry has not overlooked this opportunity. “Japanese politicians obviously want to employ each available tool to further their political ambitions. But I always warn them against direct use of manga or anime or any other components of Japanese pop culture,” Ambassador Kondo said in 2009 during a radio interview. “If one’s soft power is strong enough, it will sooner or later have a positive influence, but we can never control it, and if you do try to control it, it can cause negative effects.”

In other words, soft power is essentially civil power based on volatile shifts in tastes and preferences among populations. Ultimately, the marketplace not the government determines how it will be projected and perceived.

Official Japan can try to connect to and stimulate these developments — which is obviously what it has been doing — and then hope that that works. The paradox is that while Japan’s reliance on soft power is prominent and sometimes controversial, back home in Japan it is quite uncontroversial. It is discussed very little — for the simple reason that everyone tacitly agrees. For some, the soft power offensive is an attractive alternative to becoming a more “normal” country in the military and security sense. With pacifism still strong in the Japanese population, it is a way to play a positive role on the world’s stage in a purely peaceful manner.

For others, it is a way to create new pride and confidence in confronting the world — as a step towards a showdown with the pacifist constitution and the humble post-war attitude the country has taken towards the world.

“Tokyo’s new emphasis on cultural diplomacy is agreeable to most Japanese across the ideological spectrum,” Peng Er Lam says. “To the left, a non-militaristic approach to international relations is desirable. To the right, it is great for the world to appreciate various aspects of Japanese culture. Simply put, there is a national consensus on the pursuit of soft power for different reasons.”

If Japanese politicians cannot manage and control the development of soft power, they cannot unfortunately easily spoil things for themselves, because war history still plays a role in modern East Asian power politics.

When Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in May 2007 came out with his volatile statement that there was no coercion involved when tens of thousands of Korean and Chinese women were forced to become prostitutes for Japanese soldiers during World War II, Japan’s biggest liberal newspaper Asahi Shinbun responded in an angry comment: “It takes months, even years, to build up the respect which creates soft power. And everything that has been won can be lost in an instant. When the prime minister and other senior politicians make provocative remarks that create distrust or anger, Japan might quickly lose its attraction to other countries.”

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