At the end of World War II, Japan faced the task not only of rebuilding a devastated country, but also of rebuilding its image in the world. Since then, Japan’s cultural and public diplomacy have gone through a complex evolution and adapted repeatedly to the country’s rapidly changing place in the world, writes former Japan Foundation President Kazuo Ogoura.

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IS generally believed to refer to a national government’s efforts to influence international opinion on its domestic or foreign policies through public relations activities or intellectual exchanges targeting the media or citizen groups. Public diplomacy is therefore not the same as cultural diplomacy, in that the former is always closely associated with a well-defined political objective and aimed at certain pre-determined goals, while the latter is not necessarily linked to a specific political objective. The two sometimes overlap, however, because public diplomacy can include efforts to improve the nation’s image by means of cultural activities.

In contrast to those nations that have maintained a more or less stable image in the international community, Japan has, over several decades, undergone a rather rapid transformation of its society and, as a result, its position in the international community. Accordingly, Japan’s public diplomacy has been closely linked with its cultural diplomacy because the country’s image in the international community has been closely bound up with Japan’s own cultural or national identity. Therefore, in my analysis below, I do not necessarily distinguish Japan’s public diplomacy from its cultural diplomacy.

**CHANGING BY THE DECADE**

In tracing the history of Japan’s cultural diplomacy, there are, roughly speaking, six phases corresponding to different decades: the 1950s to the 1960s; 1960s to the 1970s; 1970s to the 1980s; 1980s to the 1990s; 1990s to 2000; and the current phase. In each of these phases, one can observe and analyze the two aspects of Japan’s public diplomacy — namely, the motive or purpose of the activities and the agent or modality of these activities.

During the 1950s and early 1960s, the goal of Japanese cultural diplomacy was to transform the pre-war image of Japan as a militaristic country into a new image of Japan as a peaceful democracy. In other words, the effort to construct a peace-loving, democratic Japan was closely associated with the promotion of international cultural activities, through which Japan sought to establish a new national identity. In line with these developments, when engaging in cultural activities overseas, the Japanese government emphasized such traditions as the tea ceremony and *ikebana* (flower arrangement), with the intention that they would convey Japan’s serene, peace-loving nature to the rest of the world.

During this period, the overseas promotion of certain elements of traditional Japanese culture, particularly those related to the samurai spirit or feudal traditions, was discouraged. Likewise, until the early 1970s, Japanese language education abroad was not actively encouraged because many Japanese intellectuals, as well as citizens of former Japanese colonies in Korea and China, recalled Japan’s prewar efforts to propagate its language in Asia and still felt a connection between language promotion and imperial ambitions.

Japan’s cultural diplomacy entered a second stage in the late 1960s and early 1970s. During this period, particularly after the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, the emphasis shifted from projecting an image of a “peaceful Japan” to portraying an economically advanced Japan. This was partly in response to American and European reactions to Japan’s economic development, which began attracting international attention in the late 1950s and early 1960s. During this period, Japanese exporters encountered various obstacles, such as allegations of market disruption, dumping and other criticism. To counter such arguments, cultural diplomacy was mobilized to promote the idea that the Japanese economy was about to reach a new stage and to project the image of Japan as a technologically and economically advanced nation.

This trend was reflected in efforts to strengthen overseas cultural activities, most clearly manifested in attempts to consolidate Japan’s overseas cultural infrastructure. Notable examples include the opening of cultural and information centers attached to embassies, the establishment in 1962 of the Society for Teaching Japanese to Foreigners and the conclusion of a series of cultural exchange agreements with eight socialist countries between 1969 and 1979, beginning with Yugoslavia and ending with China. This period also witnessed the enthusiastic introduction of the Kabuki and Noh theater traditions internationally.

The establishment of the Japan Foundation in 1972 was further evidence of this positive cultural diplomacy. Created with an endowment of 5 billion yen (which was later increased to 50 billion yen), the foundation’s three major activities were assistance for Japanese language education abroad; cultural exchange, including exchanges among artists and musicians; and the encouragement of Japanese studies abroad.

The 1970s brought another shift in Japan’s
The latest phase in Japanese cultural diplomacy led to an innovative approach to international cultural exchanges, which is related to the concept of viewing national cultural traditions not as the property of a particular nation but as an asset or ‘public property’ for all mankind. Cultural diplomacy, this time in response to the rise in anti-Japanese sentiment in Asia, typified by the eruption of negative feelings in Southeast Asia against the perceived Japanese economic onslaught. Rapidly increasing economic dependence on Japan in terms of trade, investment and development assistance provoked a backlash in many parts of Asia.

Such criticism spurred Japan to strengthen its cultural activities in Asia. The establishment of Japan Foundation offices in most Southeast Asian countries was clear evidence of the new policy, which would later lead to the opening in 1990 of the Japan Foundation ASEAN Culture Center, a facility tasked with introducing the culture of ASEAN countries to Japan in order to enhance the Japanese public’s knowledge of and interest in Southeast Asia. It was also during this period that the Ohira school (named after the late Japanese Prime Minister Masayoshi Ohira) was established in China to promote Japanese studies, mainly from the standpoint of sharing Japan’s experiences of economic development for the benefit of China’s new policy of modernization.

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS AT HOME AND ABROAD
It is worth noting that Japan’s new, positive cultural diplomacy was partially motivated by a desire to change Japan’s own perception of itself. It was indeed during this period that the Japanese started to emphasize the concept of “internal internationalization,” which resulted in the nationwide call for Japan to become more “internationalized” by opening up culturally and intellectually to the world. This trend gave rise to the establishment by local governments of sections dealing with international exchange. The launch of the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme (JET Programme), in which hundreds of foreign language teachers and international exchange co-ordinators were invited to Japan each year, was a further attempt to internationalize Japan’s local communities.

The next stage in the evolution of Japan’s cultural diplomacy began in the late 1980s. As the Japanese economy matured and the country’s importance on the international stage increased, expectations grew for Japan to make more contributions as a responsible partner in the international community. Cultural diplomacy was perceived as one of the “three pillars” of Japan’s foreign policy — the first being the country’s contributions to peacekeeping operations or similar activities and the second being its official development assistance or economic aid policies.

The novel concept of “cultural co-operation” began to play a role in Japan’s cultural diplomacy during this period. Cultural co-operation encompassed such activities as helping developing countries to stage theatrical performances, providing them with lighting or recording equipment, furnishing showcases for museums and giving them technical assistance in arts management. It was in this spirit that Japan created a special fund within UNESCO in the early 1990s for the purpose of preserving the cultural heritage of developing countries.

One of the goals of Japan’s cultural diplomacy in the late 1980s and early 1990s was to counter the sense of threat felt by American and European businesses as Japan’s investment and export activities began having a global impact. Some “revisionist” American intellectuals advocated measures to ward off what they viewed as the Japanese “threat.” In order to alleviate these concerns, the Japanese government employed public diplomacy to emphasize its desire and willingness to form partnerships, particularly with other developed nations. This diplomatic campaign led to the establishment of the Center for Global Partnership (CGP) in 1991, with the goal of promoting new types of cultural and intellectual exchange with the United States. Supported by a 50 billion yen endowment, the CGP was intended to promote various programs that could be broadly categorized as the “global agenda.” Several programs were developed to promote intellectual dialogue between Japan and the US on issues of common interest, such as democratization in developing countries, environmental problems and infectious diseases. The CGP also sought to promote new types of citizen-to-citizen exchanges, such as contacts between non-governmental organizations in both countries.

SELLING POP CULTURE
In the late 1990s, Japan had once again to adapt its diplomacy to a new era as countries around the world began to experience waves of globalization. At the same time, a decade of slow economic growth and a ballooning fiscal deficit required Japan to find a new orientation for its cultural diplomacy. First, Japan was forced to redefine its own cultural identity in this globalized world. Having been more or less fully accepted as a responsible partner in the community of developed, democratic nations, Japan had to project an image of itself not as a newcomer to the developed nations’ club but as a truly responsible and mature partner.

This meant that instead of emphasizing the exotic aspects of Japanese culture, Japan had to present itself as a pioneer of postmodern culture. Anime animation, manga comics, fashion, pop music, cuisine and novels from young writers all began to occupy an important role in Japan’s international cultural activities. Most of these activities, however, are commercial in nature, so Japan’s cultural diplomacy became closely associated with its trade policy, such as the protection of intellectual property rights or participation in international film festivals and book fairs. This new direction was best symbolized by the spread of the “content industry,” which refers to music, anime, film, fashion and related service industries.

The new trend is also associated with the growing interdependence and development of common cultural perceptions among young people in East Asia, particularly Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and coastal China, as evidenced by the popularity of Korean TV dramas in Japan and China and by the widespread admiration for Japanese pop music in South Korea and China.

It is in this context that the Japan-Korea-China tripartite forum on cultural exchanges was created and joint endeavors or projects among the three nations have been encouraged. Another phenomenon in East Asia is the rise of nationalism in South Korea and China (at least as viewed from Japan). National pride in achieving economic progress, coupled with the historical sense of having been exploited by colonial powers, has given rise to increasingly assertive nationalism in South Korea and China, which is sometimes directed at Japan because of both countries’ wartime and colonial experiences with Japan.
AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH
These developments prompted several new directions in Japanese cultural and public diplomacy. In China, for instance, the Japan Foundation around 2005 started creating centers for face-to-face exchanges, introducing contemporary Japanese culture to young Chinese. And in South Korea, some voluntary organizations, with the support of the government, organized matsuri (carnival-type citizens’ festivals) in Seoul, enabling Korean and Japanese citizens to share the experience of joining in the same cultural event, thereby consolidating a shared sense of belonging to the same community.

This latest phase further led to an innovative approach to international cultural exchanges, which is related to the concept of viewing national cultural traditions not as the property of a particular nation but as an asset or “public property” for all mankind. In line with this new approach, Japan has begun to harness cultural exchange as a means of building peace. This new concept of peace-building through cultural exchange demonstrates the multi-functional nature of cultural diplomacy. Stimulating the renaissance of local cultural traditions damaged through internal conflicts and helping ethnic groups with different cultural backgrounds to achieve peaceful co-existence are among the diverse goals now pursued through Japan’s international cultural exchanges.

One of the concrete applications of this new approach was witnessed during the Iraq War. When Japan’s cooperation with the US threatened to tarnish Japan’s image in the Middle East, Japan decided to pursue “soft power” diplomacy in the cultural domain in order to mitigate the damage. Examples of this effort to maintain a positive image of Japan in the Arab world include the distribution of picture books, written by a member of the Imperial Family of Japan, to elementary-school children in the region where the Self-Defense Forces were stationed; the invitation to Japan of the Iraqi national football team; and the broadcasting on Iraqi TV of the football-themed Japanese anime Captain Tsubasa.

Another example can be found in the case of the “Kashmir Peace Picture Books.” In February 2004, the International Center for Literacy and Culture, funded by the Japan Foundation, organized workshops in Kathmandu for writers, painters, editors and child education experts from both India and Pakistan, and they were asked to create picture books that could be read by children from both sides of the conflict-ridden area of Kashmir.

CONFLUENCE AND A SEARCH FOR FOCUS
All of these currents and trends in Japanese public diplomacy since the end of World War II still exist manifestly or invisibly, and to varying degrees, in contemporary Japanese public diplomacy. Ikebana and tea ceremonies, post-modern features of Japan coupled with age-old traditions of Noh or Kabuki theater, intellectual exchanges based on the concept of a global agenda and innovative ideas of cultural activities for peace-building—all these elements are mingled with each other in present-day Japanese cultural and public diplomacy. Such a mixture is a strong point of Japan’s public diplomacy but it also harbors a weak point, namely, the lack of a clear focus. This is partly related to a shortage of funds from both government sources and private non-profit organizations, but it is also related to the problem of redefining Japan’s role in the international community—something that the Japanese themselves have not yet fully determined in today’s world, particularly at a time when East Asia’s responsibilities and interdependence have been remarkably on the rise.

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