

META-NARRATIVES OF JAPANESE POPULAR CULTURE AND OF JAPAN IN DIFFERENT REGIONAL CONTEXTS: PERSPECTIVES FROM EAST ASIA, WESTERN EUROPE, AND THE MIDDLE EAST

Nissim Otmazgin
Department of East Asian Studies
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Keywords: popular culture, Japan, state image, cultural consumption.

Pagrindinės sąvokos: populiarioji kultūra, Japonija, valstybės įvaizdis, kultūrinis vartojimas.

Introduction: Japan's New Global Cultural Presence

It is no exaggeration to say that the world's interest in and admiration of Japanese popular culture has grown dramatically over the past two decades. The reach of Japan's popular culture extends far beyond the island nation's borders; keen interest in Japanese popular culture commodities, from manga and anime to fashion, design, video games, and sushi, is evident not just in neighboring countries, but also in North America, Europe, South America, and the Middle East. Unlike the heydays of the Japanese economy in the 1980s, when Japanese management systems and corporate culture were extensively studied and emulated abroad, these days students of Japan are more interested in Japanese contemporary culture and lifestyle.

The increasing global presence of Japanese contemporary culture is not only interesting from cultural and artistic points of view, but also

due to its impact on the way Japan is being appropriated and perceived abroad. Along with the consumption of cultural commodities, the flow of Japanese contemporary culture has introduced new perceptions of “Japan” as being a cultural power and not only an economic or industrial one. This has stimulated further interest in Japan and the Japanese language, which may have an impact on the influx of tourists into Japan. The increase in the number of students learning Japanese is one indication of the fascination for Japan’s pop culture. According to the Japan Foundation (2010), the number of people studying the Japanese language outside of Japan has increased from 127,161 in 1979 to 3,651,232 in 2009, due to the increased consumption of manga and anime by young audiences abroad.

The majority of literature on Japanese popular culture abroad comes from the field of anthropology and media cultural studies. These have typically employed an interpretive approach focusing on the content and image of certain cultural products or analyzing the practice and consumption of Japanese culture among certain communities (Otmazgin 2008). For example, there are studies that focus on the reception of Japanese TV drama among young people in Taiwan, the practice of “cosplay” among young girls in Mexico city, or the imitation of a J-pop band in Hong Kong. These examples are important as they provide a rich testimony to the practice and “meaning” of popular culture.

In the field of international relations, a few theories have addressed the possible political, economic, and diplomatic impacts of cultural exports that derive from popular culture. The most vigorously publicized is the “soft power” argument, which was initially coined by Joseph Nye (1990; 2004) to describe the way a country can use its culture and ideals to fascinate other societies, rather than only intimidating them with its military and economic power. In recent years, the soft power argument has grown fashionable among Japanese politicians, bureaucrats, and journalists as a means to boost Japan’s image abroad and kick-start its ailing economy (Otmazgin and Ben-Ari 2012). The notion of the “brand state,” coined by Peter van Ham (2001), is another attempt to conceptualize the relations between the export of cultural products and state image. According to him, people do not only consume a product, they also acquire a lifestyle, an attitude, and often a sense of respect associated with the product and with the country that produces it. For this reason, van Ham calls upon states to use PR-like methods to increase the sales of their products by branding themselves in other countries. Another theory worth mentioning, although it is less

popular these days, is the “cultural imperialism” theory. Unlike “soft power” and “brand state,” which see opportunities in cultural export, the cultural imperialism argument warns against the harmful effects brought about by the massive import of foreign cultures “from the West to the rest” and the consequential destruction of local cultures and traditions (for example, Robertson 1991; Tomlinson 1999; Herman and McChesney 1997).

The above theories have been subject to vast criticism (dealt with extensively in Otmazgin 2013). Here I will only mention one important aspect that I think is missing: these theories usually look at a certain aspect of the story (diplomatic/economic/cultural) but do not provide an adequate conceptualization of the images invigorated by the consumption of popular culture and the way consumers think about and imagine the producing state. While these theories assume that there is an explicit message embedded in popular culture, they tend to overlook the inclusive way in which people consume and interpret popular culture and, more generally, ignore the diversification of perceptions and opinions encouraged by popular culture consumption in different places.

This study examines the way Japanese popular culture has been accepted and appropriated abroad, and the way it has had an impact on the image of Japan, based on insights from three different regional contexts. Specifically, the questions this investigation attempts to address are: (1) What can we learn from different regions on the way narratives, images, and stereotypes of Japan are being created and reproduced?; (2) What is the relationship between contemporary Japanese popular culture and an interest in Japan (including Japanese studies)? And (3) What could be the possible long-term political and social implications for the transnational exposure to the intensive flow of popular culture?

This study is based on consumers’ surveys relating to Japanese popular culture consumption in Hong Kong, Bangkok, and Seoul (based on Otmazgin survey, 2004-2005), the manga market in France and Italy (Boussoui and Pellitteri survey, 2006-2007), and anime consumption and fandom in Israel (Daliot-Bul and Goldstein-Gideoni survey, 2006). Looking at these three seemingly different regions—East Asia, Western Europe, and the Middle East—allows us to examine how Japanese contemporary culture is being received both within and outside the geographically- and culturally-proximate markets of Asia and outside the major economic markets of North America.

In what follows, I discuss the appreciation of Japan’s popular culture and

Japan in general, expressed in each of the surveys. The conclusion discusses the similarities arising from the three regions and proposes consideration of popular culture as a mode of language made up of sounds, images, and texts, which can be “spoken” by consumers of different nationalities.

Images of Japan in East Asia

In the East and Southeast Asian market (hereafter “East Asia”), the expansion of Japanese popular culture started earlier than in other regions and, to date, has been more successful there (Otmazgin 2013). The wide proliferation of Japanese contemporary culture is expressed both in the intensive dissemination of Japanese popular culture commodities, as well as in the variety of products offered. Only in the cultural geography of East Asia, especially in cities, is a wider variety of Japanese popular culture products available, which are usually not offered outside Japan, such as Japanese TV dramas and pop music. For example, if you visit any big music shop in East Asia, you can most probably find a wide repertoire of Japanese music albums, usually found only in Japan, while in other parts of the world Japanese music is a small niche categorized under “world music.”

I conducted a detailed questionnaire survey with 239 undergraduate university students in the social sciences in Hong Kong (June 2004), Bangkok (February 2005), and Seoul (April 2005).¹ Hong Kong, Bangkok, and Seoul were chosen as representative of today’s East Asian metropolitans. These cities are major junctions where a considerable amount of wealth is concentrated, a sizable middle-class consumer society has evolved, and a diverse flow of popular culture constantly overlaps with consumerism. However, given the number of respondents, it is obviously not possible to make a statistical generalization for the vast East Asian region. Instead, the attempt was to provide insights into the way youngsters in urban East Asia appreciate and relate to Japan through popular culture.

The questionnaire survey included 19 open questions and two multiple-choice parts. In the first part of the survey, the respondents were asked about their general cultural consumption preferences using questions such as: “What kind of music do you listen to?”; “What kind of television programs do you watch?”; and “What kind of films do you watch?” The second part

¹ The results of this survey were published in Otmazgin 2012.

included specific questions about Japanese popular culture with questions such as: “Do you watch Japanese television programs?”; “If yes, what kind of programs and how often?”; and “Do you listen to Japanese music?” In the third part, there were various questions regarding their attitude towards Japan with questions such as: “How are Japanese popular culture products different from American, Chinese, or Korean popular culture products?”; “What do you think of Japan?”; “What kind of country is it?”; and “What do you think of Japanese people?”

The central finding, which is relevant for our discussion, is that the exposure to popular culture disseminates new favorable images, which modify the way Japan has so far been perceived. Japanese popular culture products have achieved a considerably high level of appreciation due to their “high quality” and advanced “artistic level.” Japanese music, television dramas, and anime were repeatedly described as “creative,” “interesting,” “funny,” “high quality,” “artistically stimulus [sic],” and “special.” In the questionnaires, the majority of respondents described Japan as a “developed,” “advanced,” and “modern” country. The exposure and consumption of Japanese popular culture has additionally incited the interest of the young interviewees in other aspects of Japan. Many of the interviewees said they like Japanese food and almost all said they would like to visit Japan.

This new image of Japan is especially important in the case of Seoul, where the attitude to Japan was mixed. Japan was described in both positive and negative terms. One university student explained, “most of the Japanese people are kind, but toward their government I am very negative...their policy towards Korea is very bad.” Another revealed, “I like Japanese culture and have Japanese friends but I hate their right-wing government!”; with her friend elaborating, “I like their fashion, music, and movies, but sometimes they make me mad because of the way they treat history.”

The negative responses toward Japan coming from Seoul probably emanates from the past—36 years of Japanese colonial control, which has left plenty of bitter memories that still play a role in Japanese-Korean bilateral relations. At the same time, the responses clearly indicate that there is a fundamental differentiation between the way these students relate to the Japanese state on the one hand, and their appreciation of aspects of Japanese society and culture on the other. There is a juxtaposition of positive and negative attitudes towards Japan, which is expressed by the same people regarding different issues. This implies that youngsters in places like Seoul are able to harbor mixed feelings of both anger and resentment toward

Japan while simultaneously liking its culture and expressing admiration towards its achievements.

Manga Fans in Western Europe

Similar to East Asia, in recent years, Japanese popular culture has started paving inroads to European markets with anime and manga at the forefront. The spread of Japanese popular culture products in European markets should be seen as part of a global dynamic whereby cultural flows reach consumers of other countries rapidly, helped by the mediation of cultural agents, entrepreneurs, and groups of dedicated fans. The success of some Japanese cultural products in Europe is also due to the fact that they introduce a dramatically different set of narratives and images, which are made available at affordable prices. According to Jean-Marie Bouissou (2012: 45), the success of Japanese cultural goods in France is due not only to the highly interesting images they present but also their price. According to him, the fact that a 250-page manga book costs about seven euros compared to up to 12 euros for a 46- or 64-page album of *Bande Dessinée* (French comics) explains, to a great extent, any soft power that Japan may possibly wield in France.

Between 2006 and 2007, Bouissou et al. conducted a detailed survey among 1,200 manga fans in their early 20s in France, Italy, Germany, and Switzerland. The survey, called Manga Network, included a 15-page questionnaire of 60 questions covering social, cultural, psychological, and economic aspects of fans' practices.² The survey inquires as to the reasons Europeans are interested in manga and examines the way manga has changed the image of Japan among readers.

The survey showed that the majority of respondents, who knew very little or nothing at all about Japan before they were exposed to manga, have become much more interested in Japan. A few have since become actively involved in invigorating interest in contemporary Japanese culture by convincing their friends to read manga, talking about it in their social

² This study was based on a collective work of the Manga Network (<http://www.ceri-sciencespo.com/themes/manga/index.php>), a study group organized by Jean-Marie Bouissou (Sciences Po), Bernd Dolle-Weinkauff (Goethe University), Marco Pellitteri (London Metropolitan University), and Ariane Beldi (University of Geneva). There were 370 respondents from France, 340 from Germany, 420 from Italy, and 77 from Switzerland. For a detailed summary of the findings see (Bouissou 2012: 48-52).

circles, and exchanging manga books with friends. The majority of readers also expressed interest in learning Japanese (two-thirds), traveling to the country (three-quarters), meeting Japanese people and learning more about Japan (half), and some even expressed a wish to find a job related to Japan (15 percent). This indicates that readers have developed a generally more positive view of Japan than non-readers.

According to Bouissou (2012: 51), many manga readers have acquired “a new unexpected image of Japan,” which is a positive one. Similar to East Asia, in the Bouissou et al. survey, Japan was described as “exciting,” “cool,” “fun,” and “enthraling.” The survey clearly shows that the exposure and consumption of popular culture invigorates positive feelings and increases interest in the country in a generally positive way. However, the survey also found that old stereotypes of Japan, such as the traditional image of a society of hard-working people or popular images of geisha, samurai, sushi, and Mt. Fuji have not been completely eliminated. The descriptions of Japan were rather a mix of old and new perceptions, both positive and negative, and sometimes contradictory. Japan was described as “harmonious and consensual,” “dynamic,” “post-modern,” “violent,” “full of contradictions,” “repressed,” “full of exuberance and fantasy,” and “full of inner peace.” For this reason, we can conclude that manga reading habits do not completely diminish old stereotypes about Japan but rather build a new layer of images and sensibilities toward the country.

Cool Japan in Israel

The Israeli case is somehow different from the other cases—Israel being a small market (population of 7.5 million) and a country that does not have a long historical and cultural connection with Japan. Another important aspect is that many of the perceptions of “Japan” that surfaced in Israel did not come directly from Japan but were usually mediated through the United States. Many of the fans in Israel initially became interested in Japanese popular culture through American connections—Internet forums and participation in anime gatherings in the United States, rather than direct communication with Japan. A final point which may be relevant to our discussion is that Israel as a political and cultural entity has had no part in the historical-cultural construction of discourses which shaped the relations between the West and the Orient. The orientalist image of Japan in

Israel came only later, on the waves of American popular culture, especially Hollywood movies, and was then reproduced by the Israeli media (Daliot-Bul and Goldstein-Gidoni 2010).

The popular interest in Japanese culture in Israel has been growing since the late 1980s and has been increasing over the past two decades (Goldstein-Gideoni 2003). The admiration for the Japanese economy during its heyday in the 1980s has slowly been replaced by a growing interest in anime and manga among the younger generations and an appreciation of Japanese architecture and aesthetics by the older generations. The past 20 years has also seen an influx of Israeli tourists to Japan and the establishment of new Japanese programs and departments in Israeli universities. At present, three major universities (the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv University, and Haifa University) offer comprehensive BA and MA programs in Japanese Studies, to approximately 250 students.

The media coverage on Japan, for its part, has, since the late 1990s, depicted the country as a cool, yet very weird place, which produces futuristic lifestyles, and of people obsessed with a consumer fetish for gadgets, techno-futurist products, and fashion. The depiction of Japan in the Israeli media is a mixture of admiration and ridicule (such as the technologically devised toilet seats, which are both admirable from a technological point of view but are also the target of ridicule; or Japanese street fashion, which is “exaggerated, tasteful, daring, creative, and humorous” (Daliot-Bul 2007: 11)). The result is that in recent years, Israel has become a highly receptive market for Japanese goods, such as anime for kids and adults, video games, movies (especially those of Kitano Takeshi), Murakami’s novels, and countless sushi restaurants (Ibid: 22).

Daliot-Bul and Goldstein-Gideoni’s survey (2010) focuses on the emergence of a community of Israeli fans of media-centered Japanese popular culture. Based on in-depth interviews and participation in fan forums, they argue that among Israeli fans, the Japanese “Other” is reproduced as a stylistic point of reference. Empowered by globalization, the Japanese Other is being maintained and used as a tool for cultivating a “playful” sense of identity. In their interviews, fans expressed a large degree of fascination over Japanese popular culture, which introduces a refreshing and new set of images.

Below are three quotations which represent the emerging image of Japan among Israeli fans. Yael is a 23-year-old female Japanese Studies student and a fervent “cosplayer,” as well as J-pop enthusiast:

Take, for example, Arashi [a J-pop band]; their music is interesting but so is everything beyond the music. Everything *they do*...their interactions [on TV shows] with each other or with guests.... They are also something of comedians, kind of actors.... They make television shows, concerts, television dramas, and theatrical plays. When you are a fan of a J-pop band, you actually *live* it every day. There is always something to download, everyday something to watch (Ibid: 22).

At the same time, it is exactly the synchronization of “old” and “new” perceptions of Japan which extract much attention. Tomer (male) explains the “Japaneseness” of Japanese popular culture:

Many of the elements that together produce the charm of anime and manga are things derived from Japanese culture. Since they are written by Japanese artists, a lot of anime and manga have crazy references to Japanese culture—to *yukata* [the casual Japanese summer kimono], *hanami* [flower viewing], festivals. Thinking about it, the music in anime is ultimately also part of Japanese culture and is not really “anime” or “manga.” (Ibid: 25).

Another fervent male fan went even further to suggest that this interconnectedness of genres and artists in fact dictates the manner of fandom-ship:

It is impossible to separate between bands, anime, manga, computer games, and the rest. If, for example, you like a certain actor for the way he did the dubbing of an anime—and I am personally a huge fan of certain voice actors—you soon realize that he is also doing video games, movies, OVAs, and that he is also in a band...and then you realize that the other band members are also into voice acting or that they are singing a major anime theme song, which has become a hit.... So you really *cannot stay* in just one area (Ibid: 23).

The exposure and consumption of Japanese pop culture, according to the findings of Daliot-Bul and Goldstein-Gideoni (2010), has been encouraging a sense of sophisticated cosmopolitanism they call “neo-cosmopolitanism,” which enables fans to forge new fluid identities of their own. Consuming Japanese popular culture makes them feel as if they are part of a transnational community, where “Israeli fans see themselves as performing on a par with other communities around the world; their main groups of reference are located in the United States and Japan.” Curiously, these images of Japan do not have to be genuine or “real”—it’s the notion of playfulness and the enjoyment of them which is important.

Conclusion: Popular Culture and the Changing Image of Japan

The surveys examined suggest that the consumption of popular culture has an impact on the way Japan is being perceived by fans. In East Asia, Japanese popular culture has created a more mixed impression of Japan—in contrast to the black and white depiction of Japan as being “good” or “bad,” which was prevalent in the post-World War II period. This is especially noteworthy given Japan’s colonial past in the region and the occasional skirmishes between Japan and some of its neighbors over historical and territorial disputes. In Western Europe as well, popular culture has created a new notion of Japan as a fascinating, dynamic, and interesting country—combined with the old oriental images of Japan, which continue to exist. This new image and its sensibilities do not completely erase other impressions and stereotypes but, nonetheless, add a new layer and promote the notion of Japan being an exciting country with a bubbling youth culture. And in Israel, although Daliot-Bul and Goldstein-Gideon’s survey does not address this explicitly, it seems that the consumption of Japanese popular culture creates a sense of affinity and is generally a positive process—although images and perceptions of Japan are delivered through American mediation.

Does popular culture evoke an emotional bond with Japan? I think that the meta-narratives arising from the three surveys suggest that the answer to this question is positive. The consumption of popular culture encourages individuals to peruse their own personal interests associated with Japan and possibly nurtures sympathy towards the country. However, while popular culture seems to evoke an emotional bond and sometimes an affinity among consumers, we should be careful in our evaluation of the long-term political consequences these processes entail. On an individual level, pop culture can serve as “entrance points” for people (especially fans) to become interested in Japan. However, it is not yet clear if having a “good image” abroad is more effective for a country than being perceived as having strong military and economic resources (Press Barnathan 2012). Moreover, a good image of certain parts of the country (e.g. its culture) does not mean that people will get to like the country as a whole. As seen in the Korean case, the students surveyed liked Japanese popular culture but were overwhelmingly critical of the Japanese state and its treatment of history. In other words, the consumption of Japan’s popular culture encourages people across the world to develop a positive interest in its contemporary culture and society, but

this does not translate into a confirmation of support nor does it provide Japan with any meaningful “power” in the sense of authority or control.

I propose viewing popular culture as a form of language made up of sounds, pictures, and texts, which is “spoken” by consumers. For comparison, think about the fact that we usually speak English at international academic conferences, although this may not be our native language. We do this because speaking a common language allows us to communicate, exchange views, be open to new ideas, and perhaps make new friends. The same can be said about popular culture—if people from different countries share an interest in manga or have watched Japanese anime throughout their childhood they potentially possess the ability to “speak” with other people who share the same popular culture preferences. Perhaps they will not become good friends, but at least they will have something to talk about and be able to exchange views.

References

- Press-Barnathan, G. 2012. Does Popular Culture Matter to International Relations Scholars? Possible Links and Methodological Challenges. In Otmazgin Nissim and Ben-Ari Eyal (Eds.), *Popular Culture and the State in East and Southeast Asia* (pp. 29-45). London: Routledge.
- Boussoui, J.-M. 2012. Popular Culture as a Tool for Soft Power: Myth or Reality? Manga in Four European Countries. In Otmazgin Nissim and Ben-Ari Eyal (Eds.), *Popular Culture and the State in East and Southeast Asia* (pp. 46-64). London: Routledge.
- Daliot-Bul, M. 2007. Eroticism, Grotesqueness, and Non-Sense: Twenty-First Century Cultural Imagery of Japan in the Israeli Media and Popular Culture. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*. 28 (2): 173-191.
- Daliot-Bul, M. and Goldstein-Gidoni, O. 2010. On Cultural Otherness in the Era of Globalization 3.0: The New Israeli Cosmopolitans and Japan. *Encounters*. 3: 163-193.
- Goldstein-Gidoni, O. 2003. Producers of ‘Japan’ in Israel: Cultural Appropriation in a Non-colonial Context. *Ethnos*. 65 (3): 365-390.
- Herman, E. S. and McChesney, A. 1997. *The Global Media*. London: Cassell.
- Japan Foundation. 2010. Japanese-Language Education Overseas Today. Available at http://www.jpf.go.jp/e/japanese/survey/result/dl/2009/2009_01.pdf, accessed on December 22, 2012.
- Nye, S. J. Jr. 2004. “Nihon no Sofuto Pawa- Sono Genkai to Kanousei” [Japan’s Soft Power: Its Limits and Possibilities]. *Gaiko Foramu*. June.
- . 1990. Soft Power. *Foreign Policy*. 80 (Fall):153-170.
- Otmazgin, N. 2013. *Regionalizing Culture: The Political Economy of Japanese Popular Culture in Asia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, forthcoming.
- . 2012. Japan Imagined: Popular Culture, Soft Power, and Japan’s Changing Image in Northeast and Southeast Asia. *Contemporary Japan*. 24 (1): 1-19.

- . 2008. Japanese Popular Culture in East and Southeast Asia: A Time for a Regional Paradigm? *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*. February 8, ID 2660.
- Otmazgin, N. and Ben-Ari, E. 2012. Cultural Industries and the State in East and Southeast Asia. In Otmazgin Nissim and Ben-Ari Eyal (Eds.) *Popular Culture and the State in East and Southeast Asia* (pp. 3-26). London: Routledge.
- Robertson, R. 1991. Social Theory, Cultural Relativity and the Problem of Globality. In A. King (Ed.), *Cultural Globalization and World Systems*. London: Macmillan.
- Tomlinson, J. 1999. *Globalization and Culture*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Van Ham, P. 2001. The Rise of the Brand State. *Foreign Affairs*. October 10.

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to conceptualize the relationship between the transnational dissemination and consumption of popular culture and state image through a focus on the acceptance of Japanese popular culture in different regional contexts. Specifically, this research builds on the work of surveys conducted in East Asia, Western Europe, and the Middle East comprising: 1) a questionnaire survey conducted among undergraduate university students in Seoul, Hong Kong, and Bangkok; 2) an online questionnaire survey conducted among manga fans in their 20s in France, Germany, and Italy; and 3) an ethnographic study and in-depth interviews conducted among fans of Japanese pop culture in Israel. Rather than comparing these three surveys in detail, the purpose of this study is to examine the meta-narratives they offer in relation to the way popular culture shapes Japan's image in the world.

Santrauka

Šios straipsnio tikslas yra suvokti transnacionalinės sklaidos ir populiariosios kultūros bei valstybės įvaizdžio santykį, pabrėžiant Japonijos populiariosios kultūros pripažinimą skirtingame regioniniame kontekste. Tiksliau kalbant, ši studija paremta tyrimais, atliktais Rytų Azijoje, Vakarų Europoje ir Vidurio Rytuose, kurie susideda iš: 1) bakalauro studentų Seule, Honkonge ir Bankoke klausimyno analizės; 2) interaktyvių interneto klausimynų, pateiktų jauniems komiksų (*manga*) fanams Prancūzijoje, Vokietijoje ir Italijoje, analizės; 3) etnografinio tyrimo bei giluminių interviu, kurie buvo daryti su Japonijos populiariosios kultūros fanais Izraelyje.

Šio straipsnio tikslas yra labiau ne šių trijų tyrimų detalus palyginimas, o populiariosios kultūros formuojamo Japonijos įvaizdžio pasaulyje, pateikiamo tyrimų naratyvuose, nagrinėjimas.