An exploration of Japan's soft power

A case study about Japan's use of manga and anime
as a means of cultural diplomacy with reference to Germany

The essence of diplomacy lies in the exchange of information and ideas between nations in order to persuade each other of one's aims. According to Joseph Nye (2004), this persuasion can be carried out in different ways – by applying either hard, soft or smart power. Nye uses the term hard power to describe coercion by military strength or economic incentives, whereas soft power draws on language, culture, religion, science and technology that convince others because of their attraction[1]. But because soft power needs hard power to exist, it is the combination of the two that result in a state's smart power (Fulbright/ CULCON Joint Symposium, 2009, p.3). With regard to cultural diplomacy, it is first and foremost soft power that determines its success. Cultural diplomacy is defined as "the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples" and therefore soft power is crucial "to foster mutual understanding" (Cummings, 2003, p.1).

This case study will examine cultural diplomacy in the context of Japan. It will examine Japan's use of soft power after World War II with a focus on manga and anime as tools to promote itself abroad. So as to illustrate the matters discussed, reference will be made to their recent success in Germany, which is about to celebrate the 150th anniversary of its bilateral relations with Japan[2]. Finally, it will briefly assess the effectiveness of soft power when using manga and anime and it will indicate options for its future development.

In order to understand the concept of cultural diplomacy in general, it is necessary to identify the resources of soft power as has been done by Professor Joseph S. Nye Junior. According to him, there are three different resources that can be distinguished: (1) culture and whether it is attractive to others, (2) values and whether the country lives up to them and (3) policies and whether they are regarded as legitimate in the eyes of others[3]. Regarding these three, Japan is considered to have high potential for exercising soft power. This is due, not only to the global appeal of its traditional and especially of its popular culture, but also many of its values, including the fact that Japan has proven to be a stable democracy and most of its policies find international support. As Japan's soft power assets are linked to its resources of hard power, we will first examine the latter. This circumstance becomes most visible when looking at its military power. Japan does not have an army like other states but it employs so-called "Self-Defence Forces" that were established after the Second World War. These are significantly limited by Article 9 of the Japanese constitution, which announces the rejection of settling international disputes by the use of force. In summary, this means that Japan "lacks the will and capability to exercise 'hard power'" (Lam, 2007, p.354). The emphasis on pacifism has found great international support and has contributed positively to the recognition of Japan as a peaceful country like Japan is seen today. However, 2004 proved a turning point. For the very first time, Japan deployed its Self-Defence Forces without a UN agreement and sent them to Iraq in order to prove its loyalty to the United States[4]. Many Japanese people felt that this war was in contrast to not only their values but also their constitution[5]. Hence, when protesting against the government's decision, many Japanese people confirmed their pacifist values, which constitute a main resource of Japanese soft power (Fulbright/ CULCON Joint Symposium, 2009, p. 3).

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[1] (Nye, 2004, http://hbswk.hbs.edu/archive/4290.html)

[2] (German Foreign Ministry, May 2010, http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/diplo/en/Laenderinformationen/01-Laender/Japan.html)

[3] (Nye, 2009, http://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/index.php?en_culturaldiplomacy)

[4] (wordiQ.com, 2010, http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Japan_Self-Defence_Forces)

[5] (Preble, 2006, http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=8791)

After decades of having focused on military power, the defeat of Japan in World War II brought about a change, shifting attention towards economic development. Consequently, this made Japan "the most industrialized country in Asia and the second largest economy in the world" (Fulbright/ CULCON Joint Symposium, 2009, p.2/3). Nevertheless, Japan's economic power is found to be in decline. At the beginning of the 1990s, its 'bubble economy' based on the inflation of real estate and stock prices finally burst[6]. It was followed by the negative consequences of the global financial crisis and, if you believe current news coverage on the Japanese bond market, the economy is very likely to be in distress again soon[7]. This means that Japanese cultural diplomacy is slowly losing the power it could draw from Japan's superior economic performance. In addition, it has been mentioned that Japan has cut back on its public diplomacy budget for the last eight years and if the Japanese government wishes to compensate for this loss, the private sector will need to take the initiative, (Fulbright/ CULCON Summit, 2009, p. 5).

Having found many negative developments with regard to Japanese hard power, the Japanese government decided to increasingly base its cultural diplomacy on soft power. Manga and anime are omnipresent in the everyday life of Japanese people and have become one of Japan's main products of cultural export. Although this seems to suggest that foreigners easily understand manga and anime and consequently that knowledge about Japanese culture is spread quickly, various peculiarities and cultural differences actually hinder the effectiveness of manga and anime as a tool for cultural diplomacy.

The word "manga" stems from the Japanese words "man" for spontaneous and "ga" for picture. In Japan, every sort of comic is referred to as manga, regardless of its origin. But in Western countries like Germany "manga" specifically describes the comic art originated from Japan. "Anime" in turn, which describes films that are made in the same style as the manga books, comes from the English word "animated". Both are much more important for Japanese culture than Western societies would consider comics. In Japan, the interest in manga is spread throughout all social stratums and all groups of professions. Even cookery books use manga to illustrate instructions[8]. Therefore, manga can be used to deal with topics that are specific to their target readership. In the beginning, Western publishers ignored this situation and did not distinguish between age groups. Thus, many parents were shocked by the material covered in manga or anime and considered them to be unsuitable for their children[9].

Generally, manga and anime characters are characterised by their big eyes, coloured hair and caricatured body. All these elements express meanings that tend only to be recognized by Japanese people. For example, the color of a person's hair can tell you about his or her personality (Ossmann, 2004, p. 36). In contrast to the Western comic culture, manga in Japan are black-and-white prints on cheap paper because they are thrown away once they have been read. Recurring themes are the everyday life of Japanese youth, friendship, first love, integration of magic and the battle against supernatural, evil powers as well as a general love for action[10]. They are determined by emotions, therefore, it is typical to find that heroes have weaknesses and villains act out of reasons that can be comprehended[11]. The story line is different as well. Whereas Western fairy tales lead towards a moral in the end, manga is always about a temporal imbalance between good and evil. This enables the

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[6] (Wikipedia, 2010, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japanese_asset_price_bubble)

[7] (Shocked Investor, 2010, http://shockedinvestor.blogspot.com/2010/01/2010-japan-to-lead-world-in-sovereign.html)

[8] (Japan-infos.de, 2010, http://www.japan-infos.de/kultur/manga.html)

[9] (Lee, 2009,
http://www.nzz.ch/nachrichten/kultur/aktuell/verrckt_nach_grossen_augen_1.3257235.html)

[10] (Manga - Comic-Kultur aus Japan, 2010, http://www.manga-geschichte.de/html/manga2.html)

[11] (Lee, 2009,
http://www.nzz.ch/nachrichten/kultur/aktuell/verrckt_nach_grossen_augen_1.3257235.html)

mangaka, the drawer of the manga, to endlessly continue with the story (Ossmann, 2004, p. 33), which many may consider longwinded.

Japanese humor is difficult for Western people to understand as well. The most frequently used type of humor is slapstick, but this can appear childish or absurd to foreigners because of the idiosyncrasies of Japanese culture or language that can't be translated (Ossmann, 2004, p.53). Although Japan is known for its predilection for modern technology, it still is a country conscious of its traditions. Therefore, in addition to fantasy, Japanese history also is a popular topic within manga (Ossmann, 2004, p.51). However, due to its past militarism and protectionist economic policies, manga or anime featuring this subject have to be careful not to damage the cool and hip image of Japan, particularly in East Asia (Lam, 2007, p. 349). Lee (2009) suggested that many story lines of anime are a patchwork of international tales, often set in a pseudo-historic environment. Giving the example of "Pokémon", this would encourage rather an international than a national identification with Japan[12]. This notion is confirmed by Watanabe and McConnell (2008). They identify the "Japan" that is portrayed in manga and anime as a particular brand and a place where different fantasies merge. The readers, who are mainly living in developed countries like Japan, might be able to identify with the artificial Japan because of its references to the prevalent aspects of modern life in a global society. These are "continual flux, global mobility, forever moving into and out of new planes, powers, terrains and relations". So in summary, it is the "fantasy formation" and clever marketing of manga and anime that attract and influence people all around the world (Watanabe & McConnell, 2008, p. 107) rather than the real Japan.

This seems to be true when considering the popularity of manga and anime in Germany. The modern manga industry, followed by the anime industry, started to develop in Japan in the 1950s[13]. From there it first expanded into the USA and later reached Europe. Whereas the French and Spanish market established themselves in the 1980s due to their highly developed comic industry, German people did not start to show interest in manga and anime until the 1990s. To attract more Western readers , publishers tried to westernise manga by changing the direction of the text, which in Japan is from right to left, and by magnifying the pictures and dividing them up into several volumes. Nevertheless, the greatest obstacle in the beginning was that many manga used to be available in Japanese only, which is rarely spoken by German people[14]. The worldwide breakthrough of manga was in 1988 when Marvel Comics first published the manga series "Akira"[15]. This was also the first series that was available fully in German in 1991. Nevertheless, the final breakthrough of manga in Germany that also followed the original Japanese reading style is dated to 1996, the year of the publication of the very successful series "Dragonball".

Nowadays, the market segment of manga is one of the fastest growing segments of the German book market and in 2005, it showed a healthy turnover of €70 million[16]. These sales figures indicate that the interest in Japan's culture is growing. This goes along with an increasing desire to buy Japanese products, especially merchandising. Thus, series like "Sailor Moon" in 2000 or "Pokémon" in 2001 triggered one of the biggest waves of merchandising that the German comic market had ever seen (Ossmann, 2004, p.19/20), signifying the Japanese potential for influencing German people is rising. With the USA at the forefront, the attention paid to Japanese cultural exports is increasing on a global scale, often described by the phenomenon of "Cool Japan". Manga and anime have come to play an important role in the emergence of this new powerful national brand[17].

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[12] (Lee, 2009,
http://www.nzz.ch/nachrichten/kultur/aktuell/verrckt_nach_grossen_augen_1.3257235.html)

[13] (Japan-infos.de, 2010, http://www.japan-infos.de/kultur/manga.html)

[14] (Wapedia, 2010, http://wapedia.mobi/de/Manga?p=1)

[15] (Japan-infos.de, 2010, http://www.japan-infos.de/kultur/manga.html)

[16] (Wapedia, 2010, http://wapedia.mobi/de/Manga?p=1)

[17] (Kelts, 2010, http://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/japanamerica-why-cool-japan-is-over/)

The soft power of "Cool Japan" stems from the universality of the key elements and values portrayed in manga and anime stories as described earlier. Another explanation for its global appeal might be linked to the history of the construction of Japan's national character, which emerged in the late 19th century. At that time, colonial Japan tried to distinguish itself from other people by emphasizing the traits of "loyalty to the state, work ethic and cleanliness" – a concept that seems to be borrowed from Western countries (Tai, 2003, p.9). However, it should be noted that some fundamental cultural differences may limit the power of their attraction and can result in censorship – an issue clearly highlighted when considering the German market. For example, whereas in Germany the swastika stands for fascism, it is widely used in Asia as a symbol for luck. Moreover, the careless use of uniforms typical of National Socialism in many manga underlines the existing need for further cultural exchange (Ossmann, 2004, p.65).

Since the beginning of the last century, Japan has undertaken many initiatives to increase its soft power and to extend its influence not only in Germany but also globally. In November 2006, the Council on the Movement of People across Borders, an advisory council to the Foreign Minister Aso, suggested to establish a "Japan Manga Grand Prize" for foreign artists and to appoint cultural anime ambassadors (Lam, 2007, p. 351). Hosting manga and anime competitions is one of the best ways to encourage foreign people to expand their knowledge of it and to simultaneously learn more about Japan. Unintentionally, the many international manga and anime clubs and conventions assist the Japanese state in increasing its popularity. For example, the Manga- und Anime- Convention (MMC) Berlin is hosting a manga competition in autumn 2011. The winner will be able to sign a contract with the German publisher Comic-Culture-Verlag, which will print his or her winning story[18]. This suggests that foreign *mangakas* also have a chance to become as successful as their Japanese counterparts, to make a living and increase the appeal of the profession. Moreover, since May 2007, the Japanese government has decided that artists who promote manga abroad are eligible for the "International Manga Award" and the "First International Manga Award Executive" (Lam, 2007, p. 356).

As much as manga and anime, with their surrounding networks and industry, contribute to the exercise of cultural diplomacy, the extent to which governmental institutions promote Japanese culture in Germany should not be neglected. The Japanese-German Center Berlin (JGCB) and the German-Japanese Forum are important partners in actively shaping the bilateral relations through events fostering intensive dialogue and networking. In the scientific field, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation regularly organize exchanges of scientists and researchers under scholarship programs funded also by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS). Furthermore, 56 Japanese-German societies, 127 university cooperation agreements, 66 town-twinning arrangements and three branch offices of the Goethe Institute in Japan[19] facilitate networking in the field of culture.

For global outreach, the most important Japanese institution is the Japan Foundation that has been established as early as in 1972 (Lam, 2007, p. 353). It was focused mainly on the promotion of traditional art but as its mass appeal is limited, the Japan Foundation now moves in line with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and has started to promote popular culture, too. Further initiatives for the enhancement of its cultural diplomacy constitute the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program, the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteer program and Japan's Official Developmental Assistance (Lam, 2007, p.355).

Nonetheless, it has been stated that the importance of humbleness in Japanese culture has given rise to Japan demonstrating a lack of initiative to actively project its values abroad. Therefore, Japanese

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[18] (MMC Berlin, 2010, http://www.mmc-berlin.com/articles.php?article_id=43)

[19] (German Foreign Ministry on Japan, 2010, http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/diplo/en/Laenderinformationen/01-Laender/Japan.html)

people are considered to be increasingly "complacent" and "inward looking" as proven by the decline in Japanese academics studying abroad (Fulbright/ CULCON Joint Summit, 2009, p. 5). So whereas international interest in Japan is growing, the Japanese people themselves seem to be less interested in dealing with foreigners and different cultures. This runs counter to the 2005 plans of the Japanese government to create a nation that is "open" and "culturally creative" (Watanabe & McConnell, 2008, p. 149). The implication of it may be that it will become increasingly difficult for the Japanese government to keep up a positive and friendly image of its country and, for example, successfully run exchange programs. Moreover, there exists a huge gap between foreign consumers and producers of manga and anime. Although the foreign market constitutes a vital part for Japanese publishers and artists, little effort is put into the promotion of the actual Japanese culture or the art behind the manga and anime industry. For instance, many company websites are difficult to use and are presented in Japanese only[20]. Giving interested foreigners the opportunity to easily acquire more information seems to be a key point in the future development of Japan's cultural diplomacy.

In conclusion, there is no doubt that Japan has great resources of soft power and that its cultural diplomacy is likely to benefit from the popularity of manga and anime in Germany as well as worldwide. It will be crucial for the Japanese government to encourage initiatives that enhance the understanding of Japanese culture, which is fundamentally different from Western cultures. This could be done by increasing its attention on initiatives such as the development of special dictionaries. These explain certain gestures, jokes or behaviors used in manga or anime to avoid confusion for Western or German audiences and readers[21]. As much as there is a need to do away with stereotypes foreign readers form due to misunderstandings, it is also necessary that the Japanese government start to encourage its own people to develop an interest in the promotion of their true culture. This could enhance cross-cultural understanding and might make its cultural diplomacy even more effective. Japan's society would benefit from opening up to foreign immigrants and in this way avoid the loss of its position as the number one power in East Asia to China. Finally, the Japanese government should also take into account that the influence of manga and anime can be severely limited due to their tight competition with other cultural products from China, South Korea, India and the West (Lam, 2007, p. 360). Other tools that could be developed to enhance Japan's cultural diplomacy are the establishment of an institution like CNN or BBC that could project its voice globally, the opening up of universities to foreign faculty members in areas other than language teaching and an increase in the promotion of Japanese language abroad (Lam, 2007, p. 358). All in all, Japan should continue to combine its efforts into a tailored strategy that ensures attraction to its society is also translated into political support.

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[20] (Kelts, 2010, http://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/japanamerica-why-cool-japan-is-over/)

[21] (Lee, 2009, http://www.nzz.ch/nachrichten/kultur/aktuell/verrckt_nach_grossen_augen_1.3257235.html)

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