

Light & Shadow of Soft Power

By Masakazu HOSODA

“Soft power” is reportedly given great importance as a subject Japan should pursue to display its capability in this area on the international scene in the 21st century.

Take, for example, an address given by Prime Minister Taro Aso recently at the Japan National Press Club. During the speech, the prime minister took out a women’s fashion magazine, pointed to popular model Yuri Ebihara and other girls who graced the magazine cover, and asked members of the audience, “Do you know their names? If you don’t, you are disqualified as journalists.” Aso, knowledgeable about youth culture and subculture, tested journalists’ knowledge of the subject. He then emphasized that Japanese *anime* and computer games as well as fashion are drawing the attention of consumers around the world.

We should watch to see to what extent Japanese mass culture can reach its audience, exert its influence and develop its profit-making power overseas, particularly in Asia. At a time when conventional key industries languish in a slump, I wonder how casual fashion for young people as well as young entertainers singing and dancing on TV, in addition to games and *anime*, can support Japan’s culture and economy.

My observation at this point of time is that Japanese mass culture has already influenced some of East Asian, European and American youth culture quite deeply and widely, though not to an overwhelming extent.

Incidentally, I am reminded of what I experienced on a past reporting assignment. I interviewed unique actress Kirsten Dunst, who played the role of MJ in *Spider-Man*, when she came to Tokyo to promote the blockbuster movie. As soon as Dunst, also known for her role in *The Virgin Suicides*, appeared, she asked me: “Do you know *Sailor Moon*?” Taken aback, I managed to reply that I had general knowledge of the popular Japanese *anime* because my little daughter adored it. Then she suddenly stood up and sang in English the title song of *Sailor Moon* while performing a marvelously choreographed dance. As I was struck dumb with astonishment, she remarked with a wink that she was brought up watching *Sailor Moon* on TV in America and that she was a fan of the Japanese *anime*.

The strange episode is an example of positive evaluation of Japanese soft power (although, at the same time, we should calmly recognize, as a matter of course, the downside of Japanese soft power given that some game software originating from Japan has drawn sharp criticism overseas for causing psychological harm to youths).

As I was musing about these things, news broke that Takeshi Kusanagi, a member of SMAP, a hugely popular boy band in Japan, was arrested for public indecen-



cy after allegedly stripping naked alone under the influence of alcohol in a Tokyo park before dawn. The incident, though minor as a criminal case, stirred up a frenzy of national attention.

As TV networks and newspapers alike reported on the case relentlessly, companies which had used Kusanagi for their commercials dropped him like a hot potato. A Cabinet minister whose ministry used Kusanagi as a spokesman in promoting digitalization of terrestrial TV expressed anger over the scandal. Sports newspapers covered the news with banner headlines on their front pages. General newspapers in South Korea similarly reported the news as Kusanagi, a popular entertainer idolized in Asia, speaks Korean.

Kusanagi, released from police detention the next day, held a press conference and apologized for his misdemeanor before a throng of reporters with a deep bow as if he had committed a serious crime.

It seems to me that the incident only showed the popular entertainer, loved by the masses as a “nice guy,” forgot for a moment to play his virtual image as conveyed by the media and revealed his real nature – a 34-year-old boozier. But Japanese society was not so lenient to what he did.

Calls for diffusing Japan’s soft power to the world sound convincing enough. But sometimes we might as well think about the real nature of people who actually do the job of shouldering such power. **JS**

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