

"Soft Power" is the Opium of Japan

By Régis ARNAUD

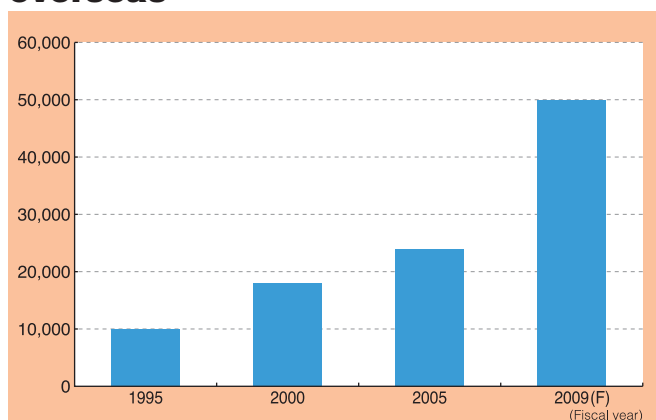
"Vatican, how many soldiers?" Stalin used to joke to mock the Pope's influence on world affairs. For Stalin, spiritual power was not much if not backed by military power. Was Stalin right? Yes. Communism or for that matter Catholicism would not have gone very far without armies forcing half the planet to convert. Conversely, Rome and Greece, beacons of European civilization, were destroyed by barbarians who did not invent much compared to the people they defeated. The Republic of Venezia, as glorious as it was, was destroyed by Napoleonic armies. Stalinism really died when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. It lost not to the Vatican, but to the United States, in an arms race the Soviet Union could not follow.

In 1990, just at the end of the Cold War and in the middle of an extremely optimistic period of human history, the concept of "soft power" emerged. It was created by American "geopolitician" (if such a job exists) Joseph Nye. According to this professor, next to raw military power is another type of power, made of intangible assets: the image and reputation of a country, its ability to communicate, the degree of openness of its society, its international behavior, the attractiveness of its culture, of its ideas, its scientific and economic influence, and its role within international institutions.

Vanity of Soft Power

This theory was soon embraced by Japanese political and intellectual circles. For example, Japanese ambassador-at-large Shotaro Yachi recently explained: "I think we can contribute to the peace and stability of the world through our soft power and through the genius of the Japanese people towards hard work." Indeed, Professor Nye himself is a worldwide famous specialist of Japan, and it is from observing Japan that he derives some of his "soft power" theory.

CHART 1
Number of Japanese restaurants overseas



Source: Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry & Fisheries

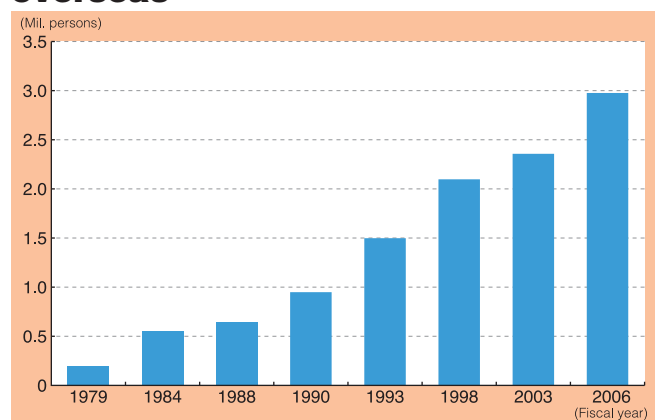
Until a few months ago, he was mentioned as a possible ambassador in Tokyo. How sweet this would have been.

Yet the very case of Japan illustrates the vanity of soft power, and serves as a wonderful counterexample to the thesis of Professor Nye. Granted, the cultural influence of Japan is immense, and in a unique way: for this influence is in traditional arts as well as in popular culture. American culture mostly influences the arts around the globe through its popular culture. France mostly influences the world through its traditional arts; Japan influences the world through both, and I know of no other country which achieved this. Japan is actually the only cultural superpower able to rival the United States today. Researcher Jessie Wilson, who recently wrote a note for the bank CLSA on Japan's pop culture, has calculated that "Japanese cultural exports have tripled over 10 years of development to more than \$18 billion, while manufacturing exports have increased by a more modest 20%."

Third Wave of Japonism

One finds *Hello Kitty* icons all over the world. *Sushi* has become as popular as hamburgers. Since 1995 the number of Japanese restaurants around the world has multiplied five times, from 10,000 to 50,000, according to the Japanese ministry of agriculture ([Chart 1](#)). Japanese video games are played by millions of Western kids. The total value of video game exports is estimated at about 252.8 billion yen each year. *Karaoke* has become a global phenomenon. A Japanese movie just won the Oscar for the best foreign-language movie; the same night, a Japanese animation won the Oscar in that category. Of the world's animation, 60% is produced in Japan. *Manga* and *anime*, once limited to a global coterie of weird

CHART 2
Number of people learning Japanese overseas



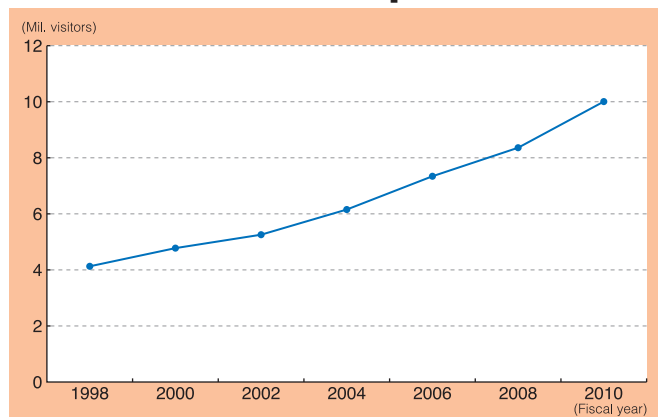
Source: Japan Foundation



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CHART 3

Inbound tourism in Japan



Source: CLSA

teenagers, have gained the status of works of art that one can find in museums. No one is spared: in war-torn Iraq, the most popular *anime* is “*Captain Majed*,” the Arabic version of Japanese *anime* series “*Captain Tsubasa*.” Quentin Tarantino, one of the most popular movie directors of our times, recognizes *yakuza* movie cult director Kinji Fukasaku as his master. “*Star Wars*,” the most successful franchise in movie history, is basically copied from Akira Kurosawa’s work. Haruki Murakami is one of the most famous novelists of our times. The Marubeni Research Institute has labeled this cultural craze the “third wave of Japonism.” The first wave swept through Europe at the end of the 19th century and influenced people like Monet and Van Gogh. The second wave took place during the 1950s and 1960s, at the time of the Japanese economic miracle. The third wave is today. In 30 years the number of foreigners learning Japanese has multiplied by 10, and the number of tourists has more than doubled over the last 10 years (*Charts 2 & 3*).

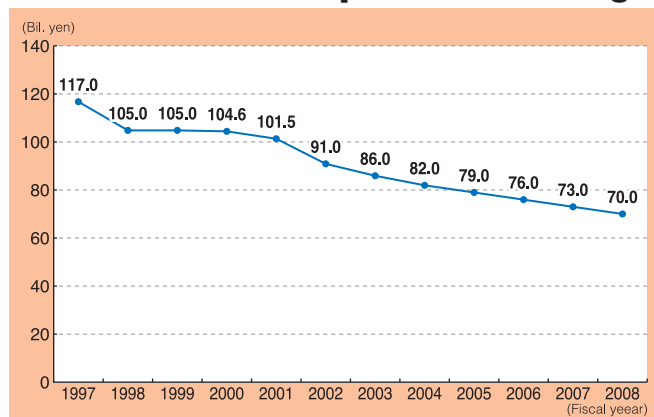
Japan Lacks Real Power

It is therefore tempting to laud Japan’s influence through the modern notion of soft power. Yes, Japan has no great military projection power, little diplomatic power, but its culture is influencing all other cultures on the planet, the argument goes. Therefore it has power. Yet the concept of soft power is delusive. “Soft” and “power” are two contradictory terms, like “slow” and “*Shinkansen*,” or “wet” and “desert.” They cannot be properly associated, and hide a concept as empty as *Kitty*’s brain.

The international community does not care a bit about Japan’s opinion despite Japan’s truly impressive public subsidies for development aid (albeit decreasing: *Chart 4*); despite an economic weight that was, at some point, as big as the rest of Asia; despite the democratic nature of its institutions; despite the model of shared wealth enjoyed by its citizens that some European countries would dream to emulate; despite its constitutional pacifism, almost unique in human history; despite its self-declared concern for the environment and, indeed, despite its cultural exports. Out of domestic concerns, Japanese diplomacy has been putting emphasis on issues that are of very little interest to the rest of the world: whaling and citizens abducted by North Korea. Lately, however, some key UN agencies’ top jobs have been given to Japanese nationals, like the IAEA. Indeed, it is the lack of power of Japan – a nation with a culture so

CHART 4

General trends in Japanese ODA budget



Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs

rich – that is the source of amazement.

Why? Because, as Mao Zedong said, “Power comes from the barrel of a gun.” The United States is strong because it has the biggest military budget on the planet, not because they invented *Mickey Mouse*. Portuguese armies did not conquer half the world because they came up with *tempura* or *fado*. Portugal had a political and religious ambition, backed by the most powerful army of its time. To have *Hello Kitty* characters sold from Paris to Mexico, to see *sushi* becoming a food standard, to see Japanese architects completing wonderful buildings all over the world – all this does not translate into power of any kind for Japan. These achievements are not marks of power but only of cultural influence.

Soft Power: Not Tool But Burden on Japan

Japan does not even have the spiritual power “small” nations like Sweden have. As Kenzaburo Oe pointed out in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in Stockholm, in the heart of a country which advocates pacifism like Japan but gets much more diplomatic leverage than Japan from it, Japan pays the price of its constant ambiguity. The same leader, and his followers, cannot express regrets for the war and go to Yasukuni shrine. They are not credible. You cannot be half pregnant.

But allow me to go further: if such a thing as “soft power” exists, then, in the case of Japan, we must conclude that it is a burden on Japan rather than a tool. For “soft power” is the other name of “identity,” or “culture,” and the lack of Japan’s real power has its origin precisely in the blind faith in its culture. There is no country where universalism is less present less than in Japan. Japanese men are Japanese before they are men. The belief in the uniqueness of Japanese culture makes Japanese authorities act like an irreconcilable wing of dissent within mankind that cannot be included in the concert of nations. As long as this goes on, Japan will be powerless. Like, for Karl Marx, religion is the opium of the people, for it consoles the person while cheating him, “soft power” is the opium of Japan.

JS

Sorry, *Kitty*.

Régis Arnaud is a correspondent in Japan of *Le Figaro* and *Challenges*. He is the editor in chief of *France Japon Eco* (published by the French Chamber of Commerce & Industry), and a regular contributor to *Newsweek Japan*.