

Japanese Culture – Enigma or Soft Power?

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Cover lead

A country's culture can be represented by many products, both tangible and intangible. Animations, films, cuisine, and fashion may be symbols of a national culture, but people's customs, behavior or mentality are also crucial in determining the general image of a country.

The March/April issue highlights this cultural complexity in Japan and its possible role in foreign policy, assuming that the power of a culture can sometimes have consequences for diplomacy.

This year, 2014, also marks the 90th anniversary of the official establishment of French-Japanese cultural exchanges, and we feature an interview with Bertrand Fort, cultural counselor at the French Embassy, about the influence of France's soft power on its foreign policy, in particular by putting France at the heart of the European Union.

We also have a number of articles devoted to various aspects of Japanese culture, both positive and negative, written by observers from several countries. Some of them are foreign students in Japan, while others are business people or independent journalists.

Their comments relate not only to tangible aspects of Japanese culture but also to customs such as *omotenashi* (hospitality) – a concept that has become more widely known with the selection of

Tokyo as the host of the 2020 Olympic Games.

We also include in this issue several opinion pieces by people who are actually engaged in promoting Japanese cultural products, such as animations, films, cuisine and fashion.

Finally, in the last article of the cover story, we feature a spontaneous discussion on the future of Japanese culture and its potential to be an important soft power for Japanese foreign policy. Most significantly, the discussants emphasize the possibly crucial role of education as an important element of soft power in helping to achieve the long-term objectives of foreign policy, namely peace and prosperity. The creation of a student exchange program in East Asia could contribute greatly to peace and prosperity in this region.

In addition to the cover story, we would like to draw your attention to two other articles – one about the role of women in Japan and the other an assessment of JEF activities in 2013. They are written, respectively, by our colleagues Masako Watanabe and Kiyomi Nakahata, who have made invaluable contributions to our work for many years.

Naoyuki Haraoka, executive managing director, editor-in-chief of *Japan SPOTLIGHT*

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