

Can Cultural Ambassadors Build Bridges?

By Roland Kelts



Author Roland Kelts

Last year the Japanese government gave final approval for the Cool Japan Fund — an official national initiative that had been at least 10 years in the making, according to Chika Takagi, one of its original directors at the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI). Pegged at 50 billion yen, with a final target of 60 billion yen via private investor partnership, the fund is intended to promote Japanese culture through cultural diplomacy, the so-called “soft power” of its native appeal. The multidisciplinary campaign is designed to plug everything from anime and manga to Japanese movies, design, fashion, food and tourism. Its ultimate intent, according to Takagi, is to “help sell goods” and thus provide a quantifiable monetary return on investment, not just the abstract rewards of international goodwill and positive feelings.

“One of the central challenges is choosing which products and personalities to promote,” Takagi told me last summer, on the eve of the fund’s passage in the Upper House. “Not everything that is popular or attractive [in Japan] will be the same way overseas. And different foreign cultures sometimes like Japan for different reasons. We have to be very selective and careful.”

Meeting that challenge is key to the fund’s potential for success. The concept and phrase “soft power” was coined in the late 1970s by former Harvard Professor Joseph S. Nye to denote the appeal of a culture’s sensibility and products, and the geopolitical influence that can accrue from it. Since 2002, when a short essay by American journalist Douglas McGray titled “Japan’s Gross National Cool” was translated into Japanese and disseminated among politicians in Tokyo, the Japanese government has been hankering to promote its contemporary pop culture abroad, and there has been a lot of chatter about Japan’s international “soft power”.

The Face of Soft Power

But Nye’s original essay referred to the cultural appeal of American products in the years following World War II, when the United States emerged as a victorious nation whose growing economy was

matched by the rising international appeal of its cultural output. A wealthy and entertainment-rich nation began producing cultural products like Hollywood movies, jazz, rock ‘n’ roll, fashion and, yes, even fast junk food that possessed a common-denominator appeal to global citizens. In short, next to its Cold War nemesis, the Soviet Union, whose barricaded borders, literal and cultural, seemed cold, dark and isolating, America and its culture were sexy.

Yet one could argue that the attraction of American soft power in the 1950s and 1960s was the result of a perfect accident. Postwar America enjoyed a sudden boom in standards of living. Increased income expanded lifestyle options, and as Europe and Asia struggled to rebuild harshly damaged social, political and physical infrastructures, the US remained relatively unscathed on the homefront. Notwithstanding Pearl Harbor, and the death and destruction of American forces and military infrastructure overseas, America’s media and creative centers of New York, Los Angeles and Chicago were untouched.

The iconic faces of American soft power were, quite literally, faces: Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, Elvis Presley, Louis Armstrong and Mickey Mouse. McDonald’s golden arches; Coca Cola’s ribbon. They were identifiable and attractive in their own right — and their Americanness was a given.

But today’s Japan is neither growing economically nor reveling in recent triumphs. Instead, its population is shrinking, its economic

Photo: Author



Otakon — “Otaku Convention” — the largest celebration of Japanese Culture on the East Coast of the United States, attracted 40,000 participants at its 20th anniversary event last summer in Baltimore, Maryland.



Global manga hit "One Piece" reached 300 million copies in print last year — a world record — and was celebrated as a Japanese cultural milestone in the *New York Times*.



Kyary Pamyu Pamyu is the latest global Japanese pop sensation, and many are comparing her to South Korea's Psy in her potential for cultural ambassadorship.

future is being dwarfed by China's and other nations', and domestic culture industries are usually underfunded, surviving on proverbial shoestrings. Still, the 21st-century reach and success of Japanese cultural creativity remains the envy of many other nations, including nearby neighbors like South Korea, whose recent surge of investment in cultural diplomacy is seen by some Japanese as a model of proactive soft power.

"South Korea is keenly aware of the global reach of its entertainment content," says Seiji Horibuchi, a pioneer in the business of marketing Japanese culture abroad who, in 1986, founded North America's Viz Media, one of the first overseas distributors of Japanese manga, anime and popular culture. "They have created a successful model that Japan could emulate." Horibuchi's latest venture is a bricks-and-mortar retail outlet: he is the CEO of "New People", a Japanese pop-culture shopping mall located in San Francisco's Japan town. "I hope [the METI fund] will bring a new Japanese star or hit property to the global market," he adds, "but it takes time. It took us over 20 years to finally see anime and manga culture take root in the United States."

Cultural Ambassador: Haruki Murakami

Japan has had many global "hit properties" over the past three decades. *Pokemon* remains the largest and most lucrative animation-game franchise in world history. *Hello Kitty* is an international icon of Japan's *kawaii* (cute) culture. *Sailor Moon* remains the definitive title in schoolgirl stories for women worldwide. And Haruki Murakami's novels sell in the millions in 40+ languages.

But does Japan really have a recognizable human face on the international stage? While all of the examples indicate a global reach, none of them suggests a human presence — an Elvis or Marilyn or Michael Jackson, or even a pop sensation like South Korea's Psy, to represent Japan on talk shows and live performances and at diplomatic events worldwide. How far can Japan's soft power strategies go if there are no real personalities behind them?

"We need Japanese people to travel and represent our culture," Takagi told me about the Cool Japan Fund. "And we need them to be as attractive and interesting as their creations."

When I first met novelist Haruki Murakami, in 1999, he told me he felt alienated from Japan's internal politics and international identity. He explained that he had no interest in "political matters" or traditional culture. He just wanted to be a great writer, and recognized as such the world over. Ten years later, after receiving international literary awards and participating in several public events in the US and Europe, he had a different take. His life had changed.

"I think transcultural exchange is the most important thing right now," he said. "I know that because I lived in many countries. When I was in America in the early 1990s, Japan was rich, and everyone talked about it. But we didn't have a cultural face. And I thought: somebody should do something. I have to do something for Japanese culture."

"It's my duty," he added. "I've been getting more popular in Europe and America, so I am in a position to be able to talk to people directly, and exchange opinions. That's a great opportunity. Only a few people can do it. And I'm one of them."

That Murakami now thinks of himself as a cultural ambassador might come as quite a surprise to most Japanese. His approach to the role is binary, depending on where he happens to be. At home in Japan, Murakami is something of a recluse. He rarely gives print interviews and avoids radio and television appearances entirely. He has only given two public readings in Japan to date — one in Kobe after the Great Hanshin Earthquake in 1995, the other last year in Kyoto in honor of his late friend, clinical psychologist Hayao Kawai.

But when he is invited overseas, Murakami is openly accessible — and opinionated. When he accepted the Jerusalem Prize, Israel's highest literary honor, he openly criticized his host nation's invasion of the Gaza Strip, a three-week armed conflict that took place just prior to the ceremony, in his metaphoric acceptance speech, "Of Walls and Eggs".

"Between a high, solid wall (oppressor) and an egg (oppressed)

that breaks against it,” he said, speaking in English, “I will always stand on the side of the egg.” And in the wake of Japan’s triple disasters in 2011, he criticized his own nation’s nuclear policies in an acceptance speech for the Catalunya Prize in Barcelona. “The accident at the Fukushima nuclear power plant is the second major nuclear detriment that the Japanese people have experienced,” he said in Japanese. “However, this time it was not a bomb being dropped upon us, but a mistake committed by our very own hands.” He went on to say that the lessons of Hiroshima and Nagasaki should have taught Japan to stand against nuclear power.

The cultural ambassador Murakami can be outspoken in his outreach, but he also presents a benign and friendly face of Japan, enhanced in no small part by his fluency in English. When I accompanied him to a series of events in San Francisco and Berkeley, California, I was astonished by his ease and accessibility. He conversed with me for over an hour onstage before an audience of 3,000, traversing cultural borders with his good humor and jokes, one of the more difficult qualities to translate. He visited classes at UC Berkeley and let students ask whatever they wished; he signed piles of books for nearly two hours in San Francisco, until I told the manager that he needed a break.

But Murakami is right: he is one of only a few people who can serve as a cultural ambassador for Japan. The other obvious choice is animation artist and director, Hayao Miyazaki.

A Different Kind of Ambassador: Hayao Miyazaki

It’s probably hard for those who have never lived in Japan to appreciate just how beloved are Miyazaki and his West Tokyo production center, Studio Ghibli, across his native land. Annual surveys in which Japanese consumers are asked to rate their favorite domestic brands often result in Studio Ghibli being voted No. 1, ahead of stalwarts like Toyota and Sony. Last August, when Ghibli’s first full-length feature film, *Castle in the Sky*, was rebroadcast on Japanese TV, its impassioned viewers set a new Twitter record for the number of tweets per second — easily surpassing the record previously held by fans of Beyonce when she announced her pregnancy.

Amid a stagnant economy, disasters natural and nuclear, and national soul-searching in the wake of regional power shifts, Ghibli and Miyazaki, its most famous and prolific artist, are reliable standard-bearers of the virtues of Japanese craftsmanship, imagination and diligence. Miyazaki is an extremely hard worker, largely eschewing the lure of CGI technologies to render most of his works painstakingly by hand, in traditional 2D format. His films are box office hits, and they are beautiful.

Unlike Murakami, Miyazaki maintains a public profile when he is in Japan, and he has been in the news almost constantly since the release of his latest film, *The Wind Rises*. The July issue of *Neppu*,

Photo: Author



Author Roland Kels and Hayao Miyazaki after their live onstage conversation at the University of California, Berkeley in 2009.

the studio’s free self-published monthly booklet, featured a special section on Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his party’s campaign to revise Japan’s pacifist Constitution. In it, Miyazaki declared his unequivocal opposition to revising the Constitution; said Japan should apologize over the “comfort women” issue — the wartime Japanese military’s organization of enforced prostitution that remains a highly sensitive matter, especially between Japan and South Korea; and suggested that some sort of compromise be sought over Japan’s escalating territorial disputes with China and South Korea, either dividing the territories or administering joint control over them.

Anyone who has paid even passing attention to Miyazaki’s history of leftist postwar positions — and his willingness to speak or act on them — might have expected his latest comments.

After the triple earthquake, tsunami and meltdown disasters of 2011, his studio hung a banner from its rooftop announcing that Ghibli would “make movies with electricity that does not come from nuclear power”. One year into his first job at Japanese animation giant Toei in 1963, Miyazaki got involved in a labor dispute and soon became chief secretary of Toei’s labor union.

They should also remember that Miyazaki is an artist first, not a politician, and something of a trickster. When I interviewed him before a live audience in California in 2009, he said: “I have kind of an evil side as well. When I go up to one of the high-rises in Tokyo and look at the scene below, I sometimes think it would be better if the seas would come a little closer — and there would be fewer buildings [down there].” Less than two years later, northeastern Japan lost a lot of buildings to the sea.

As much as Miyazaki is beloved at home in Japan, he is also the subject of reverence and adulation overseas, and by now his cherubic white-bearded face and avuncular mannerisms are familiar to audiences worldwide. He has made appearances in public and on TV in North America and Europe, and thanks to the global reach of YouTube, his many documentaries and interviews on Japanese television programs are available to all who have access to the Internet. He has traveled to Los Angeles, San Diego and San Francisco at the request of his movies’ US distributor, Disney. When I interviewed him in California, he was there partly to help publicize the US release of *Ponyo*.

In person, Miyazaki is playful, sometimes boyish. He smiles a lot with a Cheshire cat-like grin that widens his face in youthful joy. He speaks in a cigarette-roughened baritone that breaks into giggles at the slightest hint of humor, even if its source is dark. In some respects, he is far less guarded and circumspect than Murakami, but he is monolingual — and, of course of a very different generation.

Miyazaki’s reputation overseas has been burnished by his popularity among children. On the affection generated by *My Neighbor Totoro* alone, he could probably serve as Japan’s cultural ambassador at schools around the world. His 2001 film *Spirited Away* won both the Academy Award and the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film

Festival. American animator John Lasseter, chief creative director of Pixar and Disney, French artist Moebius, British animator Nick Mark, and recently deceased Canadian animator Frederic Back have all sung Miyazaki's praises, as have numerous film and animation critics across the globe.

Artist vs. Ambassador

Yet Miyazaki raises the thorny issue of precisely what a cultural ambassador can or should be. For he is not without controversy, and international reactions to *The Wind Rises* are a perfect example of this conundrum. During the film's limited Oscar-qualifying run in New York and Los Angeles in November, many worried that its portrayal of Jiro Hirokoshi, the engineer responsible for designing Japan's fearsome Mitsubishi AM6 Zero fighter plane, is too sympathetic — that a man whose creation caused millions of deaths is depicted by Miyazaki as an innocent dreamer who merely, in Horikoshi's words, “wanted to create something beautiful”.

The Wind Rises faces another big hurdle overseas: at least eight of its scenes feature characters puffing away on cigarettes. This makes sense in terms of accuracy, of course, given the film's social and historical milieu in the early and mid-20th century. But in North America, where animation is still largely seen as children's fare, or at least a family-friendly medium, and where Miyazaki himself, through films such as *Totoro*, *Ponyo* and *Spirited Away*, has garnered a huge following among parents and their kids, the casual chain-smoking scenes are causing alarm.

The situation is so bad that the film's US distributor, Walt Disney Studios, is only barely promoting it in North America, and plans to release the dubbed version next year under one of its subsidiary companies — removing the Disney logo entirely. The film's Hollywood producer, Frank Marshall, is declining interviews. Studio Ghibli representatives say they understand the concerns but hope that overseas audiences will embrace the film as a simple love story in difficult times. But what does Miyazaki think of all this?

Sometimes it seems like he can't win. When *The Wind Rises* was released in Japan last summer it was greeted by a backlash from conservatives and nationalists who complained that Miyazaki's critique of militarism was unpatriotic. In South Korea, Miyazaki drew rebukes from those who felt he was glamorizing Japan's wartime belligerence.

“I am in the realm of making entertainment films,” Miyazaki said to me in California. “Sometimes I try to break the mold of the genres I work in, but entertainment is my medium. My real aim is to satisfy the audience's curiosity and imagination.”

Miyazaki's work has long featured controversial scenes of violence and apocalyptic disruption. *Nausicaa*, considered a classic by fans and critics overseas, is an end-of-the-world war for survival. *Spirited Away* transforms the young female protagonist's parents into gluttonous pigs. *Ponyo* depicts a brutal tsunami roaring up the Japanese coastline as a desperate single mother tries to outrace it with her terrified son in the backseat, eerily foreshadowing the Tohoku horrors of March 11, 2011.

Miyazaki may be the perfect distillation of the problems inherent in cultural ambassadorship. An artist is, by nature, creative. But

creativity takes different forms. Popular chefs, for example, may be lauded for their creativity with food, and thus ideally suited to the Cool Japan Fund and its support of Japanese cultural products. But artists such as Miyazaki and Murakami are also storytellers, and narratives incorporate points of view, opinions and powerful psychological impact. We may ask ourselves: can a cultural ambassador and a creative narrative artist exist in a single person?

Late last year, popular and critically acclaimed manga artist Takehiko Inoue (*Slam Dunk*, *Vagabond*) was named one of three Japanese goodwill ambassadors to Spain. Inoue is admired in Spain, and the recent publication of his book *Pepita: Takehiko Inoue Meets Gaudi*, about how he draws inspiration from the late Spanish architect Antoni Gaudi and absorbed his work on a trip to Catalonia, helped justify his appointment.

I do believe that cultural ambassadorship, when based upon transcultural exchange and influence, can be an effective tool in international diplomacy. It's difficult, if not impossible to quantify, of course, but the intimacy of cultural power is real, especially when combined with rational and peaceful models of governance.

Today, Japan consistently ranks near the top of international polls rating nations with a “positive influence” on the world, and I think that has a lot to do with its relatively pacifistic presence over the past 70 years, combined with the intrinsic appeal of its cultural products and narratives. And while recent territorial disagreements in Asia have given rise to fears of conflict, I think it's important to remember that most people are intelligent enough to distinguish between the attractiveness of Japan's cultural products and the behaviors and attitudes of its nationalists and political figures. A young Chinese who loves Murakami's fiction or Miyazaki's films or Japanese food can still find lots to loathe in Japan's record of brutality in World War II and current geopolitical arguments.

The US is probably the best example of this — many non-Americans love certain Hollywood titles, and even hamburgers and jazz, but still abhor US hegemony and military power.

Murakami made it clear that he sees cultural ambassadorship as a responsibility. Many non-Japanese have no idea what a Japanese person might be like, and he feels responsible for giving his country and people a public face. He and other globally recognized Japanese artists, like Miyazaki, have made non-Japanese feel much more intimate with, and appreciative of, a culture and country that may be thousands of miles away. And one that they may never encounter firsthand.

There are plenty of collaborations between Japanese, American, South Korean and Chinese creatives that are now happening and being proposed. Sadly, recent political tensions in Asia have interfered with many of them. One prominent anime producer told me the Senkaku conflict has set the industry back years in its efforts to co-produce films and series with Chinese animation studios.

That's the thing about cultural bridges supported by soft power: they are precious, but can easily be broken.

JS

Roland Kelts is the author of *Japanamerica: How Japanese Pop Culture Has Invaded the US* (2007), a visiting scholar at the University of Keio and an editor of *Monkey Business International*, the English edition of the Japanese literary magazine. He is also a columnist for *The Japan Times*.