

Is Japan Poised to Become a Global Cultural Exporter?

By Mohan Gopal



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Introduction

During my middle-school years, we used to play a verbal game called “Categories”. The game would go in rounds. The person to begin the first round — let us call him or her the “Caller” — was decided using an Indian equivalent of *Rock-Scissors-Paper*. The game would then begin. The Caller would speak out the words: “Categories, will you please, name some, names of <blank 1>, any <blank 2>, such as <blank 3>.” The words followed a rhythm, not very musical, but a rhythm nevertheless, accompanied by claps when words were spoken and punctuated by finger snaps to mark the pause between words. Thus, it would go: “Categories” (accompanied by clap-clap), pause (marked by finger-snap, finger-snap), “will you please” (accompanied by clap-clap), pause (marked by finger-snap, finger-snap), “name some” (accompanied by clap-clap), pause (marked by finger-snap, finger-snap), “names of” (accompanied by clap-clap), and so forth. The Caller got to fill in the blanks after “names of” with his/her choice. Blank1 could be any object, people, place, thing, in fact almost anything. Blank2 would be a number, and Blank3 an example (or examples if the Caller had specified a number more than one). For example, if the Caller had decided that he was going to call out cats and the number was two, Blank1 would be “cats”, Blank2 would be “two” and Blank3 could be “Siamese” and “Cheshire”. The round then continued clockwise on to the next person who would also have to name two cat varieties. This would go on and on until someone broke the rhythm or could no longer name a feline variety without repetition. When this happened the round would end, the transgressor dropped out from the game and a new round would start from the next person in turn who now became the Caller.

It was in this game that I recollect someone calling out Blank1 as “Japan’s exports”. Blank3 was excitedly filled by the participants with Walkman, cassette-recorder, TV, rice cooker, cars. This was in the 1970s outside Japan. Today, almost five decades later, is it possible that foreign children may instead spontaneously fill in Blank3 with words like anime, cosplay, *washoku*, manga, J-Pop, fashion, *yosakoi*? The answer could very well be in the affirmative.

Culture as an Export Commodity

Whenever I have reflected on what are the key exports of a country

or region, some standard images and keywords would spontaneously come to mind: Zambia — copper, South Africa — diamonds, Arabia — oil, Italy — textiles, India — tea, Brazil — coffee, Malaysia — rubber, Myanmar — teak, South Korea — electronics, France — perfume, and so on. For Japan, the images that would come up were cars, home electronics and electrical appliances, advanced technology. These were indisputably items which were — and continue to be — associated with exports from Japan. Competition fueled by technological development of course significantly changes the image of the exports associated with any country. South Korea has probably taken over from Japan what the latter took over from Europe and the US. Once upon a time worldwide familiar standards like Grundig, Braun and Philips gave way to Sony, Panasonic and Sharp, which in turn have given way to Samsung and LG. General Motors gave way to Toyota, which in several countries has given way to Hyundai, though of course continuing to maintain a healthy world status even today. In all these instances, we are looking at the changing status of *manufactured goods* as representing a country’s exports. If we replaced manufactured goods with *cultural goods*, how does the discussion change?

Cultural exports is a term which has been used often interchangeably with terms like *soft exports* and *soft power*. It may, however, be useful to draw some level of distinction between these terms, which in their usage may carry a degree of overlap. A country’s culture is a vast compendium of the thoughts, ways and lifestyle of the people who have inhabited it over centuries, indeed millennia. This patrimony expresses itself in the form of music and opera, dance and drama, painting and sculpture, crafting and architecture, embroidery and carpet making; indeed the list goes on. It includes the games people play, the food that they cook and eat, the festivals that they celebrate, indeed the spirit that makes them what they are. Every conceivable form of fine art is encompassed. The historical influences that have shaped a people have had cultural impacts and the reverse is also true. When we talk of *cultural exports*, it refers to the commoditization of these as a product for exporting and earning revenue for the country.

So would the export of tea or pasta be considered a *cultural export*? Pasta as an Italian concept is representative of Italian cuisine. While I would refer to the export of this delightful food as a *soft export*, I would consider the export of Italian cuisine in itself a *cultural export*. Similarly, while tea in itself is a long-standing revenue-earner for India

and Sri Lanka, the tea-making ceremony could become a *cultural export* of Japan. Rather than get lost in the niceties of definition, suffice to say that the term *soft export* encompasses a wider spectrum.

UNESCO has done considerable work in giving form and order to the often intangible aspect of what constitutes a cultural commodity. In a detailed report published this year, UNESCO measures global cultural trade analyzing international trade trends of cultural “goods and services” over the decade spanning 2004-13. The methodology used is outlined in the 2009 UNESCO Framework for Cultural Statistics. This Framework classifies cultural goods and services into six “cultural domains”:

- A. Cultural and Natural Heritage
- B. Performance and Celebration
- C. Visual Arts and Crafts
- D. Books and Press
- E. Audiovisual and Interactive Media
- F. Design and Creative Services

(Source: “The Globalisation of Cultural Trade: A Shift in Consumption — International flows of cultural goods and services 2004-2013” — UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2016)

The above Framework is an excellent attempt to reconcile various concepts and opinions on what cultural commodities and services should constitute. It is holistic and encompasses in its purview cultural education and intangible cultural heritage, tourism and sports. However, it excludes — rightly, I feel — software technology which, though “soft” as against something manufactured, is not a cultural heritage at this point of time. It may have become so when the subject of this article is revisited a hundred years from now. The question may arise as to how to treat gaming. For our scope, I would leave the production of game software in the same space as software in general, while the ideation of a game as a service could be considered a cultural export (Chart).

While *soft exports* and *cultural exports* may be considered part of a continuum where one term leads gently, almost unnoticed, into the

other like the gradual change in the shades of the sea, we are onto something a little different with *soft power*.

Soft power is a term coined by Joseph Nye of Harvard University in the 1980s to convey the concept of countries utilizing soft avenues of diplomacy and commerce in order to achieve, negotiate or develop a mind-share for their objectives and approach to issues. These soft avenues would include cultural exchanges, development assistance, libraries, movies, festivals and sports tournaments as opposed to militaristic or strong-arm methods. A lot has been said about *soft power* and its geo-political significance.

On the evening of March 11, 2016 and the two evenings following it, the world saw an amazing spectacle of world culture on show in open-air grounds on the banks of the river Yamuna in New Delhi, India. The World Culture Festival organized by the International Art of Living Foundation was an extravaganza of music, dance and ancient chants from dozens of countries in addition to the length and breadth of India. The event was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and was attended by world leaders, religious heads, officials, business people and an audience drawn from over 100 countries. An estimated 3.5 million people participated across the three days.

As speaker after speaker called for the acceptance and respect of cultural diversity and for peace, the event could be called an amazing exercise in *soft power*. It was also noted by several leaders that the events showcased there could well vie to be attractive cultural exports for their representative countries.

Representing Japan at the festival was parliamentarian and former minister for culture Hakubun Shimomura who carried a message from Prime Minister Shinzo Abe for the event, at which a group of 150 Japanese dancers performed.

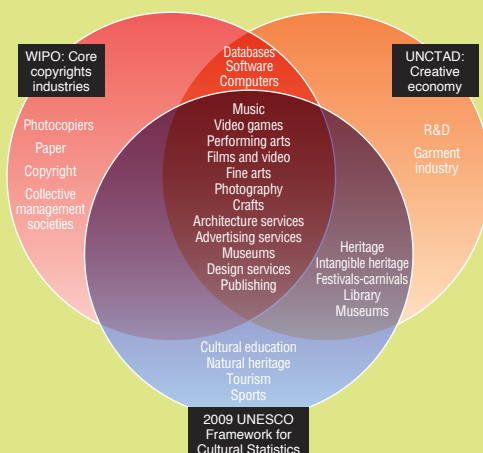
The presence of the former minister may have been an indication of the personal respect that he has for global humanitarian Sri Sri Ravi Shankar — the founder of the Art of Living — and the interest that he had in the event itself. The close relations between India and Japan and the rapport between the two prime ministers — even though this event was not an official government of India event but a private one — may also have been a plus. Beyond these plausible reasons was the fact that the Japanese government was laying emphasis on *soft exports* as an area for the country’s economic resurgence and not just as a beneficial economic add-on. Who would be a better person to brainstorm on this than the former minister? (Photo 1 and 2).

Cool Japan

During 2011, the Japanese government sponsored private-sector conceptualized projects in a few countries to showcase Japan as a soft exporter. The United States, France, China, South Korea, Singapore, Brazil, Italy and India were host to 13 projects under the initiative “Cool Japan”. This public-relations initiative was conceived by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) and encompassed a wide range of Japanese soft products and services ranging from anime to apparel. “Cool Japan” aimed to be an enabler for the private industry to grow its share of soft exports to the level

CHART

Cultural commodities classification



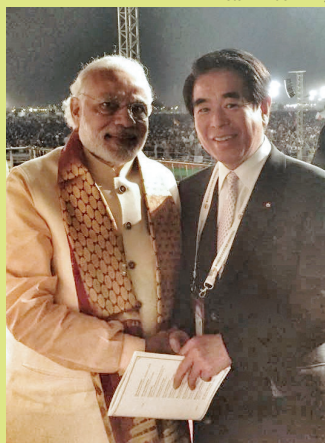
Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), 2015

Photo 1: Art of Living



Hakubun Shimomura with Sri Sri Ravi Shankar at the World Culture Festival, March 2016, New Delhi

Photo 2: Art of Living



Hakubun Shimomura with Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the World Culture Festival, March 2016, New Delhi

of 11 trillion yen by 2020, according to an article in *The Japan Times* of May 15, 2012 titled “Exporting Japan via Cool Japan”.

The initiative has a two-pronged approach of engaging at both the domestic and global levels. Inside the country, “Cool Japan” supports the “creative industries” — in particular small and medium industries that engage in the production of soft products or in the delivery of soft services. Domestically, the initiative has a direct impact on encouraging inbound tourism and even local tourism. Region-specific cultural events and food are highlighted, and the transport and hospitality industries do their enthusiastic bit in supporting an initiative which has a direct significance for their top line. A sterling example is the Seibu-Ikebukuro railway line which begins its 60-kilometer length at Ikebukuro station in Tokyo’s Toshima Ward and heads west-northwest towards the Chichibu mountains. The railway company expounds in its publicity material posted in stations and in the carriages the delights to be enjoyed in the mountains, ranging from ancient Zen temples to delicious mountain fare, and what is attractive at several stations along the route, the major part of which is through some of greater Tokyo’s residential suburbs. The Seibu-Ikebukuro railway, wanting to leave no doubt as to its aims in the minds of its passengers in the matter of cultural products, has been operating since June 2016, several trains painted in shocking pink symbolizing the famous idol KPP, whose wide-eyed doll-like features adorn the carriage livery. KPP is a singing-dancing idol who is a human imitation of animated doll-like expressions and movements. She has a fan club of many thousands and her stage shows are a kaleidoscope of pink, sky blue, pastel green and sunshine yellow. The joint publicity blitz between the idol and the railway company was launched as a commemoration of KPP’s fifth birthday and will continue for some months. I would call this an example of “Cool Japan” at its best ([Photo 3 and 4](#)).

Introduction to Japanese Patrimony

I came to Japan in January 1991. The cultural images of the country

that I held in my mind as I embarked on my journey were that of Ikebana, the art of flower arrangement, of *chado*, the tea ceremony, and of origami, the exquisite art of paper folding. I also thought there would be dainty ladies shuffling dexterously in elaborate kimono and I would land in a nation of an extraordinarily polite 130 million people. This was not completely off the mark, though, barring the politeness, I had overestimated other parameters by several decimal points. After all, what I had imagined was a fantasyland picture of common people casually taking time off in offices and shops to arrange flowers or fold paper and

performing impromptu tea ceremonies for the passerby at every street corner. Instead of the dainty kimono-clad ladies, I discovered a sea of corporate workers who seemed to be in a uniform of dark navy blue suits, white shirts and neck-ties in non-intrusive patterns and shades.

Japan has a long history of development of the fine and performing arts. Almost every artistic discipline has been indulged in, codified and taken to an immense extent of detail and perfection to produce a unique collection of cultural inheritance. While Ikebana and origami are household words in many countries, there is a substantially much larger number of cultural activities and items which could delight the world. Every weekend of my first year in Tokyo was a discovery and over the years as I read more, saw more, observed more and travelled more in the country, I could not help but wonder at the cultural bounty Japan was endowed with.

Just as my image of seeing kimono had been rather rudely impacted by the navy blue suited salarymen, and just as cups of elegant tea making and consumption had been replaced by chain-smokers, my next surprise was the national passion for manga. Along with some of the other images which I mentioned earlier, I had thought that the average train commuter would be spending whatever spare time available on the pursuit of a higher cultural passion. I had expected that people would be deeply immersed in books that expounded cultural finesse and erudite literature and that during their tea ceremony breaks they would be engaged in scholarly discussions on culture and philosophy. I could not have been farther off the mark. Most men before the advent of the smartphone seemed to be engrossed in manga comic-books or manga-filled newspapers during their waking hours on the train. Convenience stores would invariably become manga libraries for young men in particular. It took me several years to develop an appreciation for the Japanese fascination with animation.

Anime has joined the ranks of Ikebana as a household word around the world. It is a cultural export of significance and immense potential. While my initial reaction to anime was that it’s a new-age fad with no connection to the hoary traditions of a culturally rich

country, I realized I was completely mistaken. For centuries, the Japanese people have stylized and symbolized daily activities. Puppets that behave like humans, dolls that come alive, figurines that carry the most subtle of human expressions have been an integral part of Japanese art — be it a fine art or a performing one. If one stretches the concept, it is not very difficult to see that animation is a natural extension of this creativity. In fact, it is this inherent style centered on intricacy and precision that has made Japan the technology powerhouse it has become and will continue to be

whether in electronics, science or robotics. Daily life in Japan is filled with anime. Whether it is signage involving directions or notes of caution at stations, civic centers, hospitals, shops, schools, colleges and offices, there is little chance that animation has not been used to convey the desired meaning and have the required effect.

In July every year in the outskirts of Paris, a showcase for Japanese cultural exports ranging from calligraphy to cosplay and covering a wide spectrum of music, rock, traditional games, animation, dance and fashion is held for four days. The Japan Expo is an amazingly popular event bringing under one roof a lot of what Japan has to offer in the form of *soft exports*. It is a fructification of what began in 1978 with French involvement in Japanese animation and manga.

If symbolism is an advanced artistic form in Japan, the seasons are comrades-in-arms that bolster this. The cherry-blossom tree marks spring. From the barren trees of winter spring forth buds that almost seem to suddenly burst into brilliant bloom. As quickly as they appear, the flowers disappear in a gentle flurry of petals showering in the breeze. The spectacle has been captured in poetry and in the songs of school graduation and entry ceremonies. It is an assured tear-jerker. The cherry-blossom tree has played a significant role in Japan's soft power, one of the most famous ones being Washington DC's cherry blossom avenue along the Tidal Basin — a gift from the city of Tokyo in 1912.

As the pale white and cream blossoms give way to verdant green, it soon becomes the time to celebrate Japan's summers. *Natsu matsuri* or summer festivals are community events that enliven hot and humid summer evenings with food, music and dance, and the airy cotton *yukata* worn by men, women and children. The night skies are ablaze with dazzling fireworks displays. While the most common dance pattern is the traditional *Bon-odori* in which participants of all ages form a circle around a central Japanese *taiko* drum-stand and the circle goes round and round in slow measured paces, there are dances, though participative, that require more practice and expertise. These group dances usually are specific to a region or even a village but may have been exported to elsewhere in

Photo 3: Author



KPP and Seibu Railway

Photo 4: Author



Seibu Railway Information Kiosk at Ikebukuro Station

the country. One of the most eye-catching of these is the fast-paced invigorating *Awa-odori* of Tokushima in Shikoku. I know a Japanese gentleman who has been very keen on introducing this dance overseas.

Fashion pervades Japan and the seasons provide a good excuse to indulge in an exploration of fashion. By the end of August, department stores are busy replacing the cooling summer pastel colors with material and shades that can complement the pleasant chill and blazing red and yellow of autumn. There is a vitality in the way fashion is conceived of and developed in Japan, and this dynamism could help propel Japan into a prominent place on the world's fashion stage.

Like arts and fashion, Japanese cuisine is a treasure-house molded by the seasons and modeled into finesse. *Washoku* has rightly been recognized by the United Nations as a world cultural heritage. A visit to the basement food floors of department stores is a feast for the eyes and a mouth-watering trigger for the palate. A key concept of *washoku* is indeed that well before the dish establishes contact with the tongue, it should have presented a picture of perfection to the sense of sight. It can be said for sure that this objective is fully achieved.

In Subsequent Issues

It is evident that a discussion of Japan or its economy cannot be considered complete without talking about its cultural exports. This article heralds this series on exploring Japan's potential as a global soft exporter. Through these columns, in subsequent issues, *Japan SPOTLIGHT* hopes to help its readers connect with people who are engaged in the promotion, creation and use of cultural commodities.

JS

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