

Nation Branding Through Film

By Barry Natusch



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Films can be part of a nation's cultural legacy, especially for a country as unique as Japan. Scenic spots, food noted for being healthy and tasty, clothing designed with flair, drama from age-old Noh to the avant-garde, sports such as karate and sumo, visual arts showcased in art museums: these all draw tourists and their fascination can be enhanced through films. Projecting a positive image of a country on film is the focus of this essay, what we might call nation branding through film.

Nation branding is a timely topic for Japan, busy with preparations for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics when the country will be in the international spotlight. Japan is trying to attract more foreign tourists and workers from other countries with the government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe targeting 40 million tourists at the time of the Olympics. Along with this is a refocusing of its national identity and adjusting its international image, a commendable strategy in the context of a declining population and waning international influence.

Promotional films about a country, even advertising spots, used for big events like expositions or sports events are examples of branding. But Simon Anholt, who popularized the concept of “nation branding”, has a “Be careful what you wish for” warning. He says that nation branding is much more difficult than corporate branding, and that nation branding is not something which is achieved simply through advertising campaigns and catchy slogans. Rather, it is something that requires careful study of a culture, listening to the opinions of citizens of a country and people outside it, and then fine-tuning the cultural essence of the nation.

Then there are **documentary films** which can highlight certain events or aspects of people or culture. Stories in **feature films** can also highlight a country's history, culture and people. Japan is renowned for its world-class **animation films** ranging from the sensational to inspirational. **TV dramas** can also attract an enthusiastic following. We have seen the recent rise of **social media videos**, notably on YouTube, where filmmakers post contemporary and informal snapshots of culture and behavior. In all these genres, the filmmaker can create lasting images which audiences might regard as authentic depictions of a country.

Promotional Films

New Zealand offers a prime example of successful nation branding through film, after an iconic promotional film, *This Is New Zealand*, turned the country's image into a clean, green adventure playground

for tourists, and ultimately invigorated the national economy. Shown at the Osaka Expo in 1970, it attracted one million viewers. One particular scene in the film that still gives me a thrill, even 50 years after seeing it, was shot from a helicopter soaring up the back of Mount Cook, New Zealand's highest mountain, accompanied by the overture from the *Karelia Suite* by Sibelius. The scene concluded with the view dropping away thousands of feet below to create the feeling that you, the viewer, had just plunged off the mountain, as if you were skydiving. It became an iconic image for New Zealand's scenic grandeur, demonstrating masterful matching of image to music.

So a first conclusion for making a promotional film is to locate an iconic symbol of the country, shoot it with innovative cinematography, with aerial shots adding some excitement, and matching it to a memorable soundtrack. This particular scene was the climax of the film. As is true with any narrative medium, be it stories, poetry, or news items, beginning and ending a film well is crucial.

Additionally, there has to be strong culture, and particularly art and literature carry powerful images. Personally, that was what first brought me to Japan in 1973 — the *ukiyo-e* scenes of Hokusai and Hiroshige, films such as Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* and Yasujiro Ozu's *Tokyo Story*. Coming from New Zealand, with a similar geography but vastly different culture, it was like arriving in a parallel universe.

A Winning Japanese Promotional Film

The Tokyo promotional video played its part in winning the nomination for Tokyo. In 2013, three cities were on the shortlist to host the 2020 Olympic Games: Tokyo, Madrid and Istanbul. Three promotional videos were made — in Japan, Spain and Turkey — to summarize what each country had to offer. From a persuasive point of view, the Tokyo promotional video checked all the criteria boxes ([Table](#)).

We now have a second conclusion about making a successful promotional film: great visuals, music and sound effects, cinematography, characters captured in heroic actions, edited to flow along at a crisp pace, with a sense of rhythm, building to a climax laden with emotion; these are vital components.

TABLE

Olympic bid promotional films for Tokyo, Madrid & Istanbul

○ = Outstanding, △ = Average

	Tokyo	Madrid	Istanbul
Heroic Characters	○	△	△
Story	○	△	△
Cinematography	○	○	○
Music	○	△	△
Editing (pacing)	○	○	○
Special Effects	○	○	○
Emotive	○	△	△

Source: Compiled by the author

Documentary Films

A Tokyo 2020 Olympic documentary film is a chance to create a national legacy highlighting Japanese culture and technology. At the same time, another parallel event held in conjunction with the Olympics, the Paralympics, is also an opportunity for Japan to provide leadership in how it organizes and supports the event. Technology, social services, and improvements in access, highlighting the needs of minority groups, could all be part of a film record.

A classic example of a documentary film about Japan, and the Olympics, is Kon Ichikawa's 1964 *Tokyo Olympiad* (Photo 1). Ichikawa's film became a subtle and sympathetic branding of the country and a positive portrayal of Japan. This was a film which was highly praised by critics because of its direction, vignetting, cinematography and editing. Producing a film about the Olympics is not easy, and there have been only a handful of Olympic documentary films which have been critically acclaimed, but Ichikawa's film, together with Leni Riefenstahl's film of the Berlin Olympics in 1936, are at the top of the list.

In *Tokyo Olympiad*, Ichikawa mixed Olympic history and ritual with Japanese culture to portray Japan as a modern nation rebuilding itself after World War II. Ichikawa deployed considerable resources: 164 cameramen, 100 cameras, 250 different lenses, and 57 sound recordists. To create the unique atmosphere of the film, he used telephoto lenses to show dramatic psychological insights and artistic effects focusing on the struggle of athletes through vignettes, highlighting their pain and triumph, as well as candid shots of spectators.

Ichikawa's film was criticized by some officials of the Japanese Olympic Committee and politicians initially for not being sufficiently nationalistic. But over time, the framing of the scenes and the vignettes he interwove resulted in a poignant portrait of Japan, and the Olympics, at the time.

Framing how a story is told is all about what facts are included

Photo 1: Wikimedia Commons



Kon Ichikawa

and which ones are left out. In film, framing and cropping the shots also help focus the story. The camera, the telephoto lens, and the post-production editing may capture close-ups which bring the viewer into intimate contact with the subject. Or the subject may be framed as far-off, in a public space, to suggest loneliness or vulnerability. Ichikawa, possibly as a result of his early training as a film animator, was a master of framing and used telephoto lenses to great effect focusing on athletes and spectators against a blurred or *bokke* background.

Aside from Ichikawa's filming of the Olympic events and the spectacle of ceremonies, glimpses of Japan in the film portrayed it as an exotic destination to attract visitors. The use of aerial shots of Hiroshima, the runners carrying the Olympic flame through the Japanese towns and villages, shots along the coast, the Shinkansen passing by Mount Fuji, Japanese faces at the Olympics, flashes of Japanese streets and shops: these were scenes as intriguing and inspiring as footage of the Olympics themselves, and elicited reactions such as "Wow, that's a place I'd like to visit."

The Tokyo 2020 Olympics is an opportunity for another great film to be made to showcase Japan. Much has changed on the political, funding and technical sides of filmmaking since the 1960s so production variables are likely to result in a very different film to Ichikawa's. Naomi Kawase was recently named as the director of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics documentary which suggests that the Tokyo 2020 film will be directed differently too. It may even include more attention to Paralympic events. The art of Ichikawa ensured his film would remain a classic, so the director of the Tokyo 2020 film will have big shoes to fill. Ichikawa had considerable funding and technical resources with many professionals and equipment to create more than 70 hours of footage to edit. The Japan Olympic Committee will oversee funding but it would not be surprising to see commercial sponsorship and crowdfunding also. There is also the possibility of crowdsourcing to encourage other professional and amateur filmmakers to contribute their experience, expertise and extra footage.

Aside from Japanese athletes winning Olympic events, the location of Tokyo, and the opening and closing ceremonies create an

opportunity for a filmmaker to showcase aspects of a national culture. Opening ceremonies tend to be formal and ceremonial affairs, closing ceremonies by contrast can turn into spontaneous parties full of surprises. The host country's language, national figures, anthem, flag and other cultural artifacts are in the world spotlight during openings and closings.

Feature Films

Films which tell a fictional story also help brand a country. However, feature films are an indirect way for nation branding except in countries which use them for propaganda purposes. A film is a combination of several arts: writing, performances, visuals, set design, costumes, cinematography — all these elements can contribute to cultural branding in the production. Japan experienced a heyday of filmmaking in the 1950s and 1960s. A 2018 survey of the 50 greatest films of all time by 846 critics, academics and distributors included the following four Japanese films from that era, sometimes referred to as a golden age for Japanese cinema (*Photo 2*).

Japanese films in top 50 greatest films of all time chosen by 846 film professionals (2018)

Tokyo Story (1953) Yasujiro Ozu (ranked 3)
Seven Samurai (1954) Akira Kurosawa (ranked 17)
Rashomon (1950) Akira Kurosawa (ranked 26)
Ugetsu Monogatari (1953) Kenji Mizoguchi (ranked 50)

This is not to say that these films would act as promotional material for modern Japan. They are too removed in time for that now. There are films which represent more modern aspects of Japan

Photo 2: Wikimedia Commons



Do Japanese films of the 1950s match contemporary tastes?
(Seven Samurai)

and which portray positive aspects of Japanese society and might spark people's curiosity about the culture and perhaps to visit, such as Katsuhito Ishii's *Taste of Tea* (2004), or Hirokazu Koreeda's *Our Little Sister* (2016) or even films by non-Japanese filmmakers highlighting locations in Japan such as *Lost in Translation* (2003) or *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* (2011). However, the effect of contemporary feature films helping brand Japan and attract visitors is not usually a priority in such films, but might be mentioned in a publicity campaign.

Animation Films

Japan is recognized as a center of animation films, tracing their manga roots back as far as *ukiyo-e* in the Edo Era. As with feature films, animation films are not generally made deliberately for nation branding purposes. Of the top 20 great anime films of all time, almost half are Japanese.

Japanese films in ranking of top 20 animation films (2018)

2. *Akira* (1988) Katsuhiro Otomo
5. *Perfect Blue* (1997) Satoshi Kon
6. *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988) Isao Takahata
7. *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) Hayao Miyazaki
8. *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) Mamoru Oshii
11. *Princess Mononoke* (1997) Hayao Miyazaki
13. *Paprika* (2006) Satoshi Kon
17. *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time* (2006) Mamoru Hosoda

Among the consistent performers is Hayao Miyazaki's Studio Ghibli which has a big international fan following, with animation films such as *Spirited Away* (2001), *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988) (*Photo 3*), *Porco Rosso* (1992) and *Castle in the Sky* (Laputa) (1986).

Photo 3: Author



Catbuses

TV Dramas

TV serial dramas can also play an important role in branding a country. Productions from the United States and the United Kingdom particularly enjoy a big international following. Japanese TV dramas, especially the NHK *asadora*, help brand Japan. A TV drama series can capture a loyal following and according to NHK, some of its *asadora* drama series are watched by 35% to 45% of its viewers. However, Japanese TV dramas are less accessible and not as well-known to international viewers because of language and cultural differences. Still, some foreigners use these dramas for learning Japanese language because they provide regular, timed input, with an emotive component, unlike drier pedagogical programs. Hundreds of TV dramas have been screened over the years, but some of the most watched ones include *Oshin* (a story of a woman who became a supermarket chain owner), *Kaseifu no Mita [I am Mita, Your Housekeeper]* (a family of a father and four children whose mother died and took in a housekeeper) and *Rich Man Poor Woman* (a workplace drama). As with feature films, branding Japan and attracting visitors is not a priority, but might be mentioned in a publicity campaign.

Social Media & Amateur Videography

Videos posted on YouTube ([Photo 4](#)) attract quite startling numbers of viewers with some posts “going viral”. Other videographers create a channel of movies for their followers to watch whenever a new one is posted. These videos may be very economically produced and if they attract millions of hits make a very cost-effective way of leveraging the visibility of the video producers. At the same time, some videographers are tapping into the interest in Japan as a travel destination and producing videos which brand the country.

One young partnership, Rachel and Jun, were recently featured in a BBC article, which then increased the number of their already several million followers. Not only did the producers gain publicity for themselves, but Japan gained authentic informal branding exposure. Their subjects typically have a cute focus such as cats or foxes, or humorous yet thoughtful takes on cultural differences between Japan and other countries. An approach like this emphasizes the fun side of Japanese culture, reminiscent of how Germany helped rebrand its national image from being an overly

serious culture to a more relaxed one prior to hosting the FIFA World Cup in 2006. The rise of social media dramatically demonstrates the reach of social media in carrying a national branding message to a vastly bigger audience than those attending a cinema showing of a film.

Increasing Exposure

In 1970	1 million saw <i>This Is New Zealand</i> at Osaka Expo
Every year	8 million visitors to Universal Studios
Since 2001	10 million visitors to Ghibli Museum
Since 2012	200 million have seen Rachel and Jun's YouTube videos

Aftermarket Film Industry

Associated industries which link to film can attract tourists. Universal Studios in California is a tourist site in its own right, drawing around 8 million visitors each year. The New Zealand locations of *Lord of the Rings* continue to draw visitors from abroad. Studio Ghibli Museum has become a pilgrimage destination for Miyazaki fans with 10 million visiting the museum in Mitaka, Tokyo since it opened in 2001. Toys and mascots are spin-offs from films ([Photo 5](#)).

But not everyone travels to Japan for the same reasons. A recent survey reported on which places in Tokyo tourists from a variety of countries like to visit. Indians go to Akihabara, Chinese to Ginza, Taiwanese to Asakusa, Americans and Europeans to Shibuya. So using film to brand a country to target tourists is complicated.

Japan's film industry supports an enormous number of anime productions. At the Olympic closing ceremony in Rio de Janeiro in 2016, Abe made an appearance as Super Mario, an internationally



Photo 4: Wikimedia Commons



Photo 5: Author

Film-specific tourism: Studio Ghibli Museum in Tokyo

known animation character, emphasizing the strength of animation in Japan's international branding profile. It has been suggested that a parade of anime characters could be featured during the 2020 Olympics. Also associated with film is cosplay, or costume play. Around Harajuku on weekends many tourists come to see young Japanese dressing up in film-inspired costumes. While cosplay is not a purely Japanese cultural phenomenon, some of the characters portrayed originate in cinema, anime, and manga and find an appeal among younger tourists.

Components of a Memorable Film

The content, the story that is told, is paramount. Moving images of the land, the people, and the culture can leave an indelible and lasting impression. The sounds add to this, whether it is language captured in snatches of dialogue, or music to set an atmosphere, or sound effects added. Still images of paintings, sculptures, gardens, landscapes, and cityscapes vary the pace and focus the attention. Technical aspects of filmmaking such as close-ups, zoom shots, time lapse or aerial photography are crucial in triggering strong feelings in the viewer. Because that is what film does: as an emotive medium, its goal is to thrill the audience, or make them feel good (*Chart*).

Promotional, documentary, feature, animation and YouTube films differ in their power to brand a country and persuade visitors to come as tourists, students or for work. Promotional films generally

adopt a hard-sell approach, like an advertising commercial, whereas documentary films, feature films or TV dramas highlight aspects of culture and thus carry a more subtle message akin to a soft-sell approach.

In designing a promotional film, visuals, music, and vignettes need to be trialed on pilot groups or focus groups before deploying funds. As Anholt cautions, nation branding is not something which is achieved simply through advertising campaigns and revamped slogans, and a promotional film for a country needs to be thoroughly researched before the scriptwriter, director and cinematographer set to work on the narrative.

Films are expensive to make and involve many people. A government policy of arts support can help, and nowadays filmmakers sometimes turn to crowdfunding for financial help. Crowdsourcing footage can also help lower costs and democratize the filmmaking process.

Those who commission films should not hasten to influence or judge what creative filmmakers produce. The reactions of some politicians and the Japan Olympic Committee officials after Ichikawa released his Tokyo Olympiad, in saying it should have been more nationalistic and less artistic, were proved wrong by the status the film achieved through not being overtly nationalistic and being made with nuanced aesthetics.

The role of social media and YouTube and amateur video production should not be ignored. Young people do not think like the older generation and have different interests, as we have seen in the kind of animation films they are fans of. They also access information and communicate in different ways than older generations. Young people look for a different focus in a film, the way the story is told, and technical aspects of its direction.

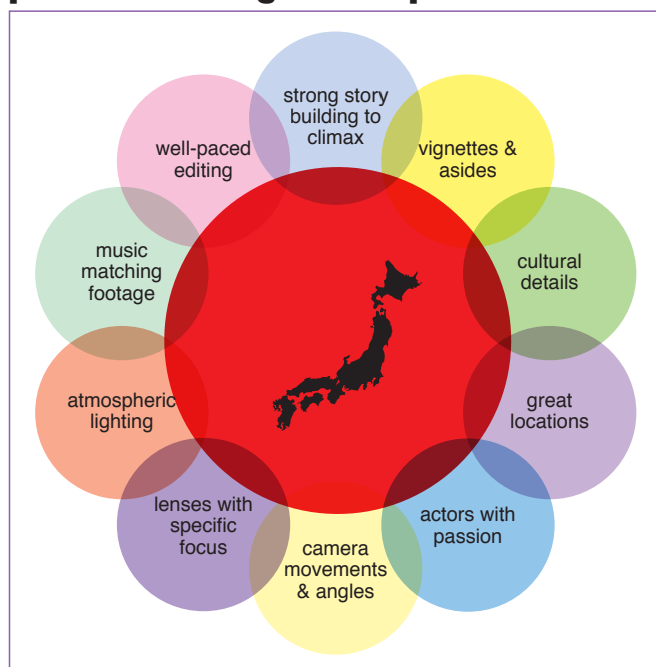
Visual framing as used in filming was mentioned. But there is another aspect to framing: a film's release can be framed by timing, location, and context. For example, the New Zealand film *This Is New Zealand* was showcased at the Osaka 1970 Expo. Ichikawa's film was shown to the emperor, members of the Olympic Committee and the press. Where, when and who gets to see a film (the framing of its debut) is a critical factor in its reception.

A world event, like the Olympic Games, is an opportunity to leave a memory of a country in the international spotlight through a great film. Japanese culture is not just sushi and sashimi; there are abstract qualities which can be emphasized too in branding Japan, such as the sophistication of the society, that it is a safe place and the people are well-known for their sincerity.

JS

CHART

Components of a film to promote positive feelings for Japan



Source: Compiled by the author

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