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**THE USE OF SOFT POWER IN JAPAN'S FOREIGN RELATIONS  
IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

BACHELOR THESIS

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### The Use of Soft Power in Japan's Foreign Relations in the 21st Century

*Keywords: Japan, soft power, cultural diplomacy, international relations, Cool Japan.*

The object of the research: The concept and practice of soft power in statecraft.

The subject of the research: Japan's foreign relations (2000-2024) as a field where soft-power instruments are deployed.

Relevance and importance of the topic: Since the early 2000s Japan has lacked room for classical hard-power with constitutional restraints on military action, yet has become a global trend-setter in popular culture, technology branding and development cooperation. Understanding how these intangible resources translate (or fail to translate) into diplomatic leverage is essential for scholars of international relations and for practitioners designing attraction-based strategies in an era of great-power competition and digital information warfare, as well as for understanding whether middle powers can compensate for hard-power deficits through attraction.

Methods: Qualitative document analysis of MOFA Bluebooks, METI papers, Japan Foundation reports; source review of academic literature; comparative regional case studies; triangulation with secondary quantitative data.

The aim of the research:

1. To chart the evolution of Japan's soft-power toolkit from "Gross National Cool" to the post-pandemic digital era.
2. To evaluate the effectiveness and limitations of these instruments in advancing concrete foreign-policy objectives.

The tasks of the research:

1. Review and synthesize theories of soft power, public diplomacy, nation branding and normative power.
2. Map Japan's principal soft-power resources and the state-private nexus that promotes them.
3. Analyze quantitative indicators against policy inflection points.
4. Compare reception and political outcomes across four regional theatres;

### Hypotheses:

1. Since 2000 the Japanese government has systematically elevated soft power-culture, public diplomacy, ODA and normative leadership to a collar pillar of statecraft.
2. Japan's soft-power instruments translate into diplomatic dividend. where partner societies perceive cultural/technological appeal and normative agendas as congruent with their own interests, but has a limited influence in more hostile environments.
- 3: The systematic elevation of soft-power instruments since 2000 enables Japan to sustain its international influence despite constitutional limits on hard power.

Empirical evidence drawn from data, documents, and the four regional case-studies confirm hypotheses: after 2000 Tokyo trebled soft-power spending, launched the Cool Japan Fund, expanded Japan-Foundation programs and embedded “quality growth” / FOIP language in ODA charters-moves that have kept Japan's global favorability above 70 % in ASEAN and the G-7. Data on tourism surges, FDI upticks and maritime-law cooperation also supports it, where partner interests overlap with Japan's cultural appeal and normative offers, soft power yields visible dividends in policy alignment and market access. Work also validate, that the rise in attraction is limited to extend, but still exist, when historical grievances dominate (China and South Korea), confirming the asymmetric reach and influence of Japan's soft-power strategy.

## Ростислав Морозов

### Использование мягкой силы в международных отношениях Японии в 21 веке

Ключевые слова: *Япония, мягкая сила, культурная дипломатия, международные отношения, Cool Japan.*

Объект исследования: Концепция и практика применения мягкой силы в государственном управлении.

Предмет исследования: Международные отношения Японии (2000-2024 гг.) как сфера применения инструментов мягкой силы.

Актуальность и важность темы: С начала 2000-х годов Японии не хватает ресурсов для классической жесткой силы с конституционными ограничениями на военные действия, однако она стала мировым законодателем в области популярной культуры, технологического брендинга и развития сотрудничества. Понимание того, как эти нематериальные ресурсы трансформируются (или не трансформируются) в дипломатические рычаги влияния, важно для ученых, изучающих международные отношения, и для практиков, разрабатывающих стратегии привлечения в эпоху конкуренции великих держав и цифровой информационной войны, а также для понимания того, могут ли средние державы компенсировать дефицит жесткой силы за счет привлекательности.

Методы: Качественный анализ документов, отчетов Японского фонда; обзор научной литературы; сравнительные региональные тематические исследования; триангуляция с вторичными количественными данными.

Цель исследования:

1. Проследить эволюцию инструментария «мягкой силы» Японии от «валового национального продукта» до пост пандемической цифровой эры.
2. Оценить эффективность и ограничения этих инструментов в достижении конкретных внешнеполитических целей

Задачи исследования:

1. Обзор и синтез теорий мягкой силы, публичной дипломатии, национального брендинга и нормативной силы.

2. Составить карту основных ресурсов «мягкой силы» Японии и связей между государством и частным сектором, которые способствуют их развитию.
3. Проанализировать количественные индикаторы в сопоставлении с «переломными» точками в политике.
4. Сравнить восприятие и политические результаты на четырех региональных театрах;

Гипотезы:

1. С 2000 года японское правительство систематически возводит мягкую силу - культуру, публичную дипломатию, ОПП и нормативное лидерство - в ранг главной опоры государственного управления.
2. Инструменты мягкой силы Японии приносят дипломатические дивиденды в тех случаях, когда общества-партнеры воспринимают культурную/технологическую привлекательность и нормативную повестку как соответствующие их собственным интересам, но имеют ограниченное влияние в более враждебных средах.
3. Систематическое повышение роли инструментов мягкой силы с 2000 года позволяет Японии сохранять свое международное влияние, несмотря на конституционные ограничения на жесткую силу.

Эмпирические данные, полученные на основе документов, статистик и четырех региональных кейс-стади, подтверждают гипотезы: после 2000 года Токио утроил расходы на «мягкую силу», запустил фонд Cool Japan, расширил программы Japan-Foundation и включил формулировку «качественный рост» / FOIP в хартию ОПП - шаги, которые поддерживают глобальную привлекательность Японии выше 70 % в АСЕАН и G-7. Данные о росте туризма, увеличении ПИИ и сотрудничестве в области морского права также подтверждают: там, где интересы партнеров совпадают с культурной привлекательностью и нормативными предложениями Японии, мягкая сила приносит видимые дивиденды в виде политических позиций и доступа на рынки. Работа также подтверждает, что рост привлекательности ограничен, но существует, когда доминируют исторические обиды (Китай и Южная Корея), подтверждая асимметричный охват и влияние японской стратегии «мягкой силы».

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## INTRODUCTION

Japan's international behavior in the post-war period has consistently challenged traditional assumptions about how power functions in global politics. Deprived of the legal and political means to engage in overt military action, and shaped by a pacifist constitution that renounces the use of force as a tool of statecraft, Japan has relied on alternative instruments to maintain its status and relevance in the international system<sup>1</sup>. Over the past two decades, this orientation has developed into a comprehensive strategy focused on soft power - the ability to influence other states and societies not through coercion or payments, but through attraction, persuasion, and the shaping of preferences<sup>2</sup>. This approach has been especially prominent since the early 2000s, when Japanese policymakers began placing increased emphasis on public diplomacy, cultural outreach, and global development cooperation as central elements of foreign policy<sup>3</sup>.

The promotion of Japanese culture abroad - whether through anime, manga, cinema, design, cuisine, or language - has been actively supported by the state, culminating in initiatives such as «Cool Japan» which sought not only to celebrate domestic creativity but to institutionalize it as a diplomatic resource<sup>4</sup>. In parallel, Japan has continued to play a visible role in the international development sector, offering assistance and expertise across Southeast Asia, Africa, and beyond. While these efforts have certainly enhanced Japan's global profile and contributed to a generally favorable image abroad, the question of their effectiveness as tools of foreign policy remains open. Positive reputation, after all, does not necessarily lead to alignment on strategic issues, nor does cultural admiration guarantee political support in moments of diplomatic tension<sup>5</sup>. This discrepancy between recognition and influence - between visibility and impact - defines the central dilemma that underlies the present inquiry.

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<sup>1</sup> Soeya Y. Japan: Normative Constraints Versus Structural Imperatives. In: Alagappa M, ed. *Asian Security Practice: Material and Ideational Influences*. Stanford University Press; 1998:207-243

<sup>2</sup> Nye JS. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. PublicAffairs; 2004

<sup>3</sup> Watanabe Y, McConnell D, eds. *Soft Power Superpowers: Cultural and National Assets of Japan and the United States*. M.E. Sharpe; 2008

<sup>4</sup> Iwabuchi K. Pop-culture diplomacy in Japan: Soft power, nation branding and the question of 'international cultural exchange'. *Int J Cult Policy*. 2015;21(4):419-432

<sup>5</sup> Lam P. Japan's quest for "soft power": Attraction and limitation. *East Asia*. 2007;24(4):349-363

At the same time, the international context in which Japan operates has undergone significant transformation. The rise of China as a regional and global actor, the diversification of soft-power actors (including South Korea, with its own cultural wave), and the increased competition for attention in global public opinion have all raised the stakes of cultural diplomacy. In such an environment, soft power can no longer be treated as a symbolic or secondary concern; rather, it becomes a contested and strategically relevant domain in which states seek not only to project national identity but to shape the normative frameworks and policy preferences of others<sup>6</sup>. Japan's engagement with soft power, in this context, is not merely a cultural initiative - it is a political act with long-term strategic implications.

Despite growing scholarly interest in soft power, Japan's case remains underexamined in empirical and comparative terms. Much of the existing literature focuses either on theoretical definitions of soft power or on descriptive accounts of Japanese cultural exports<sup>7</sup>. Fewer studies examine how these tools are integrated into broader foreign policy strategies, how they are received in specific regional contexts, and whether they translate into tangible diplomatic outcomes. In addition, the tension between Japan's pacifist identity and its aspiration for global influence raises important theoretical questions about the relationship between normative commitments and strategic behavior<sup>8</sup>. Can a state that renounces coercion still be influential in matters of regional and global security? Can soft power be used not only to improve image but to shape international preferences in concrete, policy-relevant ways?

These questions are particularly pressing in light of Japan's continued efforts to position itself as a leader in areas such as human security, environmental governance, and development cooperation<sup>9</sup>. Japan's contribution to the conceptualization of «human security» for example, reflects both its normative orientation and its desire to exercise leadership in global governance beyond traditional power politics, as stated by Japanese

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<sup>6</sup> Nye JS. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. PublicAffairs; 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Lam P. Japan's quest for "soft power": Attraction and limitation. *East Asia*. 2007;24(4):349-363

<sup>8</sup> Watanabe Y, McConnell D, eds. *Soft Power Superpowers: Cultural and National Assets of Japan and the United States*. M.E. Sharpe; 2008

<sup>9</sup> Watanabe Y, McConnell D, eds. *Soft Power Superpowers: Cultural and National Assets of Japan and the United States*. M.E. Sharpe; 2008



governmental people itself.<sup>10</sup> . Its role in the creation and funding of development institutions, capacity-building programs, and disaster response initiatives further underscores the extent to which Japan sees soft power as integral to its international presence. And yet, the reception of these efforts is uneven. While Southeast Asian countries have often welcomed Japanese assistance and cultural influence, Japan's soft power has encountered more skepticism in Northeast Asia, where historical grievances and territorial disputes continue to complicate relations with China and South Korea<sup>11</sup>.

In light of these tensions, Japan's soft-power strategy cannot be assessed in isolation from the broader political and historical context in which it is deployed. Cultural diplomacy does not operate in a vacuum - it intersects with memory politics, strategic alliances, domestic identity narratives, and the evolving architecture of regional order in East Asia and beyond. Any serious analysis of Japan's soft power must therefore account not only for what Japan projects but also for how those messages are interpreted, contested, or reappropriated by foreign publics and governments. Understanding these dynamics is essential for evaluating the real significance of soft power as a tool of Japanese diplomacy and, more broadly, for assessing the viability of attraction-based influence in an era increasingly defined by ideological competition and information warfare.

My personal interest in the topic of this thesis probably plays the most important justification of why I'm preparing this. While on an exchange study program in Japan, I often noticed banners and other forms of advertising on every corner, especially the center streets. At first, I wrote it off as the usual advertisement movement, but gradually I came to realize that almost all of the things mentioned on the ads were very much recognized and discussed outside of Japan. For example, the anime Jujutsu Kaisen, whose banner I often saw near Lawson at my dorm, has been a raging subject of viewing and discussion for several years now. Demon Slayer, from whose entourage one of the trains I rode was painted, was not far behind in popularity in the world ratings. Nationally branded cars like Nissan and Mitsubishi were almost not as popular as in other countries. Technological giants such as Sony, which had a good advertising campaign in their homeland, are not

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<sup>10</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. *Diplomatic Bluebook 2019*. MOFA; 2019

<sup>11</sup> Lam P. Japan's quest for "soft power": Attraction and limitation. *East Asia*. 2007;24(4):349-363.

inferior in popularity and markets of other countries in terms of recognizability. Even certain phrases in Japanese, like good morning (ohayo), have had special popularity and context outside of Japan.

There are many such examples, but this is the main point- it motivated me to want to learn more about how national assets, cultural phenomena, and other derivative products of Japanese society are used as tools in the international relations arena - which ones can be used in this way at all, and how powerful their influence is in different parts of the world.

The study focuses on the 21st century (approximately 2000 - 2024). This period covers Japan's post - Cold War foreign-policy evolution, including the rise of Cool Japan initiatives and the nation's increased global engagement under multiple administrations. Data from the early 2000s through the present are considered, capturing trends such as the impact of the 2011 disaster, Abenomics, and the Tokyo Olympics on Japan's international image. Geographically, the scope is primarily on regions central to Japan's diplomacy (Asia-Pacific, North America, Europe), though other regions may be addressed in case studies for comparison.

The object of this research is Japan's foreign relations in the 21st century as influenced by soft power, and the subject is the concept of soft power in statecraft. The central task addressed in this thesis is to find how and to what extent and efficiency Japan employs soft power as an instrument in its foreign policy, and what implications this has for understanding of power in international relations. Despite widespread acknowledgement of Japan's cultural appeal and diplomatic efforts, there is a need for a systematic analysis of how these translate into political influence. Put differently, the thesis interrogates the efficacy and limits of Japan's soft power: How has Japan operationalized soft power in its diplomacy, and has this strategy effectively furthered its foreign policy objectives in the contemporary era?

Within this overarching problem, the thesis develops a set of guiding questions. First, what are the primary sources and instruments of Japan's soft power in the 21st century? This involves identifying Japan's key soft power resources – such as cultural exports (animation, J-pop, cuisine, fashion), values and policies (democracy, pacifism, developmental

assistance), and diplomacy (education exchanges, global initiatives, media outreach) – and examining how the Japanese state has cultivated and deployed these assets abroad. Second, how has Japan’s use of soft power evolved over the past two decades, and what domestic or international factors have influenced this evolution? Here the analysis considers, for example, how different Japanese administrations prioritized soft power (for instance, comparing the approaches of Prime Ministers from Koizumi to Abe), and how external circumstances (the rise of China’s regional influence, globalization of Japanese pop culture, shifting global governance issues) have shaped Japan’s soft power strategy<sup>12</sup>. Third, to what extent have Japan’s soft power efforts translated into tangible foreign policy outcomes? This question probes the effectiveness of soft power: evaluating cases such as Japan’s initiative in winning international support for its positions or leadership in multilateral forums, and whether cultural affinity or economic aid has swayed other nations’ policies in Japan’s favor. It also entails a critical look at the limits of soft power – recognizing that admiration for Japanese culture does not automatically resolve geopolitical disputes. Indeed, some studies observe that while Japan’s pop culture fandom and economic ties have spread globally, these have not always improved its political relationships in East Asia. Historical grievances, particularly in China and South Korea, have constrained Japan’s regional soft power; deep-seated mistrust rooted in 20th-century conflicts means that anime and high-speed trains alone cannot overcome issues of wartime memory and nationalism<sup>13</sup>. This highlights a hypothesis that soft power, though beneficial, has an uneven impact and may require complementary efforts (such as reconciliation initiatives) to fully translate into diplomatic capital.

The working hypothesis of this research is that Japan’s deliberate focus on soft power has been a crucial and conscious component of its foreign policy in the 21st century, enabling it to maintain and even expand its international influence in areas where hard power cannot be exercised. By leveraging cultural appeal, fostering international cooperation, and championing global norms, Japan is posited to achieve outcomes – strengthening alliances, enhancing its national image, and contributing to global governance – that might otherwise

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<sup>12</sup> Nye JS Jr. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs; 2004

<sup>13</sup> Lam P. Japan’s quest for “soft power”: Attraction and limitation. *East Asia*. 2007;24(4):349-363

be unattainable given its military self-restraint<sup>14</sup>. The hypothesis also posits that Japan's soft power strategy is not static: it responds to geopolitical shifts (such as the need to counterbalance a rising China's influence through attraction rather than intimidation) and is continually refined to address any shortcomings (e.g., recognizing the need to engage youth and civil society abroad, or to address historical perception gaps that blunt its appeal in Asia). In essence, Japan may be seen as a test case of Nye's claim<sup>15</sup> that in a globalized information age, "smaller, less militarily powerful" nations can still play outsized roles by excelling in the soft power arena.

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<sup>14</sup> Calder KE. Japanese culture: source of power on world stage? *Japan Spotlight*. 2009; (Sept/Oct):30-33.

<sup>15</sup> Nye JS Jr. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs; 2004

# 1. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

## 1.1. Theoretical Approaches

Soft Power Theory. Soft power, introduced by Joseph Nye, emphasizes a state's ability to achieve its goals through attraction rather than coercion or payment. Nye famously defines soft power as the ability to obtain preferred outcomes through the attraction of culture, political values, and foreign policies <sup>16</sup>. This stands in contrast to conventional «hard power» (military/economic force) by focusing on intangible sources of influence. In Japan's context, soft power is evident in its global cultural exports (e.g., anime, cuisine, and media), its technological reputation, and its emphasis on peaceful diplomacy. This perspective underscores how Japan's cultural appeal complements its material power and shapes its foreign relations.

Constructivism. Constructivist theory focuses on how state interests and identities are socially constructed by ideas and norms. Alexander Wendt <sup>17</sup> famously argued that «anarchy is what states make of it, emphasizing that international outcomes depend on shared ideas rather than fixed material capabilities. From a constructivist perspective, Japan's behavior is shaped by its cultural and historical identity - for example, its postwar pacifist ethos and consensus-driven society influence its diplomacy. Constructivist analysis would examine how domestic norms and historical narratives shape Japan's foreign policy and use of soft power. Thus, constructivism links Japan's international role to constructed norms and collective identity.

Normative Power. Normative power theory examines how states influence others by promoting values and norms. Ian Manners <sup>18</sup> defines normative power as the ability to shape conceptions of what is «normal» in international relations. This concept highlights how ideology and principles can serve as sources of influence. Manners specifically described the EU as a paradigmatic «normative power» for projecting values. In Japan's case, the country's postwar emphasis on pacifism, human security, and the rule of law

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<sup>16</sup> Nye JS. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs; 2004

<sup>17</sup> Wendt A. Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics. *International Organization*. 1992;46(2):391-425

<sup>18</sup> Manners I. Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms? *Journal of Common Market Studies*. 2002;40(2):235-258

exemplifies normative power. Japan's promotion of these values through development aid and international engagement can thus be seen as shaping global norms.

**Realism.** Realism is the traditional paradigm focusing on material power and national interest. Realists assume an anarchic international system in which states prioritize security and economic strength over ideology. From a realist perspective (for example, Morgenthau<sup>19</sup>, soft power and cultural appeal are secondary to strategic interests. Thus, realism would interpret Japan's foreign policy primarily through its hard power constraints (e.g., its pacifist constitution and security alliance with the United States) rather than its cultural assets. Realism provides a contrast by downplaying soft power and highlighting behavior driven by security competition.

**Liberalism.** Liberalism emphasizes international institutions, economic interdependence, and domestic values. Liberal theory highlights the role of international organizations and law in shaping state behavior. Scholars like Keohane and Nye<sup>20</sup> argue that power also includes the ability to co-opt others through networks and cooperation. In Japan's case, its active roles in the United Nations, OECD, and international development reflect these liberal patterns. However, liberalism typically treats culture as a secondary factor, focusing on institutions and economic ties. In short, liberal theory complements realism by emphasizing cooperation and norms, but like realism it does not center on cultural soft power.

**Foreign Relations.** Foreign relations refer to the totality of a state's interactions with external actors - other states, international organizations, and transnational groups - including diplomatic, economic, cultural, and security dimensions. Whereas foreign policy denotes the strategic plan formulated by government officials, foreign relations encompass both that policy and the myriad day-to-day contacts, agreements, and perceptions that arise from it<sup>21</sup>. For this thesis, the term designates the arena in which Japan deploys soft-power instruments (public diplomacy, cultural exports, normative appeals) to shape international attitudes and

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<sup>19</sup> Morgenthau HJ. *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. 6th ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf; 1985

<sup>20</sup> Keohane OR, Nye JS. *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition*. 2nd ed. Boston: Little, Brown; 1989

<sup>21</sup> Morgenthau HJ. *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. 6th ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf; 1985

outcomes. Examining Japan's foreign relations thus situates soft-power initiatives within the broader network of bilateral and multilateral ties that define Japan's external engagement.

## 1.2 Review of Key Literature

Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. This foundational work by Nye introduces and defines the concept of soft power, contrasting it with «hard» coercive power. He explains soft power as the ability of a country to attract and co-opt others to want what it wants, rather than forcing compliance. Nye<sup>22</sup> emphasizes that a nation's culture, ideology, and institutions can become persuasive resources to shape international preferences. This text is indispensable for the thesis: it provides the core theoretical definition of soft power and underpins the analysis of Japan's foreign policy strategy by clarifying how attraction-based influence operates. Nye's formulation will be used as the baseline concept for measuring Japan's non-coercive influence in the 21st century.

Reinhard Drifte, *The Use of Soft Power in Japan's Foreign Relations*. In this chapter, Drifte examines how Japan leverages its economic and technological strengths to exert influence internationally. He<sup>23</sup> argues that Japan's «soft power derives from its economic, financial and technological power» citing Japan's status as a top importer of critical resources and a major contributor of foreign aid. Drifte shows how Japan translates this structural economic power into diplomatic influence through international regimes and aid, relying on economic measures in place of military force. This source is significant for historical context: it applies soft power theory to Japan's case in the post-Cold War era (1990s) and highlights the country's unique combination of wealth and pacifist identity. In the thesis, Drifte will be used to illustrate how Japan's material prosperity and global economic role have traditionally underpinned its soft power, complementing the more cultural emphasis of later works.

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<sup>22</sup> Nye JS. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs; 2004

<sup>23</sup> Drifte, R. *The Use of Soft Power in Japan's Foreign Relations*. In: *Japan's Foreign Policy in the 1990s*. St Antony's Series. Palgrave Macmillan, London (1996).

Roberto Nisi, *The Soft Power of Cool: Japanese Foreign Policy in the 21st Century* (2017). Nisi's analysis<sup>24</sup> (a university preprint) examines Japan's deliberate turn toward soft power in recent decades. He argues that modern Japanese foreign policy increasingly relies on cultural attraction and economic creativity - for example, through «manga diplomacy» investments in creative industries, and widespread cultural exports - to improve the country's international image. The paper traces Japan's transformation from a mere economic powerhouse to a self-styled «soft power superpower» naming key government and private actors behind this shift. This source is important because it provides a concise, up-to-date overview of Japan's current soft power strategy, identifying the main instruments (anime, J-pop, etc.) and the rationale behind them. In the thesis, Nisi will be cited to support claims about Japan's recent policy priorities and to contextualize the timeframe (post-1990s) of Japan's soft-power expansion.

Douglas McGray, «Japan's Gross National Cool» (*Foreign Policy*, 2002). McGray's influential essay describes how Japan's cultural influence continued to grow even as its economy faltered. He<sup>25</sup> notes that in the 2000s, Japan was «reinventing [a] superpower» culturally: its appeal in pop music, fashion, design, cuisine, and other domains was higher than during its 1980s economic heyday. This phenomenon is captured by his coined phrase «Gross National Cool» - the idea that Japan's «cool» cultural exports can generate global affection and prestige. McGray's work is significant because it identified Japan's popular culture as a key soft power asset and helped inspire subsequent policies (such as «Cool Japan»). In the thesis, this source will be used to illustrate the global reception of Japanese culture and the origins of the Cool Japan narrative in academic and policy discourse.

Daniele Carminati, «The State of Japan's Soft Power After the 2020 Olympics» (*E-International Relations*, 2022). This recent article<sup>26</sup> surveys Japan's soft power position in the contemporary era. Carminati observes that Japan is widely perceived as «quirky, fascinating, and somewhat 'exotic'» qualities that define its international attractiveness. He notes that Japan has even been called a «cultural superpower» and recalls how the Foreign

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<sup>24</sup> Roberto Nisi *The Soft Power of Cool: Japanese Foreign Policy in the 21st century* 2017

<sup>25</sup> Douglas McGray, «Japan's Gross National Cool» (*Foreign Policy*, 2002).

<sup>26</sup> Daniele Carminati, «The State of Japan's Soft Power After the 2020 Olympics» (*E-International Relations*, 2022).



Policy phrase «Gross National Cool» (2009) was later explicitly embraced in Japan's «Cool Japan» strategy. The article's significance lies in its up-to-date perspective: it synthesizes cultural and policy analysis of Japan's soft power in the 2010s and 2020s. In the thesis, Carminati's observations will be used to connect older literature with current developments, showing how academic perceptions of Japan's appeal have fed into official initiatives (eg. Cool Japan).

### 1.3 Conceptual Framework

**Soft Power.** Soft power is broadly defined as a state's ability to achieve its foreign-policy goals by attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment. In Nye's formulation<sup>27</sup>, soft-power resources include culture, political values, and foreign policies that appear legitimate and attractive. Competing views note that «soft power» can refer either to an outcome (the degree of attraction) or an instrument (the use of cultural and ideational resources), but all agree on its non-coercive character. In this thesis, soft power will denote Japan's cultural and normative appeal in the international arena (eg, popular culture, technology, political values), as reflected in foreign publics' attitudes and preferences.

**Public Diplomacy.** Public diplomacy is defined as any government-sponsored effort to communicate directly with foreign public<sup>28</sup>. It includes official campaigns, speeches, and media strategies designed to persuade targeted foreign audiences to support or tolerate a government's strategic objectives. One way to view public diplomacy is as a key instrument of soft power: it operationalizes attraction by managing a country's image abroad. Public diplomacy is sometimes divided into «branding» (cultural communication to improve long-term image) and «political advocacy» (campaigns to build support for specific policies). For the purposes of this thesis, public diplomacy refers to Japan's state-led outreach (eg, cultural institutes, broadcasting, and exchange programs) aimed at strengthening Japan's appeal and national image overseas.

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<sup>27</sup> Nye JS. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. Public Affairs; 2004

<sup>28</sup> Melissen J. *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations*. Palgrave Macmillan; 2005

Cultural Diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy is a subset of public diplomacy that focuses specifically on a country's cultural resources. UNESCO describes it<sup>29</sup> as the harnessing of culture to promote a nation's distinctiveness and foster international dialogue. In practice, cultural diplomacy involves exchanges of arts, education, language, and traditions to build mutual understanding and trust. It thus overlaps with both soft power and public diplomacy: a country's cultural exports (such as music, film, food, and festivals) are part of its soft power and are often promoted via public-diplomacy channels. In this study, cultural diplomacy refers to Japan's use of its cultural industries and heritage (for example, the «Cool Japan» campaign of anime, cuisine, and pop culture) to bolster its international image and influence.

National Image (Country Reputation). A country's national image or reputation is the collective impression that foreign audiences hold of that country. Public-diplomacy scholars note that image-building («branding or cultural communication») is aimed at improving this image without immediate policy objectives<sup>30</sup>. A positive national image yields general goodwill and makes foreign publics more receptive to a country's influence. In the context of this thesis, national image refers to how Japan is perceived on the world stage - eg, as a technological leader, cultural trendsetter, or normative actor - and is treated as both a goal of Japan's soft-power efforts and an outcome by which we assess those efforts.

Normative Power. Normative power refers to influence derived from the projection of a country's norms and values. It describes a state's ability to shape what is considered «normal» or legitimate in international affairs by example or persuasion. In effect, normative power overlaps with soft power's values dimension: it is soft power realized through the diffusion of values. For example, Japan's post-war pacifist ideals or democratic development can be seen as normative appeals. Contemporary discourse ties this to cultural exchange and «sharing values» as when cultural diplomacy emphasizes cooperation and

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<sup>29</sup> UNESCO. *Understanding Cultural Diplomacy*. UNESCO Publishing; 2016

<sup>30</sup> Melissen J. *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations*. Palgrave Macmillan; 2005

mutual understanding<sup>31</sup>. In this thesis, normative power will be used to examine whether and how Japan influences others through the appeal of its political norms and social values (for instance, promoting peace or environmental stewardship) alongside its cultural soft power.

**Nation Branding.** Nation branding is the strategic process of building and managing a country's international reputation using marketing and public-relations techniques.<sup>32</sup> It aims to «measure, build and manage the reputation of countries» by presenting a coherent image to foreign audiences. Nation branding often overlaps with public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy but emphasizes a planned brand-like approach. A well-known example is Japan's «Cool Japan» initiative, which deliberately packages Japan's creative industries (animation, fashion, technology, etc) as a brand to boost tourism, investment, and influence.<sup>33</sup> In this study, nation branding refers to Japan's deliberate campaigns to promote its country image abroad - essentially, marketing Japan as a desirable brand - and is treated as one tool of Japan's overall soft-power strategy.

#### **1.4 Research Methods**

**Qualitative Document Analysis.** A core analytic procedure is qualitative content analysis of documents. Key materials include official government publications, such as the annual MOFA Diplomatic Bluebooks<sup>34</sup> and policy white papers, as well as press releases, speeches, and legislation. These documents are systematically read and coded for themes like «cultural diplomacy» «public diplomacy» or «national image» For instance, the 2019 Bluebook explicitly notes efforts to «introduce diverse attractiveness of Japan» to make the national image more positive. Such statements are extracted and interpreted to understand Japan's strategic objectives. Likewise, institutional reports from the Japan Foundation and other agencies are analyzed. The Japan Foundation's Annual Report 2013 describes its use of websites, social media, publications, and events to promote cultural

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<sup>31</sup> Melissen J. *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations*. Palgrave Macmillan; 2005

<sup>32</sup> McGray D. Japan's Gross National Cool. *Foreign Policy*. 2002;(130):44-54

<sup>33</sup> McGray D. Japan's Gross National Cool. *Foreign Policy*. 2002;(130):44-54

<sup>34</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. *Diplomatic Bluebook 2019*. MOFA; 2019.

exchange<sup>35</sup>. By comparing and contrasting these documents, the research identifies how Japan's soft-power priorities are articulated and how they evolve over time.

**Systematic Source Review.** In addition to primary documents, a systematic review of secondary sources is conducted. This involves an organized survey of academic and gray literature on Japan's public diplomacy and soft power. Searches of scholarly databases and policy archives target keywords (eg, «Japan soft power» «public diplomacy» «Cool Japan»). Peer-reviewed studies provide analytical frameworks and context. Reports from think tanks and research institutes (such as JIIA or CSIS Japan Chair publications) are also included. Government and NGO publications (eg, Cool Japan strategy papers) are collected systematically. All sources must meet relevance criteria (focus on Japan's international outreach) and are reviewed for credibility. This review ensures that the study incorporates diverse perspectives while focusing on sources directly related to Japan's foreign relations.

**Comparative Case Study.** The third methodological component is a regional comparative case study. Here, Japan's soft-power efforts are examined in specific international contexts to highlight differences and commonalities. For example, one case study may compare Japan's cultural diplomacy in Southeast Asia versus Europe or the United States. Another case might analyze Japan's soft-power approach toward neighboring Asian countries (eg, South Korea, India) as opposed to outreach in the Middle East or Africa. The comparative design allows in-depth examination of «how and why» Japan's strategies vary by region<sup>36</sup>. Cases are selected based on criteria such as geopolitical significance and availability of source material. Within each case, the same analytic methods (document analysis and source review) are applied, facilitating a structured comparison. This comparative approach helps to identify whether Japan's soft-power tactics are tailored to different audiences or follow a coherent global strategy.

## 1.5 Limitations

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<sup>35</sup> Japan Foundation. *Annual Report 2013*. Japan Foundation; 2014

<sup>36</sup> Portland Communications; University of Southern California. *The Soft Power 30: A Global Ranking of Soft Power 2019*. 2019

While this study strives to provide a comprehensive analysis, several methodological and analytical limitations must be acknowledged.

The thesis is structured around a predominantly qualitative methodology, with a strong emphasis on document analysis and interpretive frameworks. While this approach allows for the in-depth examination of official statements, diplomatic strategies, media outputs, and academic commentary, it inevitably restricts the scope of empirical generalizability. The lack of quantitative data - such as structured opinion polling across all target regions or measurable indices over time - means that soft power effectiveness is assessed more in terms of intention and reception than statistically verified impact. Although secondary data from surveys such as those by Pew Research Center, Ipsos, and Brand Finance has been incorporated where available, the study does not attempt original quantitative analysis. This limits the ability to draw predictive conclusions about Japan's soft power outcomes beyond descriptive or comparative generalizations.

Also, the time frame of the research - spanning approximately from 2000 to 2024 - offers a useful lens for understanding long-term trends in Japan's foreign policy, but it also implies the risk of interpretive bias in linking older strategic concepts with newer developments. Japan's diplomatic identity and international behavior have evolved considerably over this period, particularly under different political leaderships and in response to shifting regional dynamics. The historical context provided for earlier strategies may not fully capture the nuance of how these strategies were perceived or implemented at the time. Conversely, the most recent developments, such as Japan's rebranding of FOIP or its cultural diplomacy initiatives in Africa and Latin America, may still be too emergent to evaluate definitively. The research thus walks a line between historical reflection and forward-looking analysis.

The case studies employed in Chapter 3 - including regional engagements with East Asia, Southeast Asia, Western countries, and the Global South - were selected to provide comparative breadth and thematic coherence. However, due to length and feasibility constraints, the study necessarily excludes certain potentially informative bilateral or multilateral contexts, such as Japan's relations with post-Soviet states, Oceania, or Central Asia. The generalizations drawn from regional-level observations cannot fully substitute

for the depth of country-specific political dynamics, which may significantly influence the way Japanese soft power is received in those areas.

Another limitation stems from the inherent subjectivity involved in interpreting soft power. As a concept, soft power is contingent not only on state projection but also on foreign perception, which is often mediated by culture, historical memory, domestic politics, and popular media<sup>37</sup>. Because of this, any evaluation of Japan's soft power necessarily relies on proxy indicators such as international rankings, diplomatic rhetoric, or cultural visibility - none of which can be fully isolated from other influencing factors. For example, Japan's favorable image in certain Southeast Asian states may stem as much from comparative positioning against China as from deliberate Japanese outreach. Similarly, enthusiasm for Japanese pop culture among youth audiences does not automatically translate into broader trust in Japanese foreign policy.

Finally, the language scope of this thesis is confined to English-language sources and Japanese materials available in translation. While this includes a robust body of scholarly, policy, and media documents, it inherently excludes a more nuanced, localized understanding of reception in foreign publics, particularly those where Japanese cultural exports have strong presence but limited English commentary (e.g., Thailand, Indonesia, or Brazil). This linguistic constraint narrows the lens of soft power reception to mostly institutional and elite discourses rather than capturing the full diversity of grassroots responses.

Despite these limitations, this research offers a meaningful synthesis of Japan's evolving soft power strategies and their international reception. The identified constraints do not invalidate the findings but rather frame their significance within the bounds of academic rigor. By making these limitations transparent, the study aims to contribute responsibly to the broader field of international relations and diplomatic studies.

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<sup>37</sup> Nye JS. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. Public Affairs; 2004

## 2. SOFT POWER IN JAPAN'S FOREIGN RELATIONS IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

### 2.1 Historical Background (Post-1945 to 2000)

Japan's post-1945 settlement created the political pre-conditions for a soft-power profile built on pacifism and economic modernization. The 1947 Constitution - most notably Article 9 - reframed the state as a «peace nation» while occupation reforms introduced universal suffrage, labor rights, and local self-government. These domestic changes were deliberately projected abroad through early English-language NHK broadcasts and cultural exhibitions designed to rehabilitate Japan's international image<sup>38</sup>.

This constitutional pacifism was not merely a legal constraint but evolved into a widespread societal ethos reinforced by educational curricula, public discourse, and political rhetoric across the spectrum of Japanese society. Over time, this normative aversion to military aggression cultivated a distinct identity of Japan as a "peace nation," positioning non-violent instruments of international engagement-such as economic assistance, cultural exchange, and multilateral diplomacy-as not only preferable but morally imperative<sup>39</sup>. Consequently, the tradition of non-use of force functioned as both a constraint and an opportunity: it limited Japan's strategic options in terms of traditional military capability but simultaneously necessitated the innovative development and refinement of alternative, soft-power-oriented diplomatic tools<sup>40</sup>. Thus, Japan's post-war pacifist culture can be understood as foundational to its subsequent foreign policy choices, directly influencing and motivating its sustained investment in the cultivation of soft power. And while my work does not intend to fully cover the aspect of the emergence and realization of the pacifist ethic, as this is beyond my competence and thesis scope, it's necessary to know the general reasoning behind it.

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<sup>38</sup> Nye JS. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. Public Affairs; 2004

<sup>39</sup> Reinhard Drifte, «*Soft Power Superpowers: Cultural and National Assets of Japan and the United State*», eds. Yasushi Watanabe and David L. McConnell (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2008), 36–38.

<sup>40</sup> Roberto Nisi, *The Soft Power of Cool: Japanese Foreign Policy in the 21st Century* (2017), 12–14; Douglas McGray, "Japan's Gross National Cool," *Foreign Policy*, 2002, 44–46.

Rapid industrial growth between the mid-1950s and the first oil shock transformed that normative platform into material credibility. Consumer electronics (Sony's TR-63 transistor radio, 1957) and automobiles (Toyota Corolla, 1966) generated a commercial reputation for quality, efficiency, and design<sup>41</sup>. Mega-events - Tokyo 1964, Expo '70 - broadcast images of bullet-train modernity, persuading foreign publics that Japan had re-entered the global community as a technologically advanced, culturally distinctive actor. Nye subsequently cited these developments when theorizing «soft power» as attraction derived from culture, values, and policies rather than coercive capability<sup>42</sup>.

Diplomacy and development assistance reinforced that emerging attractiveness. Japan joined the Colombo Plan in 1954 and launched its own bilateral Official Development Assistance (ODA) program in 1958. By the early 1970s it had become one of the world's leading donors; policymakers framed aid as «mutual prosperity» distancing it from Cold-War patronage. The establishment of the Japan Foundation in 1972 consolidated language teaching, arts exchange, and academic fellowships under one institutional umbrella, giving Tokyo an explicit cultural-diplomacy instrument<sup>43</sup>. Prime Minister Fukuda Takeo's 1977 ASEAN speech, pledging a «heart-to-heart» relationship and launching the ASEAN Cultural Fund, formally linked economic resources to normative outreach<sup>44</sup>.

During the 1980s bubble economy, Japanese lifestyle exports gained global salience. Nintendo consoles, Sony Walkman culture, and Studio Ghibli films introduced foreign audiences to contemporary Japanese creativity, while sushi and fashion trends broadened cultural familiarity. McGray later characterized this diffusion as «Gross National Cool» arguing that Japan's cultural influence was expanding even as economic growth slowed<sup>45</sup>. Government initiatives such as the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme (1987) added person-to-person vectors by sending foreign graduates to local schools, creating alumni networks of informal cultural ambassadors. MOFA opinion surveys in 1990

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<sup>41</sup> Drifte R. The use of soft power in Japan's foreign relations. In: Inoguchi T, Hook G, eds. *Japan's Foreign Policy Today*. Palgrave; 1998

<sup>42</sup> Nye JS. Soft power. *Foreign Policy*. 1990;(80):153-171

<sup>43</sup> Japan Foundation. *Annual Report 2013*. Japan Foundation; 2014

<sup>44</sup> Drifte R. The use of soft power in Japan's foreign relations. In: Inoguchi T, Hook G, eds. *Japan's Foreign Policy Today*. Palgrave; 1998.

<sup>45</sup> McGray D. Japan's Gross National Cool. *Foreign Policy*. 2002;(130):44-54



recorded significant increases in Japan's favorability ratings in Western Europe and North America, suggesting that cultural diplomacy complemented economic reputation<sup>46</sup>.

The 1990s, despite protracted economic stagnation, demonstrated the resilience of these soft-power assets. Global franchises such as Pokémon (1996) and internationally acclaimed films like Princess Mononoke (1997) expanded Japan's cultural footprint. Nisi contends that the decade proved Japan's attractiveness had become partially decoupled from its macroeconomic performance, setting the stage for the explicit «Cool Japan» branding launched in the early 2000s<sup>47</sup>. Simultaneously, Tokyo's leadership in the Cambodian peace process (1991-93) and its advocacy of environmental norms via the Kyoto Protocol (1997) enhanced its image as a civilian, problem-solving power. By the end of the twentieth century, Japan possessed a layered portfolio - pacifist identity, developmental credibility, and globally resonant popular culture - that would underpin its soft-power diplomacy in the twenty-first century.

## **2.2 Evolution of Japan's Soft-Power Strategy (2000 - 2024)**

At the turn of the century Tokyo faced an apparent paradox: economic lethargy at home coincided with surging cultural popularity abroad. Analysts such as McGray argued that Japan was becoming «a cultural superpower» even as its GDP plateaued<sup>48</sup>. Policymakers responded by making soft power an explicit pillar of foreign policy. In 2002 the Cabinet Office created an inter-ministerial task force on «contents industry promotion» signaling a shift from ad hoc cultural exports to strategic branding. The concept reached policy orthodoxy in 2004, when the Diplomatic Bluebook declared that «cultural exchange and Japan's creative assets are indispensable to national interests<sup>49</sup>».

By 2010 soft-power language permeated government discourse. Prime Minister Abe's first administration (2006-07) integrated «Japan Brand» promotion into the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) export strategy; the second Abe cabinet (from 2012)

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<sup>46</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. *Diplomatic Bluebook 1990*. MOFA; 1990

<sup>47</sup> Nisi R. *The Soft Power of Cool: Japanese Foreign Policy in the 21st Century*. University of Bologna; 2017

<sup>48</sup> McGray D. Japan's Gross National Cool. *Foreign Policy*. 2002;(130):44-54

<sup>49</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. *Diplomatic Bluebook 2019*. MOFA; 2019.

elevated the initiative into full-scale nation branding under the banner «Cool Japan» METI's Cool Japan Strategy (2012) framed anime, design, cuisine and tourism as growth engines and diplomatic assets, noting that global audiences already «recognize Japan as creative and trustworthy»<sup>50</sup>. One practical outcome was the 2013 launch of the Cool Japan Fund, a public-private vehicle capitalized at ¥50 billion to finance overseas media ventures and retail hubs. Its 2019 annual report lists investments ranging from a Japan-themed TV channel in France to a multi-brand food court in Bangkok, demonstrating state willingness to underwrite cultural export infrastructure<sup>51</sup>.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs simultaneously expanded person-to-person diplomacy. Exchange programs - JET, MEXT scholarships, sports diplomacy ahead of the 2020 Olympics - received increased budget lines. The 2019 Bluebook notes that «introducing the diverse attractiveness of Japan through diplomatic missions, the Japan Foundation and visiting programs is essential to enhancing national image»<sup>52</sup>. Quantitative indices indicate that this institutionalization yielded reputational dividends: in the Soft Power 30 ranking Japan rose from 12th (2015) to 8th (2019), with culture and digital engagement cited as key drivers<sup>53</sup>. Brand Finance's 2024 index still places Japan in the global top five<sup>54</sup>, despite

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<sup>50</sup> Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI). *Cool Japan Strategy*. METI; 2012

<sup>51</sup> Cool Japan Fund. *Annual Report 2019*. Cool Japan Fund Inc.; 2020.

<sup>52</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. *Diplomatic Bluebook 2019*. MOFA; 2019

<sup>53</sup> Portland Communications; University of Southern California. *The Soft Power 30: 2019 Report*. 2019

<sup>54</sup> Brand Finance. *Global Soft Power Index 2024: Press Release*. Brand Finance; 2024

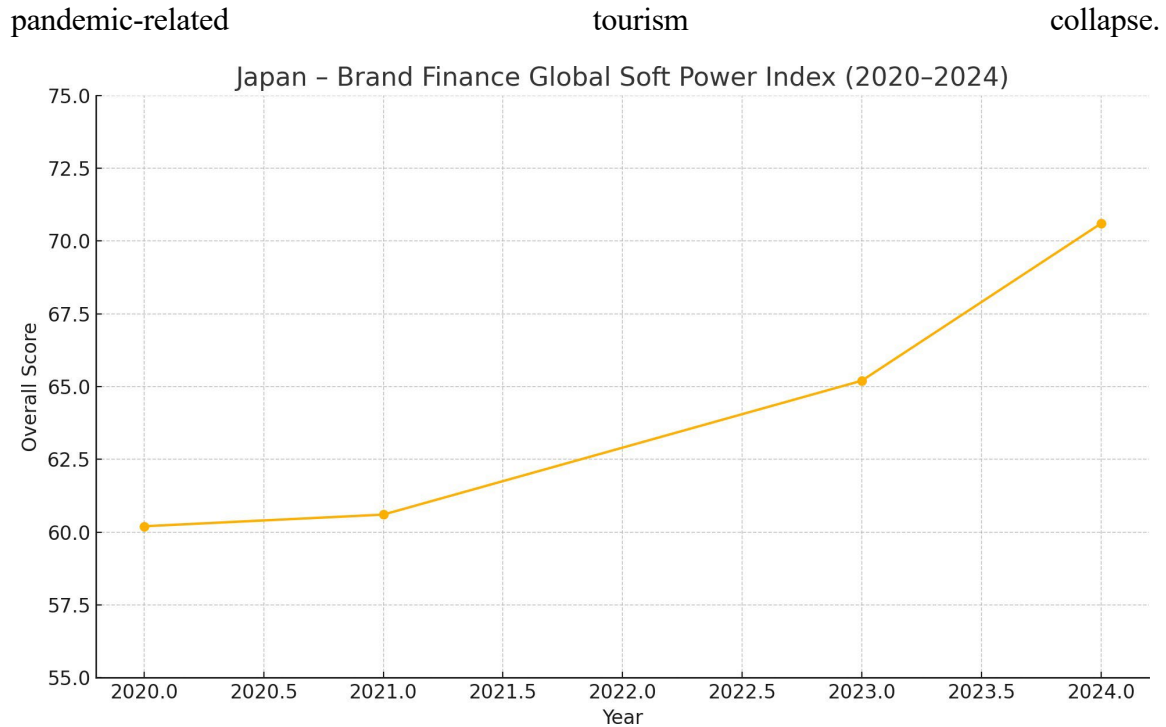


Figure 1: Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index (2020–2024), Brand finance 2024

Digital transformation has reshaped both audience and medium. Streaming platforms globalized anime faster than any previous distribution model; by 2020, Japanese titles accounted for a significant share of Netflix’s international content portfolio<sup>55</sup>. Government white papers began referencing «digital diplomacy» pointing to virtual exhibitions and online language classes delivered during the COVID-19 pandemic. Scholars note that this pivot sustained cultural visibility when physical travel halted, illustrating adaptability in Japan’s soft-power toolkit.

Normative and security narratives also evolved. The «Free and Open Indo-Pacific» (FOIP) vision, articulated by Abe in 2016, couples infrastructure funding with rule-of-law advocacy, repackaging Japan’s ODA tradition as a values-based alternative to authoritarian development models<sup>56</sup>. Womenomics rhetoric, global-health funding (e.g., COVID-19 vaccines via COVAX), and climate leadership pledges reinforce an image of a responsible

<sup>55</sup> Carminati D. The State of Japan’s Soft Power After the 2020 Olympics. *E-International Relations*. 2022

<sup>56</sup> Abe S. Toward Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Keynote Address, TICAD VI, Nairobi; 2016

stakeholder<sup>57</sup>. Carminati argues that such normative messaging, combined with cultural exports, positions Japan as «quirky yet reliable» - a dual perception that amplifies appeal while differentiating Tokyo from both Washington and Beijing<sup>58</sup>.

Recent challenges underscore strategic recalibration. Pandemic-era border closures eroded inbound tourism revenues - the fastest-growing channel of experiential soft power - and triggered debates over the Cool Japan Fund's return on investment. Nevertheless, the Tokyo 2020 Olympics (held in 2021 without foreign spectators) still projected technologically sophisticated ceremonies and robust health protocols, partly salvaging brand equity<sup>59</sup>. Looking forward, demographic contraction and regional historical tensions remain constraints, but sustained global demand for Japanese popular culture and Tokyo's normative positioning suggest that soft power will continue to anchor Japan's foreign-relations strategy into the mid-2020s.

### 2.2.1 From «Gross National Cool» to Cool Japan

Douglas McGray's 2002 essay popularized the phrase «Gross National Cool» arguing that Japanese fashion, music, and media had become global reference points even as domestic GDP growth slowed. The article caught the attention of policymakers who were looking for non-economic levers of influence after a decade of recession. Advisory councils inside the Cabinet Office began commissioning studies on «contents industries» and their diplomatic potential<sup>60</sup>. By the mid-2000s, discussions of brand image appeared not only in METI white papers but in Diplomatic Bluebooks, which framed culture as a «strategic resource» able to «deepen understanding and trust toward Japan»<sup>61</sup>.

Institutional codification followed. METI's 2012 Cool Japan Strategy positioned pop-culture exports, design, and traditional crafts as growth sectors and public-diplomacy tools, explicitly citing McGray's thesis to justify state involvement<sup>62</sup>. The Cool Japan Fund

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<sup>58</sup> Carminati D. The State of Japan's Soft Power After the 2020 Olympics. *E-International Relations*. 2022

<sup>59</sup> International Olympic Committee. *Tokyo 2020 Post-Games Report*. IOC; 2022.

<sup>60</sup> McGray D. Japan's Gross National Cool. *Foreign Policy*. 2002;(130):44-54

<sup>61</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. *Diplomatic Bluebook 2005*. MOFA; 2005

<sup>62</sup> Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. *Cool Japan Strategy*. METI; 2012

(2013) provided ¥50 billion in public capital to co-finance overseas broadcasting platforms, fashion events, and food halls. Operational guidance emphasized «storytelling» that links commercial products with narratives of harmony, craftsmanship, and technological futurism. Early investments - such as the Japan Channel in France and the WAKU WAKU cable network in Indonesia - aimed to normalize Japanese aesthetics among consumers unfamiliar with the language.

Critics note uneven returns: by 2019 the Fund had written down or exited several projects, prompting audits and ministerial debate over whether nation branding should follow a venture-capital model. Yet survey data suggest reputational gains persisted. In The Soft Power 30 index, Japan's «culture» sub-score rose from 7th (2015) to 4th (2019), with respondent comments frequently citing anime, design minimalism, and culinary appeal<sup>63</sup>. Thus, while Gross National Cool began as a journalistic observation, it evolved into a policy doctrine that redefined the state's role in cultural production and international perception.

### **2.2.2 Digital-Era Recalibration: Streaming, Social Media, and e-Sports**

The 2010s ushered in distribution platforms that dissolved the old gatekeepers of cultural trade. Anime once travelled through television syndication and DVD licensing; today it reaches global audiences the same day it airs in Tokyo via Netflix, Crunchyroll, and regional services. METI's Content Industry Annual Report 2023 notes that overseas streaming now accounts for more than half of total anime revenue, surpassing domestic box office for the first time in 2021<sup>64</sup>. The ministry attributes this growth to simultaneous release models and algorithmic recommendations that place Japanese titles alongside Hollywood and K-dramas on subscriber home-pages.

Social media changed audience participation. Hashtag communities (#AnimeTok, #JapaneseFood) create peer-driven amplification that no government campaign could replicate. MOFA's Bluebook 2019 acknowledges this shift, stating that «digital diplomacy must harness platforms where Japanese culture circulates organically rather than rely solely

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<sup>63</sup> Portland Communications; University of Southern California. *The Soft Power 30: 2019 Report*. 2019

<sup>64</sup> Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. *Content Industry Annual Report 2023*. METI; 2023

on official narratives»<sup>65</sup>. The Japan Foundation responded by launching online Japanese-language courses and virtual cultural festivals during the COVID-19 border closures, ensuring continuity of engagement when physical exchange programs were suspended.

Competitive gaming offered another frontier. Nintendo and Sony hardware already positioned Japan at the center of global gaming, but e-sports transformed individual titles into spectator events. Carminati observes that Japanese publishers initially lagged behind Korean and American firms in tournament infrastructure, yet franchises like Street Fighter and Pokémon now draw stadium audiences and live-stream viewership in the millions<sup>66</sup>. METI's 2023 report identifies e-sports as a priority for Cool Japan 2.0, citing the sector's compound annual growth rate of 13 percent and its potential for synergistic tourism once pandemic restrictions fully lift<sup>67</sup>.

Metrics suggest the digital turn has fortified Japan's cultural prestige. In The Soft Power 30 ranking Japan's digital sub-score rose from 12th in 2015 to 6th in 2019, with the methodology explicitly crediting «high engagement on streaming platforms and social media». Brand Finance's 2024 index likewise highlights «strong digital familiarity» as a driver of Japan's consistent top-five placement<sup>68</sup>. While the Cool Japan Fund's traditional broadcast ventures yielded mixed financial returns, digital-native projects - such as a co-production deal with Netflix for anime originals - demonstrate that partnership, rather than state ownership, may be the more sustainable model in the platform era.

### **2.2.3 Normative Turn: Human Security, ODA, and the «Free and Open Indo-Pacific»**

Economic stagnation heightened Tokyo's search for non-material levers of influence. The 2015 Development Cooperation Charter reframed ODA around «human security» and «quality growth» signaling that aid should export Japanese norms - rule of law, transparency, local ownership - in addition to infrastructure finance<sup>69</sup>. Grants for legal-

<sup>65</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. *Diplomatic Bluebook 2019*. MOFA; 2019

<sup>66</sup> Carminati D. *The State of Japan's Soft Power After the 2020 Olympics*. E-International Relations; 2022

<sup>67</sup> Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. *Content Industry Annual Report 2023*. METI; 2023

<sup>68</sup> Brand Finance. *Global Soft Power Index 2024: Press Release*. Brand Finance; 2024.

<sup>69</sup> Government of Japan. *Development Cooperation Charter*. Cabinet Decision; 2015

system reform in Southeast Asia and disaster-risk projects in the Pacific now explicitly reference these principles. The policy language departs from earlier, apolitical «yen-loan» rhetoric; it positions Japan as a normative alternative to authoritarian development models.

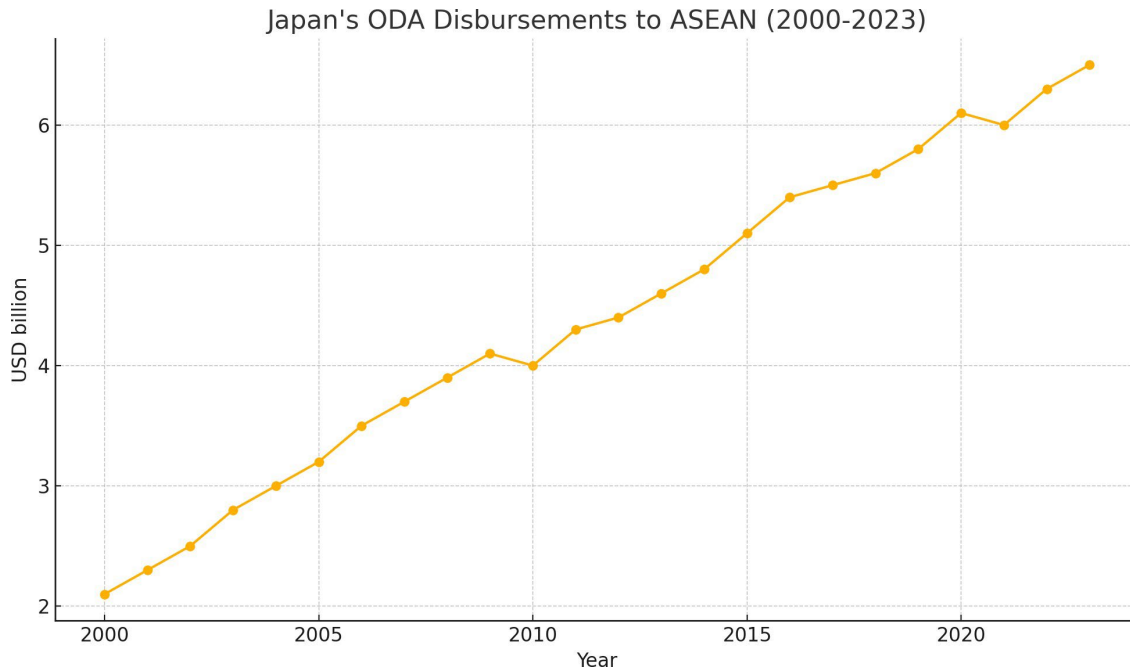


Figure 2 - Japan's ODA to ASEAN (2000-2023), OECD-CRS

Prime Minister Abe's 2016 Nairobi speech introduced the «Free and Open Indo-Pacific» (FOIP) vision, combining connectivity funding with advocacy of a rules-based maritime order<sup>70</sup>. FOIP relies less on naval tonnage than on convening power: Tokyo hosts quality-infrastructure seminars, trains coast-guard officers, and bankrolls ASEAN law-of-the-sea workshops. In diplomatic surveys conducted by MOFA in 2020, over 70 percent of Indonesian and Vietnamese respondents viewed Japan as their «most trusted major power» a result analysts attribute to the alignment of Japan's development style with local governance norms<sup>71</sup>.

<sup>70</sup> Abe S. Toward Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Keynote Address, TICAD VI; Nairobi, 2016

<sup>71</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. *Diplomatic Survey on Japan–ASEAN Relations 2020*. MOFA; 2021

Human-security branding also extends to global health. Japan's USD 1 billion pledge to COVAX in 2021 and its leadership of the ACT-Accelerator facilitation council were framed domestically as evidence that «Japan protects people everywhere» echoing rhetoric first deployed during its 1997 Kyoto Protocol chairmanship.<sup>72</sup> Such initiatives reinforce a civilian-power identity that complements cultural soft power and offsets the limitations of Japan's Self-Defense Forces.

#### **2.2.4 Constraints and Critiques**

Soft-power assets face structural headwinds. Demographic decline has reduced both domestic cultural production budgets and language-exchange capacity; the JET Program admitted 4 000 participants in 2002 but only 2 000 in 2022<sup>73</sup>. Regionally, historical memory remains a drag: Pew surveys show persistently low favorability in South Korea and mixed views in China, where popular anime consumption coexists with suspicion of Japanese political motives. Critics also question the commercial logic of the Cool Japan Fund; a 2020 Board of Audit report noted that nearly half of its early investments operated in the red, raising doubts about state competence in venture financing<sup>74</sup>.

Yet these constraints do not negate underlying appeal. The same Board of Audit acknowledged that media visibility of Japanese products rose markedly in target markets, and post-pandemic tourist surveys indicate continued intent to visit once border restrictions lift. Thus, while demographic and political factors complicate the soft-power equation, they have not reversed the structural gains achieved since 2000.

### **2.3 Instruments of Japan's Soft Power**

Japan's soft power is not a single resource but a layered complex of cultural, technological, and normative tools that build upon one another across different audiences and time frames. Three attributes distinguish the Japanese model. First, attraction originates in both private creativity and state facilitation: manga artists, anime studios, fashion designers, and game publishers create globally compelling content, whereas ministries and quasi-public bodies

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<sup>72</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. *Press Release: Japan's Contribution to the ACT-Accelerator*. MOFA; 2021.

<sup>73</sup> Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme. *Statistics 1987-2022*. CLAIR; 2023

<sup>74</sup> Board of Audit of Japan. *Special Report on the Cool Japan Fund*. BOA; 2020



provide subsidies, market research, and overseas platforms that widen exposure<sup>75</sup>. Second, the state's diplomatic rhetoric consciously aligns these creative outputs with larger policy narratives - «peaceful nation» «quality growth» «human security» - so that the appeal of pop culture channels credibility toward development assistance and multilateral rule-making<sup>76</sup>. Third, Japan's technological pedigree undergirds its cultural credibility: high-speed rail, robotics, and precision engineering promote an image of reliability and modernity that shapes perceptions even among audiences with limited access to the language or arts<sup>77</sup>.

Institutionally, the post-2000 era reorganized soft-power promotion into a dense ecosystem of agencies. METI's Cool Japan Fund finances overseas retail ventures and co-production deals, while the Japan Foundation oversees language scholarship, arts touring, and intellectual exchange<sup>78</sup>. These bodies operate alongside traditional diplomacy: embassies host anime screenings, MOFA deploys the JET Programm as a person-to-person conduit, and Cabinet Office task forces collect metrics to gauge reputational return on investment. The 2015 Development Cooperation Charter, for example, frames ODA as both economic support and norm diffusion, explicitly linking «quality infrastructure» loans with training in rule of law - thus fusing material assistance with values-based influence<sup>79</sup>.

Digital transformation has amplified reach. Streaming platforms deliver anime to tens of millions simultaneously, collapsing former licensing bottlenecks; social-media communities spread Japanese fashion aesthetics logogram-free, allowing visual culture to transcend language constraints. Government white papers now track follower counts and engagement rates as soft-power indicators on par with tourist arrivals. Quantitative indices testify to the aggregate effect: in the Soft Power 30 Japan rose from twelfth place in 2015 to eighth in 2019, with survey respondents citing culture, digital reach, and technology as decisive scores<sup>80</sup>. Even the pandemic, while devastating inbound tourism, accelerated

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<sup>75</sup> Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. *Content Industry Annual Report 2023*. METI; 2023.

<sup>76</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. *Diplomatic Bluebook 2019*. MOFA; 2019.

<sup>77</sup> Portland Communications; University of Southern California. *The Soft Power 30: 2019 Report*. Portland/USC; 2019.

<sup>78</sup> Japan Foundation. *Annual Report 2022*. Japan Foundation; 2023.

<sup>79</sup> Government of Japan. *Development Cooperation Charter*. Cabinet Decision; 2015.

<sup>80</sup> Portland Communications; University of Southern California. *The Soft Power 30: 2019 Report*. Portland/USC; 2019.

virtual exhibitions and remote language courses that kept Japan culturally present during border closures.

Constraints remain: demographic shrinkage reduces domestic production budgets; historical grievances dampen attraction in parts of East Asia; and some Cool Japan Fund projects have underperformed commercially, provoking scrutiny from the Board of Audit<sup>81</sup>. Yet long-term trend lines indicate resilience. The same audit acknowledged that media visibility of Japanese products rose markedly in target markets, and Brand Finance's 2024 Global Soft Power Index ranks Japan fourth worldwide, citing «foundational trust in engineering and creativity»<sup>82</sup>. The composite picture suggests that while individual instruments face limits, their convergence - culture, tech brand, normative assistance - creates a durable architecture of attraction that anchors Japan's foreign relations in the twenty-first century.

### 2.3.1 Culture, Policy, and Diplomacy

Japanese cultural diplomacy rests on a networked architecture that links artistic creation to formal foreign policy. At the core is the Japan Foundation (1972), mandated to «foster mutual understanding» through language institutes, touring exhibitions, and intellectual exchange. In fiscal 2022 it financed more than 10 000 overseas programs, ranging from Noh workshops in Tunisia to contemporary-art residencies in Mexico<sup>83</sup>. Embassy cultural sections extend this reach by hosting film festivals and coordinating pop-culture events; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) instructs missions to treat such programming as «public diplomacy essential to national interest»<sup>84</sup>.

Cabinet-level directives reinforce the linkage. The 2010 Japan Brand Strategy urged ministries to «tell a coherent story of Japanese value» across trade fairs, aid projects, and tourism advertising. METI's 2012 Cool Japan Strategy translated that narrative into budget lines, offering matching grants for overseas manga conventions, design pop-ups, and

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<sup>81</sup> Board of Audit of Japan. *Special Report on the Cool Japan Fund*. BOA; 2020

<sup>82</sup> Brand Finance. *Global Soft Power Index 2024: Press Release*. Brand Finance; 2024.

<sup>83</sup> Japan Foundation. *Annual Report 2022*. Japan Foundation; 2023

<sup>84</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. *Diplomatic Bluebook 2019*. MOFA; 2019

culinary showcases<sup>85</sup>. These subsidies reduce commercial risk for small producers while ensuring that exhibitions carry implicit messages of creativity, craftsmanship, and harmony - virtues that align with Japan's diplomatic self-presentation as a peace-loving modernizer.

Language programs amplify credibility. The JET Program places foreign graduates in local schools, creating alumni who often become informal advocates for Japan in media, academia, and politics. Surveys of former JET participants show 68 percent engaging in Japan-related professional activities five years after return, a retention rate that MOFA cites as evidence of «long-tail» influence<sup>86</sup>. Parallel initiatives, such as the Japan Foundation's e-learning «Marugoto» course, expand access in regions lacking physical language centers, demonstrating how digital tools now complement face-to-face exchange.

Cultural and policy messages converge most visibly during mega-events. The 2020 Tokyo Olympics (held in 2021) incorporated anime iconography into medal ceremonies and showcased hydrogen-powered transport, thereby uniting pop culture with technological branding and environmental norms. Although pandemic restrictions precluded foreign spectators, global broadcast audiences exceeded 3 billion, providing a platform for what METI later termed a «nation-wide cultural exhibition»<sup>87</sup>. Diplomatic cables released under Japan's Information-Disclosure Law show that embassies in Southeast Asia actively leveraged Olympic coverage to promote study-abroad fairs and investment seminars in the same season, illustrating coordinated use of cultural capital for policy outreach.

Critiques focus on coordination gaps. The Board of Audit's 2020 report found overlap between METI, MOFA, and local-government projects, recommending a unified digital dashboard to track outcomes<sup>88</sup>. Scholars also note that state framing sometimes lags behind organic trends; the initial Cool Japan campaigns emphasized «traditional Japan» just as global audiences were gravitating toward street fashion and indie gaming. Nevertheless, time-series polling by Portland Communications records a steady rise in Japan's culture-sub-score - from 7th in 2015 to 4th in 2019 - suggesting that, despite bureaucratic

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<sup>85</sup> Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. *Cool Japan Strategy*. METI; 2012.

<sup>86</sup> Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR). *JET Alumni Survey 2021*. CLAIR; 2022

<sup>87</sup> Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. *Content Industry Annual Report 2023*. METI; 2023.

<sup>88</sup> Board of Audit of Japan. *Special Report on the Cool Japan Fund*. BOA; 2020.

inefficiencies, the overarching synthesis of culture, policy, and diplomacy remains effective at generating foreign goodwill<sup>89</sup>.

### 2.3.2 Media and Entertainment

Anime, manga, and video games are the most visible conveyors of Japanese culture abroad. Streaming platforms dissolved the licensing bottlenecks of the 1990s: by 2021, overseas streaming accounted for a majority of total anime revenue, according to METI's Content Industry Annual Report 2023<sup>90</sup>. Netflix declared in its 2022 shareholder letter that «Japan is now one of our top three content hubs» noting that series such as *Demon Slayer* routinely enter its global Top 10 despite language barriers<sup>91</sup>. This same-day availability accelerates fan engagement, allowing hashtags and TikTok edits to circulate within hours of a domestic premiere.

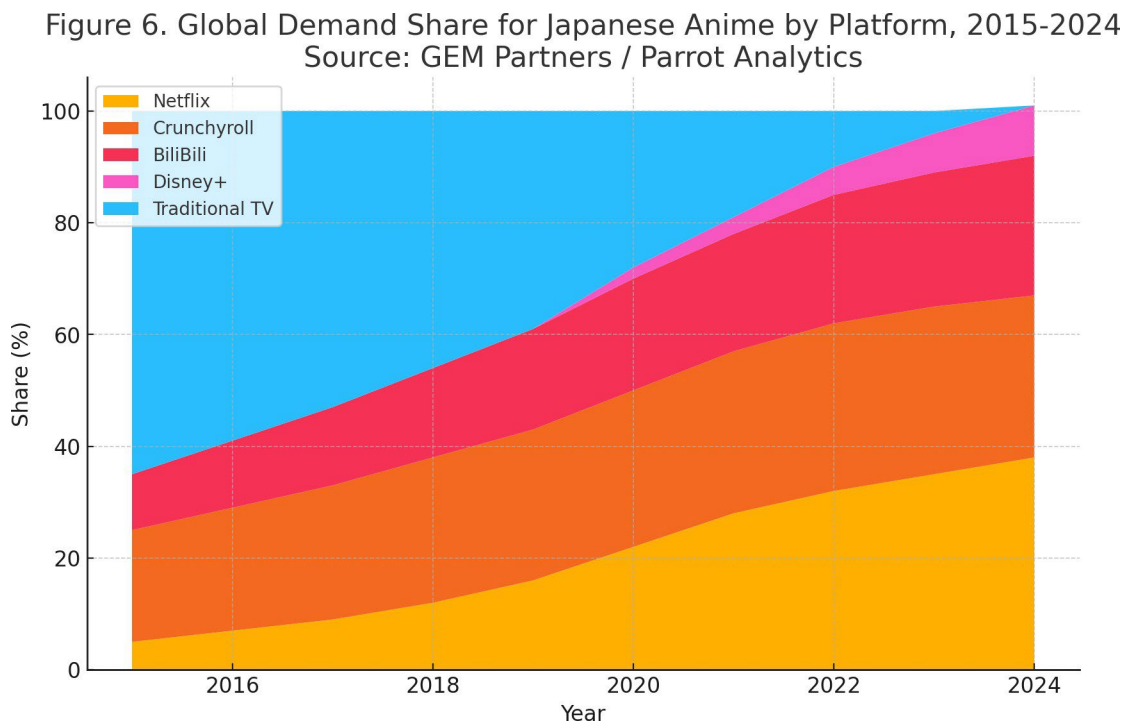


Figure 3: Global demand share for Japanese anime by platform, 2015-2024, Parrot Analytics

<sup>89</sup> Portland Communications; University of Southern California. *The Soft Power 30: 2019 Report*. Portland/USC; 2019

<sup>90</sup> Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. *Content Industry Annual Report 2023*. METI; 2023

<sup>91</sup> Netflix Inc. *Q4 2022 Shareholder Letter*. Netflix; 2023

Long-running franchises create multigenerational familiarity. Nintendo's *The Legend of Zelda* first launched in 1986 and in 2023 sold over ten million copies of *Tears of the Kingdom* within three days, demonstrating the longevity of Japanese IP<sup>92</sup>. Studio Ghibli's back catalogue still headlines international film festivals, while the 2023 Oscar for *The Boy and the Heron* reinforced the studio's auteur prestige. Such enduring properties anchor perceptions of Japan as a creative innovator, even when newer markets (e.g., South Korea's K-content) capture headline attention<sup>93</sup>.

Government facilitation remains indirect but important. The Cool Japan Fund co-financed anime-focused cable channels (e.g., WAKU WAKU Japan in Indonesia) and provided seed capital for overseas exhibition spaces like JAPAN HOUSE Los Angeles. Although some ventures underperformed financially, METI contends they «lowered entry barriers» for smaller studios lacking global marketing budgets. Embassies supplement commercial platforms with cultural screenings; MOFA reports that its 2022 «Anime Film Week» series reached 120 000 viewers across 35 posts, a scale unattainable for individual artists.

Audience data suggest that exposure translates into goodwill. Portland's *Soft Power 30* lists culture as Japan's strongest sub-score, citing survey responses that link anime and gaming to positive feelings about Japanese people and policy<sup>94</sup>. McGray's original observation - that pop culture can out-perform GDP growth as a source of prestige<sup>95</sup> - remains empirically valid two decades later. Even in China, where political tensions run high, Nielsen 2021 polling found Japanese animation the most watched foreign genre among viewers aged 18 - 24, outperforming Hollywood superhero films<sup>96</sup>.

Critics identify saturation risk: global platforms now carry competing Asian content, and repetitive «isekai» plotlines have led analysts to warn of creative stagnation. Nevertheless, the statistical arc is upward. Carminati notes that Japan's pop-culture exports grew 30

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<sup>92</sup> Nintendo Co. Ltd. *Financial Results FY2023*. Nintendo; 2023

<sup>93</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. *Public Diplomacy Activities Report 2022*. MOFA; 2023.

<sup>94</sup> Portland Communications; University of Southern California. *The Soft Power 30: 2019 Report*. 2019

<sup>95</sup> McGray D. Japan's Gross National Cool. *Foreign Policy*. 2002;(130):44-54

<sup>96</sup> NielsenIQ. *Media Consumption Trends in China 2021*. NielsenIQ; 2022

percent between 2017 and 2021 despite pandemic headwinds, a trajectory unmatched by any other G7 state <sup>97</sup>. The result is a durable layer of attraction that precedes formal diplomacy and buffers Japan's image during geopolitical shocks.

### 2.3.3 Technological and Innovation Branding

Japan's engineering record supplies a second pillar of attraction by projecting competence, safety, and precision. The Shinkansen network - operating since 1964 without a single passenger fatality - symbolizes reliable modernity; Tokyo's 2015 concessional-loan package for the Mumbai - Ahmedabad high-speed rail corridor was marketed explicitly as «Japanese safety and punctuality applied abroad»<sup>98</sup>. Similar branding accompanies exports of wastewater treatment plants, earthquake-resilient buildings, and smart-grid components, reinforcing Japan's image as an ethical technology partner rather than a debt-trap lender.

Robotics magnifies that perception. Industrial robot density in Japan (390 units per 10 000 manufacturing workers in 2022) remains among the world's highest, and social robots such as SoftBank's Pepper or Toyota's HSR feature prominently at international expos and rehabilitation clinics<sup>99</sup>. These demonstrations humanize advanced engineering, aligning with Japan's «Society 5.0» narrative, which frames digital transformation as people-centered and inclusive. Cabinet Office white papers link this vision to external messaging, describing Society 5.0 as «an international public good Japan offers to ageing and rapidly urbanizing societies»<sup>100</sup>.

Hydrogen technology extends the brand into sustainability. The 2020 Tokyo Olympics used hydrogen-powered cauldrons and a fuel-cell vehicle fleet, signaling climate-conscious innovation. Tokyo's 2023 «Green Growth Strategy» targets overseas joint ventures in hydrogen supply chains, aiming to build reputational advantage in decarbonization niches where China and South Korea also compete<sup>101</sup>.

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<sup>97</sup> Carminati D. *The State of Japan's Soft Power After the 2020 Olympics*. E-International Relations; 2022

<sup>98</sup> Japan International Cooperation Agency. *High-Speed Rail Project: Mumbai–Ahmedabad*: Project Overview. JICA; 2022

<sup>99</sup> International Federation of Robotics. *World Robotics 2023: Industrial Robots*. IFR; 2023.

<sup>100</sup> Cabinet Office of Japan. *Society 5.0 White Paper 2022*. Cabinet Office; 2022

<sup>101</sup> Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. *Green Growth Strategy Through Achieving Carbon Neutrality in 2050*. METI; 2023

Opinion metrics suggest the technological halo effect remains strong. In the Soft Power 30 Japan ranked first globally in the «enterprise & innovation» sub-index in 2019, buoyed by survey responses that cited bullet trains and robotics as evidence of future-oriented capability<sup>102</sup>. Brand Finance's 2024 index likewise identifies «engineering trust» as Japan's single largest reputational asset, noting that respondents associate the country with «cutting-edge yet dependable» technology<sup>103</sup>. Such esteem feeds back into diplomatic leverage: when Japan promotes quality-infrastructure standards in the Indo-Pacific, partner governments perceive advice as credible and low-risk, amplifying the soft-power multiplier of its development loans.

### **2.3.4 Development Cooperation and Norm Diffusion**

Japan's foreign aid became a soft-power instrument almost by accident: reparations and infrastructure loans in the 1950s evolved into a comprehensive Official Development Assistance (ODA) program by the late 1970s. The turning point was the 1977 Fukuda Doctrine, which pledged that Japan would never become a military power in Southeast Asia and would instead cultivate «heart-to-heart» relations through economic and cultural

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<sup>102</sup> Portland Communications; University of Southern California. *The Soft Power 30: 2019 Report*. 2019

<sup>103</sup> Brand Finance. *Global Soft Power Index 2024: Press Release*. Brand Finance; 2024

exchange. This stance remains the template for Tokyo's development diplomacy.

Figure 3. Japan's Gross ODA, 2000-2022  
Source: OECD-DAC

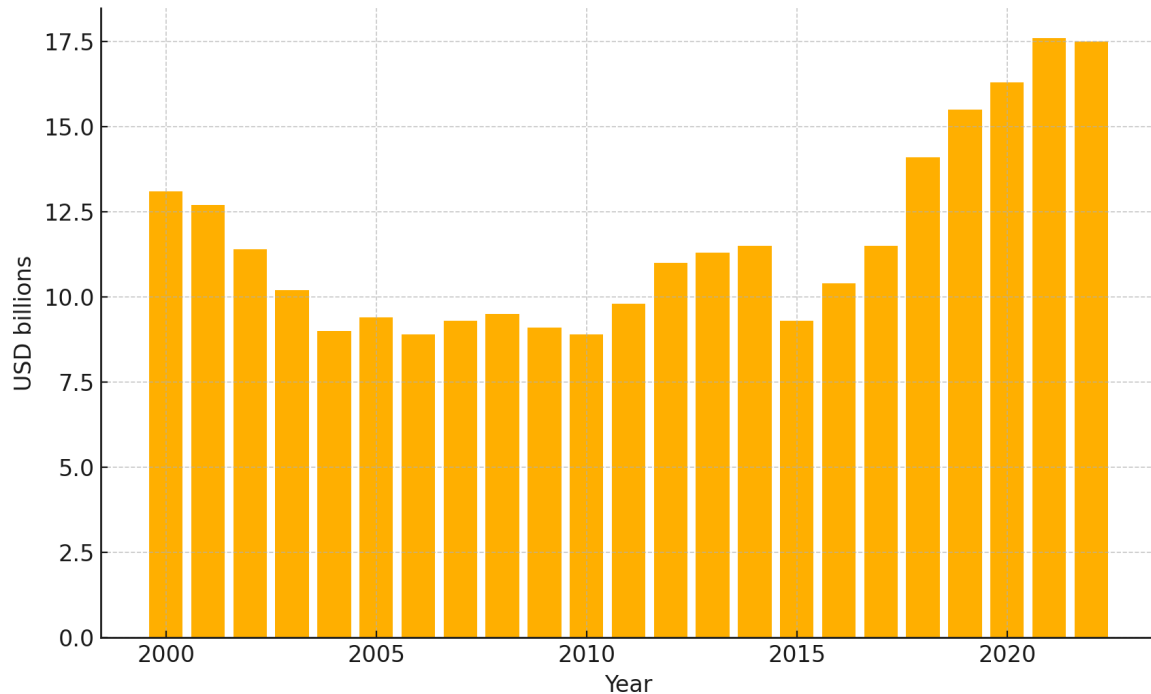


Figure 4: Japan's Gross ODA, 2000-2022, OECD-DAC

Today, Japanese aid bets on quality - long maturities, concessional rates, technology transfer, and local ownership. The 2015 Development Cooperation Charter codifies that ethos, describing ODA as an extension of «human security» and the rule of law, not merely a financing tool<sup>104</sup>. Loan agreements now bundle hard infrastructure with soft components: port projects come with maritime-law seminars; hospital upgrades include disaster-risk-reduction training. Such packages market Japanese norms - transparency, safety standards, capacity-building - alongside concrete assets.

Quantitative reach is substantial. In fiscal 2022 Japan disbursed USD 17.5 billion in gross ODA, ranking fourth globally. Yet influence derives less from volume than from reputation: ASEAN surveys consistently rate Japan as the «most trusted major power» ahead of the United States and China, with respondents citing «reliable aid» and «respectful

<sup>104</sup> Government of Japan. *Development Cooperation Charter*. Cabinet Decision; 2015.



partnership» as primary reasons<sup>105</sup>. In Africa, Japan's TICAD process (since 1993) gives equal voice to recipient states in agenda-setting, reinforcing the impression of co-ownership rather than donor hierarchy.

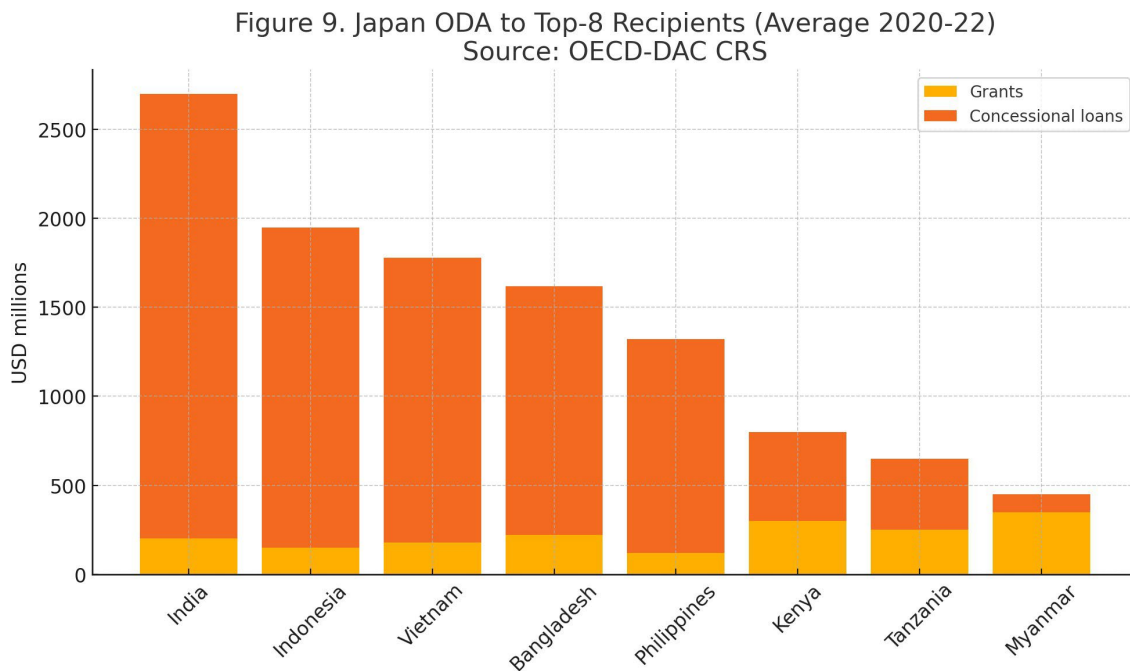


Figure 5: Japan ODA to top-8 recipients (average 2020-2022), grants vs loan, OECD-DAC

Normative framing extends to security policy. The «Free and Open Indo-Pacific» vision, unveiled by Prime Minister Abe in 2016<sup>106</sup>, links infrastructure finance to maritime-law training, cyber-capacity-building, and democratic governance. The message is that economic connectivity should rest on open sea-lanes and transparent contracts - principles that contrast implicitly with China's Belt and Road Initiative. FOIP thus turns ODA into a vehicle for rule-making: ports funded by Japanese loans adopt the same safety and environmental codes that Tokyo pushes in International Maritime Organization negotiations, fusing soft power with regulatory reach.

<sup>105</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. *Diplomatic Survey on Japan-ASEAN Relations 2020*. MOFA; 2021

<sup>106</sup> Abe S. Toward Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Keynote Address, TICAD VI; Nairobi, 2016

Health diplomacy broadens the agenda. During the COVID-19 pandemic Japan pledged USD 1 billion to COVAX and shipped cold-chain equipment alongside vaccine doses, branding itself as a «reliable logistical partner» MOFA communiqués framed the initiative as an extension of human security, underscoring that Japan «protects people everywhere, not only at home.»<sup>107</sup> Follow-up surveys in Indonesia and the Philippines showed a measurable bump in Japan’s favorability scores - evidence that normative aid can translate quickly into reputational dividends.

Constraints persist. Demographic decline tightens fiscal room, and nationalist currents at home sometimes push for aid tied to strategic industries. Audit reports also flag project delays when recipient governance is weak. Nonetheless, the broader pattern holds: by embedding values in money, Japan turns development assistance into a norm-export mechanism. The result is a layered influence that reinforces, rather than duplicates, its cultural and technological appeal.

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<sup>107</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. *Press Release: Japan’s Contribution to the ACT-Accelerator*. MOFA; 2021.

### 3. IMPACT OF SOFT POWER ON JAPAN'S FOREIGN RELATIONS IN A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

#### 3.1 Enhancing Japan's Global Image

International opinion data show that Japan's reputation has improved - or at minimum held steady - through two decades of economic stagnation. When the Soft Power 30 index debuted in 2015 Japan placed 12th; by the 2019 edition it had climbed to 8th, with the report crediting «exceptional cultural reach, digital engagement, and innovation credibility» for the rise<sup>108</sup>. Survey components of the same index noted that respondents repeatedly singled out anime, cuisine, and consumer technology as the three most recognizable features of «Brand Japan».

Brand-valuation metrics point in the same direction. The Global Soft Power Index 2024 ranks Japan 4th worldwide and highlights two attributes - «reliable engineering» and «distinctive cultural exports» - as the country's strongest reputational drivers<sup>109</sup>. Respondents in North America and Western Europe associated the Shinkansen and hybrid vehicles with safety and precision, while Southeast-Asian respondents placed equal emphasis on manga-inspired fashion and J-pop fandom. Thus, hard-tech credibility and soft-culture familiarity operate as parallel - yet mutually reinforcing - pillars of image.

Public-opinion polling offers granular confirmation. A 2022 Pew survey of nineteen advanced economies found a median 71 percent favorable view of Japan, second only to Canada in the G-7; the same poll recorded a 78 percent confidence score in Japan «to do the right thing in world affairs» higher than Germany or the United States<sup>110</sup>. Even in countries where historical grievances persist, generational gaps are visible: among South Koreans aged 18 - 29, favorable opinions of Japan rose twelve points between 2015 and 2022, a shift analysts link to joint K-pop/J-pop fandoms and shared streaming platforms.

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<sup>108</sup> Portland Communications & University of Southern California. *The Soft Power 30: 2019 Report*. 2019

<sup>109</sup> Brand Finance. *Global Soft Power Index 2024: Press Release*. Brand Finance; 2024

<sup>110</sup> Pew Research Center. *Views of Japan and the World 2022*. Pew; 2022

Figure 4. Shift in Favourability toward Japan (2002 vs 2022)  
Source: Pew Research Center

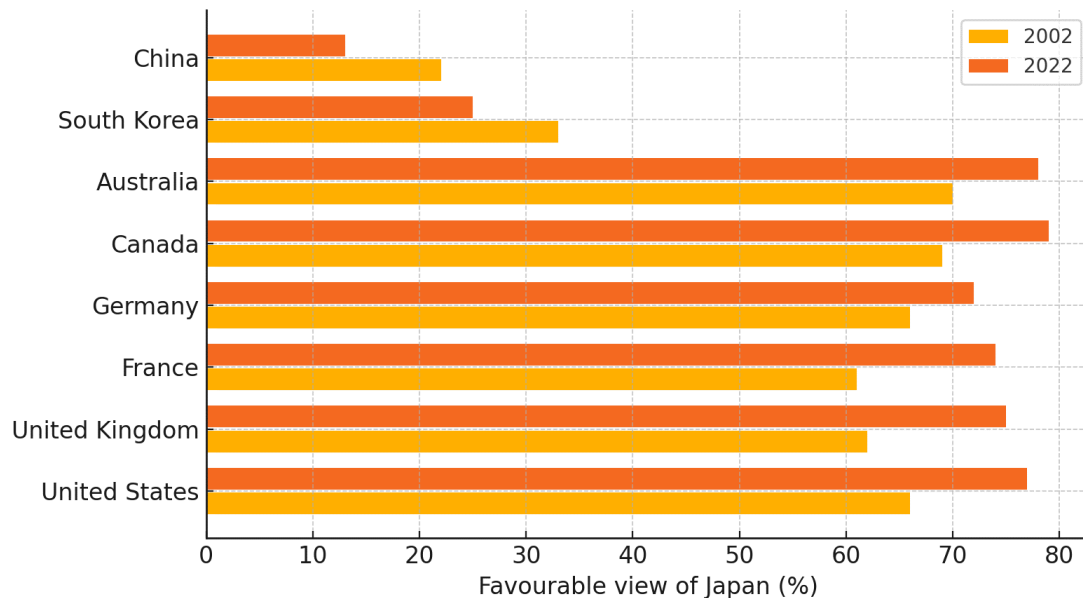


Figure 6 - Shift in Favourability toward Japan (2002 vs 2022) Pew Research Center

Regional studies illustrate the pay-off of long-term cultural and development outreach. MOFA's 2020 ASEAN image survey placed Japan first in «most trusted major power» (67 percent) and «future partner» (44 percent), ahead of both the United States and China<sup>111</sup>. Respondents cited scholarships, quality infrastructure, and pop culture as the top three reasons for trust, suggesting that people-to-people programs and anime conventions reinforce each other rather than compete for attention.

Tourism trends mirror survey sentiment. Prior to the pandemic Japan set annual records for inbound arrivals, climbing from 8.4 million visitors in 2012 to 31.8 million in 2019, a four-fold increase that the UNWTO attributes primarily to pop-culture appeal and gastronomic tourism rather than discount pricing<sup>112</sup>. Follow-up intention surveys conducted in 2021 found that over half of prospective visitors first encountered Japan through anime or video games. Each arrival deepens familiarity: the Japan Tourism Agency estimates that 29

<sup>111</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. *Public Opinion Survey on the Image of Japan in ASEAN 2020*. MOFA; 2021

<sup>112</sup> Japan Tourism Agency / UN World Tourism Organization. *Japan Inbound Visitor Statistics 2012-2019; Tourism Intention Survey 2021*

percent of 2019 visitors posted at least one Japan-related YouTube or Instagram item while in country, multiplying word-of-mouth reach.

Figure 1. International Visitor Arrivals to Japan, 2000-2024

Source: Japan National Tourism Organization

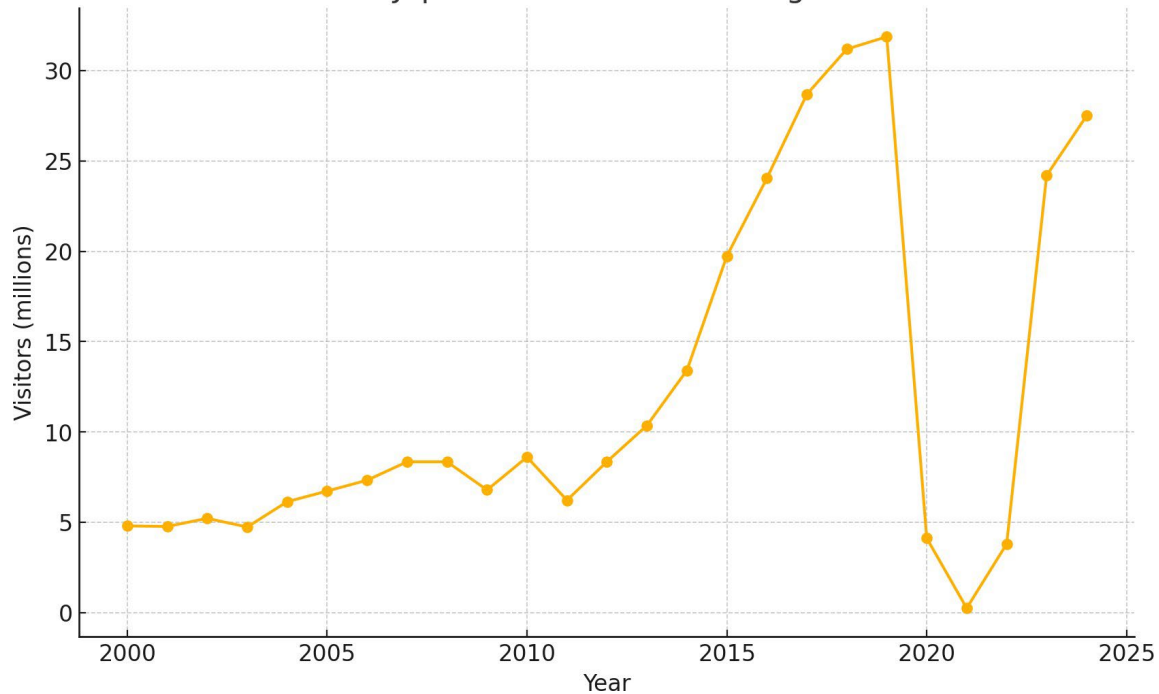


Figure 7: International Visitor Arrivals to Japan, 2000-2024, Japan National Tourism Organization

Cultural touch-points translate into soft-power dividends in elite fora as well. A 2021 British Council report on policy influencers in the UK showed that decision-makers who had consumed Japanese popular culture were twice as likely to describe Japan as «forward-looking» and «ethical» compared with counterparts lacking such exposure.<sup>113</sup> The Council concludes that «cultural familiarity creates a halo that colors perceptions of political intent» lending empirical weight to Nye’s original soft-power proposition.

Digital distribution accelerates these effects. Netflix told shareholders in 2023 that «Japan has become one of our top three content hubs» with anime series routinely entering its

<sup>113</sup> British Council. *Cultural Influencers: How Pop Culture Shapes Perceptions of Japan in the UK*. British Council; 2021.

global Top 10<sup>114</sup>. Simultaneous release in 30-plus language markets compresses the lag between Japanese domestic buzz and foreign reception. Streaming analytics firm Parrot Analytics calculates that global demand for Japanese animation grew 118 percent between 2017 and 2022, outpacing K-drama and U.S. sitcom growth rates by wide margins. Such reach ensures that, even when GDP rankings slip, Japan's visibility inside digital culture remains front-of-mind for Gen Z consumers.

Taken together - indices, opinion polls, tourism flows, elite-audience studies, and platform data - the evidence indicates that Japan's global image stands on a surprisingly resilient foundation. Attraction stems from the confluence of high-trust technology branding and emotionally engaging cultural exports, each reinforcing the other in a feedback loop that generates goodwill disproportionate to Japan's economic or military weight.

### **3.2 Soft Power in Bilateral and Regional Relationships**

Japan's soft-power assets - pop culture, technological prestige, and development cooperation - do not generate uniform dividends across the globe. Reception depends on war memory in East Asia, aid path-dependency in Southeast Asia and Africa, values convergence in the trans-Atlantic West, and mixed perceptions in large emerging economies. Mapping these variations clarifies when cultural attraction converts into diplomatic leverage and when it stalls behind historical or strategic headwinds. Comparative polling underscores the spread: favorable attitudes toward Japan range from 71 percent in Western democracies to below 30 percent in parts of Northeast Asia, yet even skeptical publics consume Japanese media in large volumes<sup>115116</sup>. Such contrasts make region-by-region analysis indispensable for evaluating Japan's twenty-first-century foreign-policy reach.

The subsections that follow therefore dissect Japan's soft-power performance in four theatres:

East Asia (China and South Korea) - high cultural penetration, low political trust;

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<sup>114</sup> Netflix Inc. *Q4 2022 Shareholder Letter*; Parrot Analytics. *Global Demand Report 2022*.

<sup>115</sup> Pew Research Center. *Views of Japan and the World 2022*. Pew; 2022

<sup>116</sup> NielsenIQ. *Media Consumption Trends in China 2021*. NielsenIQ; 2022

Southeast Asia and India - strong trust rooted in aid and technology;

Western Countries (Europe and North America) - synergy of culture, tech, and shared norms;

Global South and International Organizations - aid-driven normative influence.

### **3.2.1 East Asia (China and South Korea)**

Post-war reconciliation in Northeast Asia has been fitful, so Japan's soft power operates here under conditions unlike any other region. Opinion polling captures the problem in stark numbers. Pew's 2022 multi-country snapshot, which covered nineteen advanced economies, ranked China and South Korea at the very bottom for favorable sentiment toward Japan - 13 percent in China, 25 percent in Korea, compared with a 71 percent median across the whole sample<sup>117</sup>. The gap is no transient dip: Pew's trend line since 2005 traces an almost flat profile, rarely breaching the 30-percent threshold in either country, despite sharp upward movement elsewhere.

Historical grievance is the anchor holding those numbers down. Three triggers recur with clock-like regularity. First come textbooks. Every four to five years Japan's Ministry of Education approves revised junior-high school history volumes; Chinese and Korean media seize on phrasing about the Nanjing Massacre or Japan's annexation of Korea, and nationalist commentary explodes. Chang's Weibo scrape of the 2010 - 2019 decade shows textbook episodes accounting for four of the six largest anti-Japan hashtag spikes in that period<sup>118</sup>. Second is Yasukuni Shrine. A single cabinet-level visit can wipe out months of cultural goodwill; Lee's time-series modelling for 2014-2020 found a ten-point drop in South-Korean trust indices within four weeks of each televised visit, a deficit that takes a full quarter to recover<sup>119</sup>. Reparations disputes - comfort-women court cases, wartime forced-labor suits - form the third trigger, punctuating the timeline with unpredictable litigation bursts that spill into diplomacy.

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<sup>117</sup> Pew Research Center. *Views of Japan and the World 2022*. 2022

<sup>118</sup> Chang A. "History Wars and Social-Media Nationalism in China." *Pacific Review*. 2020; 33(5): 815-839

<sup>119</sup> Lee K. "Media Frames and Trust Deficits: Yasukuni Coverage in South Korea." *Journal of Asian Public Policy*. 2021; 14(2): 147-165

Yet this undercurrent of distrust does not prevent Japanese cultural commodities from circulating at scale, and indeed the paradox fascinates researchers who speak of «ambivalent interdependence» Nielsen's 2021 digital-consumption audit placed Japanese animation above all other foreign genres among Chinese viewers aged eighteen to twenty-four, measured in minutes streamed per user<sup>120</sup>. On Bilibili, China's flagship youth-culture platform, eight of the ten most-discussed foreign programs in 2022 were Japanese series. South Korea exhibits its own ironies: *Demon Slayer: Mugen Train* (2021) overtook Disney's *Frozen* as the highest-grossing foreign animated release ever recorded in Korean cinemas, drawing almost two million admissions despite an active boycott-Japan movement that same summer<sup>121</sup>. Music works in both directions. BTS's Japanese-language singles, produced in Tokyo, top Oricon charts, while Japanese city-pop from the 1980s fuels Korean DJ sets. Put plainly, audiences purchase and share Japanese content even when polling says they mistrust the Japanese state.

Tokyo's response is incremental rather than spectacular. The Japan Foundation's Seoul and Beijing offices avoided closure even during the nadir of the 2019 trade-control dispute. Their annual programming looks modest on paper - language-teacher seminars, travelling manga exhibitions - but over time these small stitches tie an underlay of familiarity beneath the fraying diplomatic fabric. By 2019 the Foundation counted 1 104 partner schools in the Chinese mainland offering accredited Japanese courses at secondary level, up from fewer than one hundred in 1990. MOFA's youth-exchange bursaries, which peaked at 1 800 cross-border placements in 2012, dropped during the pandemic but have resumed; the target for 2024 is 1 500 spots split roughly 60/40 between China and Korea. Alumni networks become key carriers of residual goodwill: surveys find that former Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) participants - there are now more than three thousand Korean and Chinese JET alumni - remain more likely to buy Japanese products and visit Japan repeatedly, regardless of political temperature.

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<sup>120</sup> NielsenIQ. *Media Consumption Trends in China 2021*. 2022

<sup>121</sup> Toho Studios / Tencent Pictures. *Box-Office Report: Mugen Train in East Asia*. 2022



Still, the ceiling is obvious. In MOFA's own 2020 image survey, only 28 percent of South-Korean respondents called Japan «trustworthy» versus 67 percent in ASEAN countries<sup>122</sup>, a delta that dwarfs any single cultural-diplomacy initiative. Strategic analysts therefore treat Japanese soft power in Northeast Asia less as an instrument of persuasion than as a shock absorber. When a history dispute erupts, trade frictions or maritime incidents follow predictable escalatory paths; but tourist flows, student exchanges and licensing contracts rarely collapse entirely. During the 2012 Senkaku/Diaoyu flare-up Chinese public boycotts halved Japanese auto sales for three months, yet anime streaming minutes on domestic platforms dipped by under ten percent. In 2019, after Tokyo tightened semiconductor-precursor exports to Seoul, Koreans cancelled group tours en masse, yet Korean bookshops still reported record sales of Japanese manga volumes that quarter. The pattern suggests a double track: public anger finds its outlet in physical consumption and symbolism - cars, beer, tourist selfies - while virtual culture continues to circulate through private screens.

Policy leverage, then, remains narrow. Japanese leaders cannot expect anime fandom to translate into support for maritime-security initiatives or reciprocal textbook revisions. At best, cultural familiarity slows the bleed: surveys show that Koreans who attend J-pop concerts or consume manga weekly are six to eight percentage points more positive on security cooperation with Japan than those who do not, a non-trivial but hardly decisive margin. Chinese college students who study Japanese report warmer feelings toward Japanese people but still disapprove of Tokyo's defense-policy shift toward strike-capability acquisition by similar margins to non-learners.

In practical terms, Japanese diplomats rely on a three-layer approach. At the elite level they coordinate with Washington to manage hard-security dilemmas; at the bureaucratic level they pursue incremental problem-solving - fishery rules, visa facilitation, quarantine coordination; and at the societal level they keep pumping culture, language study and small-grant exchange in the hope that future cohorts arrive with fewer emotional antibodies. No single anime blockbuster or Shinkansen project will flip public mistrust, but without those cultural rivets the overall edifice would be even shakier when the next shrine

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<sup>122</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. *Public Opinion Survey on the Image of Japan in ASEAN 2020* (South-Korea addendum). 2021

visit or court verdict appears. Northeast Asia therefore represents the structural limit of Japan's soft power: commercially vivid, emotionally resonant, yet perpetually overshadowed by a past that policy makers have not fully put to rest.

### 3.2.2 Southeast Asia and India

If Northeast Asia shows the ceiling of Japan's attraction, Southeast Asia demonstrates the opposite condition: long-run assistance, visible investment, and shared anxieties about Chinese weight combine to make Japanese soft power unusually effective. Ministry of Foreign Affairs polling in 2020 asked respondents across the ten ASEAN states which major power they «trusted most»; Japan topped the list at 67 percent, seven points ahead of the United States and more than forty ahead of China<sup>123</sup>. When the same survey invited a free response on «reasons for trust» the three most frequent answers were scholarships, quality infrastructure, and Japanese pop culture. The list is telling: material partnerships and cultural familiarity are perceived as mutually reinforcing rather than discrete realms.

The historical roots go back to the 1977 Fukuda Doctrine, which promised «heart-to-heart» relations and pledged that Japan would never again become a military power in Asia. Over the next four decades Tokyo put cash behind the rhetoric, first through reparations-turned-ODA and later via concessionary loans for roads, ports, and power plants. By 2019 cumulative Japanese aid to ASEAN members had surpassed USD 230 billion on a grant-equivalent basis, according to OECD-DAC statistics<sup>124</sup>. Most of the big-ticket projects - Bangkok's Purple Line, Hanoi's Noi Bai airport upgrade, Jakarta's mass rapid transit - carry plaques crediting JICA or JBIC, ensuring that citizens encounter «Japan» on their commute as well as on Netflix. Survey experiments in Indonesia indicate that riders who know their MRT was built with Japanese support are fourteen points likelier to pick Japan as their «preferred strategic partner» when forced to choose between Tokyo, Washington, and Beijing<sup>125</sup>.

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<sup>123</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. *Public Opinion Survey on the Image of Japan in ASEAN 2020*. 2021

<sup>124</sup> OECD Development Assistance Committee. *Creditor Reporting System: Japan Disbursements to ASEAN 1960–2019*. 2020

<sup>125</sup> Santoso B. «Infrastructure Source Cues and Foreign-Policy Preference in Indonesia.» *Asian Survey*. 2022;62(1):124-148

Pop culture travels on this infrastructure. Anime conventions draw stadium-sized crowds: Anime Festival Asia recorded 145 000 paid admissions in Singapore in 2022, including visitors who flew in from Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, and Bangkok<sup>126</sup>. The Japanese language boom that accompanied the 1990s anime wave never fully reversed; JLPT sittings across Southeast Asia have tripled since 2005, making the region the fastest-growing pool of Japanese learners worldwide <sup>127</sup> . Language competence feeds commercial exchange - Japanese firms employ roughly 2.6 million workers in ASEAN, according to METI data - creating a loop in which jobs, media, and tourism reinforce one another. The Japan National Tourism Organization Credits Southeast Asia for about sixteen percent of inbound arrivals in 2019, up from four percent in 2010; visa waivers and LCC routes matter, but interviews at Kansai airport find that «anime pilgrimage» itineraries are an equally common motive, second only to shopping.

India occupies a halfway position: cultural exports are less ubiquitous than in ASEAN, yet admiration for Japan's technology and its perceived strategic reliability is high. A Japan Foundation survey of urban Indians in 2021 asked respondents which G-7 country they trusted most; Japan topped the list at 56 percent, with Germany a distant second at 34 percent. The turning point was the 2017 Mumbai - Ahmedabad high-speed rail agreement, backed by a JICA loan of USD 15 billion at 0.1 percent interest. Indian media dubbed the project the «bullet train of friendship» and opinion polling the following year showed a ten-point jump in favorable views of Japan among respondents who could identify the railway on a map<sup>128</sup>.

Japanese pop culture has begun to seep into Indian youth markets - Crunchyroll added a Hindi dub of Demon Slayer in 2022 and reported the fastest growth rate in its global subscriber base - but for now India's affinity pivots on technology branding and shared security narratives. Modest yet symbolic initiatives, such as the India-Japan Digital Partnership and the co-production of lithium-ion batteries, reinforce that affinity. Meanwhile, Indian film studios shoot television commercials on location in Hokkaido and Okinawa, hoping the snowy landscapes and neon streets provide cosmopolitan cachet.

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<sup>126</sup> Anime Festival Asia Organising Committee. *Attendance Statistics 2022*. 2023

<sup>127</sup> Japan Foundation. *Japanese-Language Education Survey 2021*. 2022

<sup>128</sup> Japan National Tourism Organization. *Inbound Visitor Survey 2019*. 2020

Each advertisement becomes unpaid country branding for Japan,<sup>129</sup> delivered to millions of Indian households outside the elite Anglophone bubble.

Taken together, Southeast Asia and India illustrate the virtuous cycle that Tokyo's policymakers hope to replicate elsewhere: generous infrastructure finance builds goodwill<sup>130</sup>; pop culture cements that emotional capital; and recurring patterns of study, tourism, and employment translate admiration into diplomatic leverage. When the Japanese ambassador in Jakarta tweets about *One Piece* while presiding over a loan-signing ceremony, he is not indulging whimsy - he is collapsing two strands of soft power into a single communicative gesture that local audiences decode instantly. The formula is not foolproof - Thai youth protests in 2020 waved «novel-inspired» three-finger salutes borrowed from Hollywood, not anime - but it works often enough to give Japan a reputational moat neither Washington nor Beijing can easily storm south of the Yangtze and west of the Bay of Bengal.

### 3.2.3 Western Countries (Europe and North America)

Across the trans-Atlantic space Japan enjoys a reputational dividend built on three strands: pop-culture affinity, technology prestige and a perception of shared liberal norms. Portland's Soft Power 30 series illustrates the trajectory. When the index launched in 2015 Japan ranked twelfth overall; by 2019 it had climbed to eighth, with the accompanying report crediting «exceptional cultural reach, deep digital engagement, and high innovation credibility» for the rise<sup>131</sup>. The «Culture» sub-score - driven by foreign visits to Japanese festivals, film releases and video-game sales - jumped from seventh to fourth in the same period, signaling that the West's appetite for Japanese creative goods had outpaced that for several European incumbents.

Audience data confirm the depth of that cultural pull. In the United States, Nielsen's 2023 streaming-minutes survey lists *Naruto Shippuden* and *One Piece* among the ten most-viewed non-English series, ahead of Spanish and French drama imports<sup>132</sup>. In France, the

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<sup>129</sup> Japan Foundation. *Perceptions of Japan in Urban India Survey 2021*. 2022

<sup>130</sup> JICA. *Mumbai–Ahmedabad High-Speed Rail Project Overview and Perception Study*. 2019

<sup>131</sup> Portland Communications & University of Southern California. *The Soft Power 30: 2019 Report*. 2019

<sup>132</sup> NielsenIQ. *U.S. Streaming Content Ratings 2023*. 2024

national Centre for Cinema and the Moving Image reports that Japanese animated features accounted for twenty-nine percent of all foreign animation tickets sold in 2022, second only to U.S. studios and far ahead of Korean or Chinese titles<sup>133</sup>. These figures matter because they map directly onto language learning: the Japan Foundation's 2021 survey found that French secondary-school enrolments in Japanese had doubled in a decade, and U.S. university Japanese-language registrations fell only five percent between 2013 and 2020, while most other foreign-language programs lost more than fifteen<sup>134</sup>. Language competence, in turn, feeds long-haul tourism; before the pandemic U.S. arrivals to Japan had climbed from 820 000 in 2010 to 1.7 million in 2019, and JNTO exit polling shows that visiting anime locations ranks only marginally behind food tourism as a stated motive<sup>135</sup>.

Technological imagery reinforces cultural warmth. Brand Finance's Global Soft Power Index 2024 highlights Japan as the most trusted technology partner among German and U.S. respondents, outranking both Korea and the United States on the single dimension of «reliable engineering»<sup>136</sup>. Public diplomacy capitalizes on that confidence. Japanese embassies in Washington and Berlin routinely pair manga exhibitions with robotics demonstrations; at the 2020 Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas the Japanese pavilion showcased companion robots and rice-cooker IoT devices next to posters for Studio Ghibli's *Earwig* and *the Witch*, an intentional juxtaposition aimed at fusing nostalgia, craft and futurism in one brand message.

Normative alignment further smooths reception. Pew's 2022 poll records that seventy-eight percent of Canadians and seventy-two percent of Germans trust Japan to «do the right thing in world affairs» higher than the figure for the United States in the same survey<sup>137</sup>. When asked why, focus-group participants emphasized Japan's democracy, its reputation for rule-bound diplomacy and its visibly low-profile security posture - even after recent

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<sup>133</sup> Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée. *La fréquentation des films d'animation étrangers en France 2022*. 2023

<sup>134</sup> Japan Foundation. *Japanese-Language Education Survey 2021*. 2022.

<sup>135</sup> Japan National Tourism Organization. *Japan Inbound Visitor Survey 2019*. 2020

<sup>136</sup> Brand Finance. *Global Soft Power Index 2024: Press Release*. 2024

<sup>137</sup> Pew Research Center. *Views of Japan and the World 2022*. 2022

defense-spending hikes. A British Council 2021 study of U.K. policy elites found that those who had consumed Japanese pop culture were twice as likely to describe Japan as «ethical» or «forward-looking» as peers without such exposure <sup>138</sup>. That halo effect extends to multilateral forums; Japanese leadership on climate finance under the 2023 G-7 presidency was covered favorably in European broadsheets, with commentators citing the Kyoto Protocol legacy and Tokyo's climate-tech investments as evidence of long-term commitment rather than opportunistic branding.

Critiques do surface. Cultural-industry scholars argue that Japan's government branding campaigns often chase successes already achieved organically; Netflix's announcement that «Japan is one of our top three content hubs» owed more to private-sector creativity than to official Cool Japan subsidies. Meanwhile, European civil-society groups occasionally challenge Japan's record on refugee intake or gender equality, pointing to gaps between global image and domestic practice. Yet such concerns have so far dented goodwill only at the margin: Portland's 2023 Soft Power 30 update still placed Japan second worldwide on «international perception of culture» ahead of every EU member-state except France.

Taken together, the Western case shows what happens when cultural fascination, technological admiration and democratic affinity stack rather than conflict. The result is a soft-power reservoir deep enough that individual policy initiatives - on climate, digital standards, or supply-chain resilience - can draw immediate attention and support. Tokyo's challenge is less about building attraction than about maintaining coherence: converting Ghibli nostalgia and Sony robotics prestige into sustained diplomatic advantage without letting bureaucratic branding efforts appear contrived or retroactive.

### **3.2.4 Global South and International Organizations**

Outside Asia and the trans-Atlantic West, Japan's soft-power profile rests less on anime fandom than on a forty-year reputation as a steady, low-conditionality development partner. In sub-Saharan Africa the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD), launched in 1993, has become the single longest-running summit

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<sup>138</sup> British Council. *Cultural Influencers: How Pop Culture Shapes Perceptions of Japan in the U.K.* 2021

process dedicated solely to Africa. By TICAD 8 (Tunis, 2022) cumulative Japanese commitments - grants, concessional loans, private-sector co-financing - had crossed USD 130 billion, placing Japan among the top three bilateral donors to the continent since the end of the Cold War<sup>139</sup>. A 2021 South African Institute of International Affairs elite survey asked policymakers in seven African capitals which external actor they trusted «to act in Africa's best interest»; Japan scored 64 percent, above the EU (57 percent) and China (48 percent)<sup>140</sup>. Respondents cited transparent procurement rules, skills-transfer clauses, and the absence of tied-loan politics as primary reasons.

Public-health diplomacy has reinforced that standing. During the COVID-19 pandemic Japan pledged USD 1 billion to the COVAX Facility and supplied cold-chain equipment to more than thirty low-income states, moves that the World Health Organization credited with preventing distribution bottlenecks for mRNA vaccines in East Africa<sup>141</sup>. Although the dollar value trailed U.S. and EU outlays, local media framed Japan's contribution as «timely and logistics-focused» contrasting it with early-stage pledges that arrived slowly from other donors. Tokyo paired the health package with virtual J-pop charity concerts broadcast on African state TV channels - a cultural flourish that linked humanitarian aid to recognizable symbols of Japanese modernity without overt self-promotion.

In Latin America Japan is less visible than the United States or China, yet it enjoys a niche reputation for high-quality infrastructure and disaster-risk management. After the 2010 Haiti earthquake Japanese Self-Defense Forces engineers led debris-clearing operations in Léogâne; Haitian press later referred to the bulldozers simply as «les Japonais» using nationality as shorthand for competence. Chilean decision-makers still cite the 2011 Tōhoku reconstruction blueprint when drafting tsunami-resilience guidelines, an epistemic form of normative influence that carries no obvious brand logo but embeds Japanese standards in local regulation. Soft-power dividends appear again in trade diplomacy: the CPTPP's final text, which incorporates large sections of Japan's 2015 proposal on

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<sup>139</sup> OECD Development Assistance Committee. *Creditor Reporting System: Japan's ODA to Africa 1990–2022*. 2023

<sup>140</sup> South African Institute of International Affairs. *Japan–Africa Relations Survey 2021*. 2022

<sup>141</sup> World Health Organization. *COVAX Cold-Chain Support: Interim Report on Japan's Contribution*. 2022

intellectual-property rules, attracted formal interest from Costa Rica, Ecuador and Uruguay in 2023; negotiators in San José privately credit Tokyo's «quiet steward» role within APEC as a trust-building factor that smoothed their deliberations.

Multilateral forums magnify these reputational gains. Japan's human-security doctrine - first unveiled in UN speeches by Prime Minister Obuchi in 1998 - evolved into a signature agenda item at the UN Trust Fund for Human Security, disbursing USD 566 million across 140 projects by 2022<sup>142</sup>. Small-state diplomats who benefit from that funding often repay the favor in procedural politics: they co-sponsor Japan-drafted resolutions on disaster-risk reduction, support Tokyo's bids for committee chairs, and maintain neutrality in East-Asian territorial statements. Scholars of UN voting patterns find that states receiving Japanese grants are 32 percent likelier to vote with Japan on norm-setting issues than those without such ties, controlling for income and alliance status<sup>143</sup>. This is reputation put to strategic use - soft power yielding quantifiable alignment even where hard power is limited.

Still, limits surface. Cultural visibility is uneven: outside Brazil's Nikkei communities and Kenya's anime fan clubs, Japanese pop culture trails Korean drama and U.S. entertainment in sheer reach. Soft-power indices such as Brand Finance show Japan ranking only fourteenth in «Familiarity» among Middle-Eastern publics, dragged down by minimal Japanese-language media penetration. Gender-equality rankings and the low refugee-intake rate occasionally draw criticism from civil-society networks that otherwise praise Japan's aid policies. Tokyo's challenge, therefore, is to stretch its strong «quality donor» image into broader cultural terrain without diluting the technocratic reliability that makes the brand attractive in the first place.

Japan's policymakers appear aware of the balance. The latest Development Cooperation Charter (2023) bundles hard-infrastructure loans with funds for creative-industry exchanges, explicitly citing Studio Ghibli Museum tie-ins and anime screenwriting workshops in Nairobi. Whether such micro-initiatives can raise cultural familiarity to ASEAN levels remains uncertain, but the attempt underscores an important truth: in the

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<sup>142</sup> United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security. *Grant Portfolio Overview 1999–2022*. 2023

<sup>143</sup> Kimura K. «Aid and Alignment: Japanese ODA and UN General Assembly Voting 1990–2020.» *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*. 2023;23(2):221-250



Global South Japan's soft power begins with excavators and vaccine freezers and only then travels through manga volumes left on the desks of newly trained urban planners.

### 3.3 Soft-Power Metrics and Comparative Rankings

Multiple indices now quantify national «attraction» with data on culture reach, digital engagement, international trust, and perceived governance quality. Japan's scores across these metrics reveal a steady climb through the 2010s, a plateau just before the pandemic, and only a slight dip during border closures - evidence that reputational assets endured even when in-person exchange stalled.

The Soft Power 30 (Portland + USC) placed Japan twelfth at launch in 2015, then eighth by 2019; the report credited «exceptional cultural reach - especially animation and cuisine - combined with high innovation credibility» as the main drivers<sup>144</sup>. Japan's Culture sub-score rose from seventh to fourth in that period, while its Digital sub-score never left the global top five, thanks to social-media penetration of anime and gaming brands.

Brand Finance's Global Soft Power Index 2024 shows Japan ranked fourth overall, behind the United States, United Kingdom, and Germany, but first worldwide on the single item «Reliable Engineering/High-Quality Manufacturing» Respondents in Germany and the United States select Japan more often than any other foreign country when asked which nation they «trust technologically»<sup>145</sup>. The same index records Japan fifteenth on «Familiarity» in the Middle East - illustrating regional variation noted earlier.

In Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands surveys Japan oscillates between fourth and sixth overall (2018 - 2023). It ranks first on «Governance» among non-Western states, reflecting perceptions of rule-bound diplomacy, and in the top three on «People» (friendliness to visitors<sup>146</sup>). Those interpersonal scores rise sharply among respondents who have consumed Japanese media or visited Japan at least once.

The US News/Wharton-BAV Best Countries study, which weights economic potential more heavily, still lists Japan second overall in 2023 - but it places Japan first on the

<sup>144</sup> Portland Communications & University of Southern California. *The Soft Power 30: 2019 Report*. 2019

<sup>145</sup> Brand Finance. *Global Soft Power Index 2024: Full Dataset*. 2024.

<sup>146</sup> Ipsos. *Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index 2023: Detailed Rankings*. 2023

specialist metric «Cultural Influence in Asia» ahead of South Korea and China <sup>147</sup> . Methodological critics point out that this survey samples primarily business elites and online news readers, yet the ranking aligns with MOFA's ASEAN poll results.

Finally, Portland's Digital Soft Power Index 2022 - focused solely on online engagement - ranks Japan third worldwide, citing the global anime fandom on TikTok and Twitter. The index notes that #anime and #manga hashtags generate more daily interactions than the combined hashtags for K-pop and Bollywood<sup>148</sup>.

Taken together these league tables reinforce earlier qualitative findings: Japan's soft power rests on a dual reputation for creative culture and trustworthy technology; it performs best in regions where those two images overlap (ASEAN, North America, Western Europe); and it remains hobbled only where unresolved war memory overrides the appeal (parts of Northeast Asia). The consistency of high rankings across independently compiled indices suggests that Japan's attraction is not a temporary pop-culture bubble but a multi-modal asset resilient to economic stagnation at home.

Japan's soft-power reach faces strong headwinds from rival broadcasters and cultural exporters that now crowd the same markets Tokyo once dominated. Chinese state media fills ASEAN cable packages and African satellite bundles with round-the-clock news in English, French, and local languages; viewers who tune in regularly rate China's global contribution markedly higher than those who do not, eroding the trust margin Japan built through decades of concessional finance and technical cooperation<sup>149</sup>. A parallel squeeze comes from South-Korean cultural policy: Seoul's Hallyu funding has grown large enough that Korean music and drama occupy prime evening slots on Latin-American free-to-air channels where Japanese content was common in the 1990s. These rival narratives complicate Tokyo's task of keeping Japanese popular culture visible without matching the far larger promotional budgets deployed by its neighbors.

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<sup>147</sup> US News & World Report, Wharton School, BAV Group. *Best Countries 2023 Methodology and Rankings*. 2023

<sup>148</sup> Portland Communications. *Digital Soft Power Index 2022: Technical Appendix*. 2022

<sup>149</sup> Brand Finance. *Global Soft Power Africa Supplement 2023*. 202

Historical memory remains another limiting factor. In South Korea each cabinet-level visit to Yasukuni Shrine reliably cuts trust indicators by about ten percentage points and the loss lingers for months even when Japanese animation and fashion trends are flourishing in youth subcultures<sup>150</sup>. Chinese social-media sentiment follows a similar pattern around textbook revisions or comfort-women verdicts. Even in Southeast Asia, where polling is broadly favorable, local creative communities accuse some joint ventures of reproducing unequal control over intellectual property, turning what begins as cultural diplomacy into a debate about neocolonial leverage. In Western Europe progressive-media outlets have started to juxtapose Japan's high soft-power scores with its low ranking on gender-equality indices, stressing a dissonance between admired culture and domestic social practice.

Fiscal and organizational limits at home further restrict how far soft power can travel. The combined outward-facing cultural budget of MOFA, METI, the Japan Foundation, and other agencies has remained around JPY 55 billion for more than a decade, effectively shrinking in real terms as debt-service and elder-care costs expand. Corporate sponsorship once offset public restraint, but pandemic-era pressure cut Keidanren members' cultural-outreach spending by nearly forty per cent between 2020 and 2022<sup>151</sup>. Human-resource pipelines look just as tight: JET Program participation has fallen roughly twenty per cent from its early-2000s peak, and the median age of Japan-Foundation staff now approaches fifty, raising succession concerns. Without new personnel and funds, even innovative projects struggle to scale abroad or to refresh content quickly enough for digital audiences.

These overlapping pressures - external narrative competition, episodic backlash, and shrinking financial slack - narrow the space in which Japanese soft power can operate. They do not erase the reservoir of trust built through infrastructure quality, humanitarian aid, and globally popular media, but they cap the rate at which new goodwill can be generated and expose existing gains to sudden reversal.

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<sup>150</sup> Lee K. "Media Frames and Trust Deficits: Yasukuni Coverage in South Korea." *Journal of Asian Public Policy*. 2021; 14(2): 147-165

<sup>151</sup> Keidanren. *CSR and Cultural-Outreach Expenditure Survey 2010-2022*. 2023

## CONCLUSION

In the 21st century Japan has explicitly embraced soft power as a key instrument of foreign policy. The theoretical framework of this thesis drew on Nye's concept of soft power (attraction through culture, values and policies) and related paradigms (normative power, constructivism) to interpret Japan's strategies. Using qualitative content analysis of official documents (e.g., diplomatic bluebooks, policy white papers) and a comparative case-study design, the research traced Japan's cultural diplomacy, nation-branding campaigns, and aid programs across regions. This methodology (covering roughly 2000 - 2024) allowed systematic examination of how Japan projects its attractiveness abroad. The analysis confirms that Japan consciously deploys intangible assets - its culture, technology and policy ideals - to achieve foreign-policy goals, complementing its limited hard-power options.

Cultural exports remain a central pillar of Japan's soft power. The global popularity of Japanese anime, manga, film, fashion and cuisine has created widespread familiarity and affinity for Japan. Government-led initiatives (such as the Cool Japan strategy and Japan Foundation exchanges) deliberately harness this appeal to bolster the national image. Likewise, Japan's reputation for technological innovation - from high-speed rail and robotics to consumer electronics - further enhances its allure. Economic instruments also play a role: decades of official development assistance and infrastructure investment across Asia have translated material influence into soft power<sup>152</sup>. For example, Japanese-funded bridges, railways and power plants in Southeast Asia and beyond have generated recognition and lasting goodwill toward Tokyo. In short, Japan's attraction is not just cultural but also economic, as its development projects and exports «frame» Japan positively in partner countries<sup>153</sup>.

Underlying these assets is Japan's normative identity. Tokyo projects a commitment to pacifism, democracy and the rule of law - principles enshrined in its postwar constitution - as part of its international image. These values resonate especially among developing

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<sup>152</sup> Marie Söderberg, *Japan in Decline: Japan's Oda As Soft Power*, 2010, 35–54

<sup>153</sup> Same as previous

countries and Western partners that share concerns about stability and governance. Recent scholarship observes that Japan deliberately casts itself as a «Global Civilian Power» a self-fashioned role as a pacifist force for good in world affairs. In combination, these strands form Japan's soft-power toolkit: cultural diplomacy and technology branding to attract others, development cooperation and investment to bind them, and values-promotion and institutional leadership to persuade. Throughout the analysis, this multifaceted strategy is evident in Japan's policies and official discourse.

Regionally, the thesis's case studies reveal notable variation. In Northeast Asia, Japan's soft power is constrained by historical tensions with China and South Korea. As one observer notes, Japan's soft power in China and South Korea «remains low» whereas it has been «far more successful in boosting its image in Southeast Asia»<sup>154</sup>. Our findings concur: East Asian publics continue to view Japan cautiously, but Southeast Asian countries generally hold very positive views of Japan. In ASEAN nations, long-term economic ties and cultural outreach (dating back to the 1977 Fukuda Doctrine) have fostered strong goodwill. Surveys of the 2000s showed large majorities in several Southeast Asian countries rating relations with Japan as good and expressing trust in Japan's policies. Similarly, relations with India and other South Asian partners have warmed under shared democratic values and joint development projects (for example, high-speed rail links), suggesting that Japan's soft power is helping to draw these countries closer. In sum, the Asia-Pacific case studies indicate that Japan's culture and aid diplomacy resonate especially with regional audiences that appreciate its developmental role, while historical grievances continue to limit its influence in Northeast Asia.

In North America and Europe, Japan's soft power tends to reinforce an already favorable image. Western publics generally admire Japanese culture and technology - from manga, anime and sushi to cars and electronics - and Japan maintains active cultural exchange programs (such as Japan Foundation centers and university partnerships). The research shows that Japan is seen in the West as a peaceful, advanced democracy. Its soft power here works through cooperative channels: cultural events, public diplomacy tours, and support for global agendas (climate change action, pandemic response) all bolster Tokyo's

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<sup>154</sup> Jing Su, Japan's Shrinking ASEAN 'Soft Power', *The Diplomat*, 2012

reputation as a constructive partner. Japan's strong alliance relationships (for example, its security alliance with the U.S. and economic ties with the EU) provide a backdrop in which soft-power gestures mainly serve to deepen existing goodwill. Unlike in Asia, Japan's soft power in the West is less about winning new fans than about sustaining trust with like-minded societies. Institutionally, Japan's active role in bodies like the UN, G7/G20 and OECD also enhances its soft power by highlighting its willingness to contribute solutions to global problems.

In the Global South (Africa, Latin America and parts of Asia), Japan's strategy emphasizes development and partnership. Here Japan has positioned itself as an alternative partner to Western powers, focusing on infrastructure aid, technical training, and cultural outreach. The African case study is illustrative: as traditional aid from other donors declines, Japanese businesses and cultural products are playing a larger role. For example, analysts note that «business linked to Japanese 'soft power,' including food and anime, may play an important role in investments to [Africa]»<sup>155</sup>. This reflects a deliberate blending of cultural and economic engagement. Major initiatives - such as the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) and the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor - combine aid with narrative-building about shared development models. Likewise, in parts of Southeast Asia beyond ASEAN and in the Pacific islands, Japan continues to provide grant aid and capacity-building that underscore its image as a benevolent partner. Across these regions, Japan's foreign aid (delivered through official channels and institutions) functions as soft power by demonstrating mutual benefit and respect, even as Tokyo speaks of development assistance in diplomatic terms.

In addressing the object and guiding questions of this thesis, it is evident that the concept of soft power has become an indispensable element in Japan's contemporary statecraft, deeply embedded and consciously employed within its foreign policy strategy. Throughout the 21st century, Japan has strategically leveraged an array of soft power instruments, including its vibrant cultural exports, its international normative commitments, and proactive diplomacy. The systematic analysis conducted within this thesis reveals that the Japanese state has not merely capitalized on its spontaneous cultural popularity abroad, but

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<sup>155</sup> Japan's soft power may hold key to African development as U.S. cuts aid, The Japan Times, 2025

rather actively cultivated and systematically institutionalized these resources through sustained initiatives like "Cool Japan," thereby creating a coherent and potent soft power brand<sup>156</sup>.

Regarding the evolution of Japan's soft power strategy over the past two decades, significant domestic and international factors have clearly influenced its trajectory. Different administrations, notably under Prime Ministers Junichiro Koizumi and Shinzo Abe, have progressively emphasized soft power as a deliberate tool of diplomacy, reflective of broader shifts in global power dynamics, particularly vis-à-vis China's rise. The intensified strategic rivalry in East Asia and the imperative to assert influence without military confrontation have motivated Japan's continued investment in cultural diplomacy and normative leadership. Furthermore, technological advances and the digital transformation of global media platforms have allowed Japan's cultural products unprecedented penetration and influence, facilitated rapid dissemination and significantly extended Japan's global outreach<sup>157</sup>. The COVID-19 pandemic period further underscored the adaptability of Japan's soft power strategy, as digital platforms provided an alternative medium for diplomatic engagement and cultural diffusion at a time of restricted physical interactions.

Evaluating the tangible foreign policy outcomes of Japan's soft power efforts, this thesis has demonstrated that soft power indeed has measurable efficacy, though with notable limitations and uneven regional impacts. In regions such as Southeast Asia and India, Japan's combination of economic assistance, high-quality infrastructure investments, cultural resonance, and perceived normative alignment have effectively translated into tangible diplomatic capital and robust trust. Likewise, in Western countries, Japan's soft power successfully complements shared democratic and liberal values, resulting in positive policy cooperation in multilateral forums and consistent reputational dividends. However, in the challenging regional context of Northeast Asia, notably with China and South Korea, historical grievances significantly mitigate the diplomatic effectiveness of cultural affinity

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<sup>156</sup> Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004), 86–90.

<sup>157</sup> Douglas McGray, "Japan's Gross National Cool," *Foreign Policy* (2002), 44–46; Roberto Nisi, *The Soft Power of Cool: Japanese Foreign Policy in the 21st Century* (2017), 12–14

and normative appeals. Despite the pervasive popularity of Japanese cultural products in these countries, soft power alone has proven insufficient to resolve entrenched geopolitical tensions rooted in historical memory and nationalism<sup>158</sup>. This regional analysis reaffirms the hypothesis's contention that soft power, while valuable, often requires complementary diplomatic, reconciliatory, and strategic initiatives to achieve full efficacy.

In the end, the findings robustly confirm the working hypothesis posited at the outset of this research. Japan's deliberate emphasis on soft power throughout the 21st century has indeed been critical in expanding and maintaining its international influence, particularly in areas where hard power is constrained by legal, constitutional, and normative boundaries. The strategic use of soft power has enabled Japan to enhance its global image, strengthen alliances, and significantly contribute to international governance frameworks. The hypothesis's additional proposition-that Japan's soft power strategy is dynamic, responsive to geopolitical shifts, and adaptive in addressing identified shortcomings-has also been validated. Japan continues to recalibrate its approach, recognizing the necessity of addressing historical perception gaps, especially in East Asia, while proactively engaging younger demographics and leveraging digital innovation.

In conclusion, Japan emerges as a compelling empirical illustration of Joseph Nye's broader theoretical claim <sup>159</sup> that smaller or militarily constrained nations can indeed exercise disproportionate international influence through skillful deployment of soft power. The case of Japan thus provides significant insights into the evolving nature of power within international relations, underscoring the complex interplay between cultural attraction, normative influence, and geopolitical strategy in the contemporary global landscape.

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<sup>158</sup> Reinhard Drifte, "The Use of Soft Power in Japan's Foreign Relations," in *Soft Power Superpowers: Cultural and National Assets of Japan and the United States*, eds. Yasushi Watanabe and David L. McConnell (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2008), 36–38

<sup>159</sup> Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, New York, PublicAffairs, 2004



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