

Received March 15, 2017

Revised May 10, 2017

Accepted May 20, 2017

## Three Faces of Japan's Soft Power

YEE-KUANG HENG\*

---

After two lost decades of economic stagnation and faced with rising neighbors such as South Korea and China, soft power has been touted by politicians and academics alike as a means for Japan to maintain its global profile and influence. “Soft power” is a concept coined by Harvard professor Joseph Nye to maintain American preponderance in the post-Cold War era, but what does it mean in the Japanese context? This paper suggests that there are three discernible faces to Japanese soft power. First, there is a conventional emphasis on promoting pop cultural assets overseas such as *manga* (comic books); *anime* (animated cartoons) and *cosplay* (costume play). Second, Japan may also seek to project influence by aligning with international norms on freedom of maritime navigation or combating climate change. Third is a somewhat more unconventional use of Japanese military assets in a non-threatening manner to attract others into supporting Tokyo's policies through, for example, providing humanitarian assistance. The paper concludes by evaluating the impact and limitations of this Japanese triad in attaining desired goals through soft power.

*Keywords:* Soft Power Triad, Cultural Appeal, International Norms, Military Force

---

\* Professor, University of Tokyo, Japan;  
E-mail: heng@pp.u-tokyo.ac.jp;  
DOI: 10.16934/isr.18.1.201706.171

## I. INTRODUCTION

In a rather matter-of-fact manner, Japan's mass-circulation daily *Asahi Shimbun* (2007) noted that 'Japan's economic power has peaked out, and the challenge today for this country is how to polish and best its soft power.' It is one thing for the *Asahi* to recommend soft power as the solution to Japan's woes, but it is yet another to properly understand what soft power means in the Japanese context. After all, the oft-cited definition of soft power provided by Harvard professor Joseph Nye has its origins as a way to maintain American preponderance in the post-Cold War era. The original formulation had next to nothing to do with Tokyo's ability to project influence overseas, much less the Japanese interpretation of the concept. Soft power is defined as the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment (Nye 2004, x). This variety of power according to Nye (2004), is to be differentiated from 'hard power' (usually military force to compel or coerce a target to comply with demands) or 'inducement' through the use of incentives. Nye (2006) contends that a country's soft power 'rests primarily on three resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others; its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad) and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)'. What relevance do these hitherto American-centric set of ideas have for post-bubble Japan contemplating its place in a rapidly changing world? The answer is 'quite a lot'. Japanese politicians have been pondering how to use Japan's own soft power resources to polish its image and advance national interests (Berger 2010, 570). One of its more ardent advocates, former PM Aso Taro (2009) for instance, once recommended that Japan should focus on 'sending out its vast and varied range of "soft" power'. Aso's claim implies that there are in fact several dimensions of Japanese soft power to be utilised. This paper seeks to argue that the range of Japanese soft power Aso referred to can be seen to manifest in three core facets. The first resource of cultural attraction in Nye's formulation has drawn predominantly the most academic attention in studies of Japanese soft power (McGray 2002; Otmazgin 2008; Lam 2007; Heng 2010). This is unsurprising because 'typically when people think of soft power, they tend to focus on a country's contributions to global culture – food, music, novels, movies' (Hymans 2009, 252). However, the plethora of scholarship that have evaluated Japan's cultural soft power may perhaps be missing the point that, in fact, 'cultural allure may be the least relevant element of soft power, however entertaining its coverage may be' (Jing 2013, 151). More importantly, current discussions point towards wider dimensions of Japan's soft power to be evaluated, beyond simply cultural attraction. Something appears to be missing, for 'Japan as a brand needs more' (Legewie 2011). For Smith (2012), the 'real source of Japan's attraction' in its democratic values is being obscured by an over-emphasis on its cultural appeal.

Others point to its potential ability to address shared challenges such as climate change (Heng 2014). This being the case, what other soft power resources then might Japan possess and bring to bear, besides cultural appeal? Such discussions bring us to the role that Nye postulated political values play in generating attraction: the second leg of Japanese soft power examined in this paper. For Lee (2011, 11), this ‘normative’ dimension of soft power hinges on whether or not countries regard a state’s policies as legitimate and justifiable: how far its policies reflect or enhance international norms and shared values. This paper suggests that the second face of Japanese soft power can currently be seen in several ways. Tokyo has presented itself as champion of access to the global commons and a defender of global norms such as freedom of maritime navigation in the South China Sea. Other attempts to act as trouble-shooter and addressing shared global challenges, such as climate change and ageing, may also be seen in this light of reflecting shared values and norms. The third pillar of soft power that this paper explores lies in Japan’s military assets. These can help to make increased Japanese maritime presence seem legitimate, attractive and enhance moral authority for Japanese foreign policy goals in upholding freedom of maritime navigation and PM Abe’s signature ‘proactive contribution to peace’ policy. The analysis turns here to how Tokyo has engaged in capacity-building and humanitarian assistance/ disaster relief for countries in South-East Asia through its military, the Japan Self-Defence Forces.

## II. THE FIRST FACE: CULTURAL ATTRACTION

Japan’s traditional cultural assets are well-known, ranging from flower arrangement (*ikebana*) to the *chado* tea ceremony, judo and calligraphy. However, with growing global interest in more contemporary forms of Japanese popular culture such as manga and video games, the Japanese state has also moved to leverage Japanese pop culture as a new source of cultural soft power. During his term as Foreign Minister, the previously mentioned Aso Taro (2006) declared that ‘any kind of cultural diplomacy that fails to take advantage of pop culture is not really worthy of being called “cultural diplomacy”...and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is really going all out to “market” this, so to speak.’ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2017) is also unabashedly declaring that to further the understanding and trust of Japan, it is ‘using pop-culture, in addition to traditional culture and art, as its primary tools for cultural diplomacy. Among young people, pop-culture, such as Manga and Anime, has been popular worldwide in recent years.’ Aso, himself a self-declared manga fan who tries to read at least one manga per week, initiated the International Manga Award in 2007 to invite manga artists from around the world to submit their drawings to the Ministry. The scheme seeks to recognise international manga artists who contribute to the promotion of manga overseas. The winner is

invited to a ceremony in Tokyo to receive the award and meet with Japanese manga publishing houses. In another eye-catching move in 2008, Doraemon, one of the most loved iconic characters in Japanese anime and manga (a blue robotic, time-travelling cartoon cat) was appointed as Japan's first-ever official anime ambassador. Presented his diplomatic credentials by then-Foreign Minister Koumura Masahiko in a photo opportunity at the Foreign Ministry, Doraemon's appointment was one of the strongest and clearest indicators of Tokyo trying to harness its soft power through cultural appeal. Other initiatives launched under the banner of pop culture diplomacy include the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) conferring a Foreign Minister's Prize on the best costume-player at 'the World Cosplay Summit', the biggest annual Cosplay event in Japan, since 2009. The summit which draws cosplayers from across the world is co-hosted by the Ministry, Aichi Prefecture, Chunichi Shimbun and others. The MOFA continued launching more initiatives in 2009. Three leading female fashionistas in the field of fashion were appointed Kawaii Ambassador or 'Trend Communicator of Japanese Pop Culture' to promote Japanese street fashion overseas, such as Harajuku-style fashion and Lolita-style fashion. In September 2011, pop culture diplomacy took on an almost literal meaning when Japan's biggest boy band SMAP performed their first overseas concert in Beijing, after Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao said he hoped SMAP could improve China-Japan friendship.

These creative and cultural industries are seen to be new drivers of economic growth as well as attracting overseas audiences. In 2010, Japan's New Growth Strategy included emphasis on exporting 'Cool Japan'. Under this broad slogan, the Ministry of Economy Trade and Industry announced in 2010 its new Creative Industries Promotion Office'. The 'Cool Japan' project is a Japanese government plan to promote Japanese animation, fashion and food overseas. In 2012, the newly re-elected Abe Shinzo administration appointed Inada Tomomi as the first minister in charge of the 'Cool Japan' strategy. The campaign logo was created by designer Kashiwa Sato, who has done work for the Uniqlo clothing brand that has expanded dramatically overseas. Cool Japan stresses public-private partnership where private sectors are the prime actors. The Cool Japan Fund includes the Japanese government as a shareholder, together with other major industry actors such as airline company ANA Group and giant retailer Takashimaya. As of April 2016, there was investment capital of 52.3 billion Yen accumulated to invest in enterprises seeking to expand overseas. Perhaps the ultimate manifestation of this close governmental involvement in promoting Japanese pop culture overseas occurred at one of the biggest global events of 2016, the summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro. PM Abe Shinzo engaged in a little dose of cosplay and appeared dressed as Nintendo's video-game character Super Mario at the Closing Ceremony. Abe later explained that 'I borrowed the power of Japan's characters as I wanted to show Japan's soft power'. Other Cabinet ministers such as Defence Minister Inada

Tomomi have also gamely dressed up in costume and participated in cosplay events overseas such as the Tokyo Crazy Kawaii Paris event in 2013 in her previous portfolio as minister in charge of promoting Cool Japan.

### **III. THE SECOND FACE: CHAMPIONING GLOBAL NORMS AND REFLECTING SHARED VALUES**

According to Nye's formulation, countries that adopt policies aligned with or reflecting global norms and values can generate soft power. Maritime freedom of navigation in the Asia-Pacific has emerged as one key norm in recent years, as tensions grow over territorial disputes and artificial island-building in the South China Sea. The Abe Administration has sought to align itself with these norms as a self-proclaimed supporter and defender of shared access to the global maritime commons. In his speech at the North Atlantic Council, Abe (2014a) stressed that 'Japan should play a more proactive role in order fully to defend freedom of overflight, freedom of navigation, and other global commons.' While Japanese government documents tend to provide several examples of this proactive stance, ranging from contribution to UN PKOs and non-proliferation efforts, what is most relevant to this paper is the example given of 'strengthening the rule of law in global commons'. The 2013 National Security Strategy identified amongst others, security challenges for Japan in the form of 'risks to global commons' where conflicts of interest over the sea are increasing (Government of Japan 2013, 5). According to the UN Environment Programme, the 'Global Commons' refers to resource domains or areas that lie outside of the political reach of any one nation State. Thus international law identifies four global commons namely: the High Seas; the Atmosphere; Antarctica; and Outer Space. In Japan's case, its concerns can be seen clearly in two domains: access to the maritime and aviation commons, but Tokyo has also increasingly turned its attention to cyber-space and Outer Space. The National Security Strategy continues to note that it considers important Japan's need to maintain and develop 'open and stable seas' as well as 'strengthening the international order based on shared values and rules'(Government of Japan 2013, 4). It envisions Japan as 'a guardian of the rule of law' and as a proactive participant in rule-making particularly with regard to the sea, outer space and cyberspace, and as strengthening capacity building efforts for developing countries in these fields (31). To that end, the strategy declared that Japan will strengthen cooperation with partners and enhance bilateral and multilateral exercises. With regard to assisting ASEAN in 'safeguarding the seas', PM Abe (2014b) has declared his intention to provide 'seamless support' combining various options including defence equipment and technology cooperation on surveillance and rescue capabilities; ODA and capability-building by the JSDF. In particular, the 2013 NSS declared that Japan will 'provide assistance to those coastal states alongside the sea lanes of communication...and strengthen cooperation with partners

in the sea lanes who share strategic interests with Japan' (Government of Japan 2013, 24). Tokyo also played a pivotal role establishing the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP) based in Singapore. In a speech delivered to the Australian Parliament, PM Abe (2014c) announced that Tokyo will be raising its regional security profile. 'So far as national security goes, Japan has been self-absorbed for a long time...As a nation that longs for permanent peace in the world, and as a country whose economy is among the biggest, Japan is now determined to do more to enhance peace...We want to make Japan a country that will work to build an international order that upholds the rule of law, Let us join together all the more in order to make vast seas from the Pacific Ocean to the Indian, and those skies, open and free...In everything we say and do we must follow the law and never fall back into force and coercion.' Maintaining and upholding freedom of navigation in maritime sea lines of communication and civil over-flight in international airspace has emerged as a key indicator of Japan's attempt to project soft power and influence through this normative dimension. Tokyo managed to assert the importance of 'freedom of navigation' into the Chairman's statement at the 16<sup>th</sup> ASEAN-Japan summit in October 2013 in Brunei. Again, two months later, the Joint Statement of the Japan-ASEAN 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Summit in Tokyo declared 'We underscored the importance of maintaining peace, stability and prosperity in the region and promoting maritime security and safety, *freedom of navigation*; unimpeded commerce, exercise of self-restraint and resolution of disputes by peaceful means'. Japan and ASEAN also agreed to 'enhance cooperation in ensuring the *freedom of overflight*...and the relevant standards and recommended practices by the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO)'. Japan has effectively inserted itself into the soft power equation for ASEAN states, offering its help as an attractive solutions-provider through capacity-building and aligning itself diplomatically with shared values and norms on freedom of navigation. While some commentators argue that Beijing is 'in essence, bucking international norms that guarantee freedom of movement in both the maritime and aerial realms' (Hornung 2013), Japan has been presenting itself to anxious Southeast Asian states as a defender of shared global maritime commons and global norms. This is to attract these states into supporting Tokyo's more high profile security position and to its views on territorial disputes in the region.

Besides championing freedom of navigation, there is potential soft power to be generated from trouble-shooting other shared global challenges such as climate change and ageing. The 2009 White Paper on International Trade of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI 2009, 498) proposed a new role for Japan as 'a problem-solving country that can proactively contribute to solving problems facing the international community and take advantage of such contributions for boosting its national power in a win-win manner to benefit both itself and the

world'. Ex-PM Aso in 2009 singled out environmental problems because 'overcoming global warming is the greatest challenge of the 21st century' and Japan should be 'leading the world in the low-carbon emission revolution' (Heng 2014, 169-192). Successive administrations have continued this emphasis on tackling climate change. Conscious of Japanese dependence on imported fossil fuels after the 3/11 triple disaster, PM Abe has laid out his notion of a 'Hydrogen Society' where Japan leads the world with homes and cars, and where offices run on hydrogen fuel cells. This is a vision of Japan as a world pioneer in a low-emissions society of the future that can thrive without causing harmful side-effects to the environment and fight climate change in the process. Abe has made 'hydrogen a symbol of Japan's ability to innovate despite the collapse of its vaunted consumer electronics industry' (Harding and Inagaki 2017). This vision includes developing and launching high-technology low-emission hybrid and hydrogen cars, hydrogen refuelling stations and supply chains. Sustainable smart cities with low carbon footprint are also high on the agenda. The idea of a hydrogen society may be appealing to other countries, helping to attract others to want what Japan wants, in the classic soft power formula. PM Abe's 2015 Joint Statement with Australian PM Turnbull for instance highlighted cooperation on the hydrogen society and Hydrogen Energy Supply Chain Project that the two countries will work towards. Hydrogen is drawing attention as an energy source 'that can solve problems such as global warming and depletion of energy resources', said Furukawa Kazuo, chairman of the New Energy and Industrial Technology Development Organization (Irfan 2016). Japan has also provided 'green' aid to the Pacific Islands Forum to help low-lying islands cope with impact of climate change and rising sea levels. The 'Cool Earth' Partnership programmes are aimed at delivering assistance to countries to tackle climate and environmental problems. For instance, a 300 million dollar loan was provided to Indonesia to prevent deforestation, increase geothermal capacity and improve the water management sector. Other ways in which Japan is presenting itself as tackling shared problems is the use of robotic technologies to assist with ageing-related problems. Paro, a therapeutic robotic Arctic harp seal designed to calm the agitated elderly and those with dementia, was created by scientist and Deputy Director in the Cabinet Office, Dr. Shibata Takanori. This can be viewed as a new dimension of soft power whereby advanced robotic technologies developed in Japan can be attractive to other countries that share similar problems with ageing. Japan can burnish its image as a leader in solving such global-scale problems.

#### **IV. THE THIRD FACE: THE JAPAN SELF-DEFENCE FORCE**

This section moves to evaluating the potential soft power role that Japanese military forces, the Japan Self-Defence Forces (JSDF) can play.<sup>1</sup> Apart from

repelling an invasion and preparing for new threats such as ballistic missile strikes and aggression against remote islands (undoubtedly 'hard' power tasks in the conventional sense), 'international peace cooperation activities' are listed as another JSDF 'primary mission' (Ministry of Defence 2010, 322-348). It may seem at first glance instinctively counter-intuitive and even possibly contradictory to suggest that 'hard' power elements (the JSDF) may somehow function as the third pillar of Japanese soft power. Fundamentally in theoretical terms, it is not so easy to draw a clear perfect distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' power (Nye 2011, 21). Nye (2004, 116) has made the intriguing point that 'the military can also play an important role in the creation of soft power'. This ability crucially hinges on whether a particular military asset is being deployed in assistance mode (soft power) or coercion mode (hard power) (Heng 2015). Nye (2011, 21) goes on to explain that the 'resources often associated with hard power behavior can also produce soft power behavior depending on the context and how they are used...A tangible hard power resource such as a military unit can produce both command behavior (by winning a battle) and co-optive behavior (by attracting) depending on how it is used.' The manner in which military assets are deployed makes a significant difference because 'fighting and threatening are hard power behaviors; protecting and assisting are soft power behaviors' (227).

One good example to illustrate this importance of context is Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations that are increasingly important to militaries especially in the Asia-Pacific, one of the most disaster-prone regions in the world. Today, many multilateral military exercises contain an HADR component to foster greater cooperation. Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has clearly grasped the flexible deployment of military assets along this soft power-hard power spectrum. Speaking highly of American aircraft carriers deployed to provide assistance and relief supplies to Indonesia after the 2004 tsunami, Lee (2007) noted that 'the US should make the most of this soft power to win over hearts and minds, and inspire and shape developments in Asia and beyond'. Soft power opportunities for Japan may ironically emerge out of such unfortunate catastrophes. The super-typhoon Haiyan that devastated the Philippines in November 2013 saw a vigorous Japanese HADR response. Tokyo sent its largest ever contingent of JSDF assets overseas since World War Two, including the flat-top *Ise* helicopter destroyer, about 1000 SDF personnel, C130 transport and KC 767 refuelling tankers. The JSDF performed here in 'assistance' mode. These missions enhance the attraction of Japan to the target country, and sharpen the global image of Japan as an active responsible power. It also seeks to legitimize and to some extent, routinise the increased presence of Japanese forces as beneficial and positive to the region. The news headline 'Japanese forces coming to PH to help' (ABS-CBN News 2013) on Filipino ABS-CBN News neatly captures this assistance dimension of military forces and how they can help



generate soft power for Japan. Other news reports by Agence France Press from that time suggest that JSDF deployments to parts of the Philippines where Imperial Japan fought and lost bloody battles with the US in World War Two, was positively received by the Filipino people: Tente Quintero, 72, former vice mayor of Tacloban, declared that while there was dispute with China over South China Sea islands, he was 'happy' Japanese troops were helping to provide disaster relief (Agence France Press 2013). Filipinos' positive response to this episode suggest that JSDF military forces deployed in this particular assistance mode 'can reduce concerns about the country's alleged return to militarism that have resurfaced in South Korea and China since Abe came to power' (Ordaniel 2013).

A more nuanced understanding of the dual use of military assets for both hard and soft power purposes therefore suggests that 'what the army calls the kinetic (hard power) use of force is not the only currency of military power' (Nye 2011, 40). Besides emergency disaster relief, Japanese forces have also participated in more routine development and medical assistance missions in the Asia-Pacific region such as the US Navy-led Pacific Partnership (PP) exercise. JSDF has contributed medical personnel to PP since 2007, but ramped up its contribution in 2010 when the large amphibious vessel Kunisaki sailed with 40 medical/dental personnel and 22 NGO volunteers to participate in the PP exercise off Vietnam and Cambodia. Tokyo's objectives in PP range from enhancing its maritime presence in the region and improving Japan's image to strengthening inter-operability with US and other partner navies. Government documents classify JMSDF participation in PP as 'an international civilian assistance activity' (Government of Japan 2010), despite the deployment of naval vessels. For the 2014 PP exercise, JSDF vessel Kunisaki served as the primary mission platform, the first time a partner nation's vessel other than a US Navy warship took the lead in the exercise. JSDF members also took the opportunity to introduce traditional Japanese martial arts such as kendo to South Pacific Islanders. Together with US personnel, JSDF sailors worked on development projects including painting kindergartens in Cambodia and rebuilding schools. Such activities reinforced the image of Japanese soldiers being there to help and provide assistance, rather than to threaten or coerce.

JSDF can also help generate soft power for Japan through other means such as capacity-building and training with other countries, particularly those that require assistance trouble-shooting capability gaps in shared areas of concern such as maritime surveillance. This has a close linkage with the preceding section discussing Tokyo's championing of maritime norms and freedom of navigation. Japan's Ministry of Defence (MOD) defines capacity-building assistance as 'assisting other nations to build their defence capacities through using the resources of our country...the JSDF use their capabilities and resources to assist other nations' militaries or military-related organisations'. One key objective is 'gaining trust from the international community.' (Ministry of Defence 2016, 1) Sending the JSDF in

assistance mode for training and capacity-building and gaining trust is instrumental for soft power purposes. Attracting regional states to want what Tokyo wants is the key goal here: Japan's increased security profile and policies regarding maritime freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. Japan and the Philippines conducted their first ever joint naval exercises in 2015 in the South China Sea, although Manila stressed that the exercise was unrelated to the disputed waters. JSDF destroyers JS *Harusame* and *Amigri* worked with the Philippine frigate BRP *Ramon Alcaraz* on dealing with unplanned encounters at sea. In 2016, Japan reached a deal to lease up to five retired Beechcraft TC-90 King Air TC-90 advanced trainer aircraft to the Philippines Navy. Retrofitted with basic surface and air surveillance radar, these planes are meant for maritime patrols. Then-Philippines Defence Secretary Gazmin praised the deal as 'a big help because we don't have such a capability' (Associated Press 2016). In April 2016, a training submarine and two destroyers made a port call at strategic Subic Bay, the first in 15 years, followed by the JSDF flat-top helicopter destroyer (or helicopter carrier) *Ise* later. Taken together, visits by JSDF vessels to the Philippines for training exercises, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations and capacity-building for maritime surveillance, suggest that the military may have an important emerging role to play in this third pillar of Japanese soft power projection. As Tokyo intensifies its attempts to establish a role as champion of global norms and freedom of maritime navigation, deployments of the JSDF may enhance the attractiveness of Japanese foreign and security policy to countries in the region who share similar concerns. Vietnam and the Philippines now both seem to want what Tokyo wants and look towards Tokyo for assistance. The question remains whether this convergence of interests was a result of JSDF activities or whether JSDF activities simply was a case of preaching to the converted. In other words, soft power may be seen as a useful tool to entrench pre-existing attractions rather than generating new forms of attraction.

## **V. EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION**

Global rankings of Japan's soft power have ranked the country highly. In the 2016 edition of the Soft Power 30 Index compiled by London public relations consultancy firm, Portland Communications, Japan was ranked 7th in the world and the 1st in Asia. For comparison, South Korea came it at 22nd globally and 3rd in Asia. China emerged even lower down the rankings. In the 2015 edition of the Soft Power 30 Index, Portland Communications (2015) noted that 'Prime Minister Abe recently announced a move towards "pro-active pacifism" in response to China's regional posturing. Whether there is a role for Japan's considerable soft power assets in that diplomatic strategy remains to be seen'. This is an important reminder of the crucial linkage between soft power and achieving foreign policy and security goals. For Japan, these include promoting new growth industries to

reinvigorate economy and generate a ‘feel good’ factor. Maintaining Japanese influence and global presence vis-a-viz rising China/S Korea/India is another. This includes helping achieve foreign policy goals in ASEAN and attracting support for Japanese security policy changes to cope with a rising China and with North Korean nuclear and missile threats. Projecting soft power is not something states do simply for the sake of doing so, but rather it is meant to achieve some desired goals.

The first face of Japanese soft power surveyed in this paper is very clearly related to what Nye calls cultural attraction. In the case of Japan, this has translated into the promotion of its culture, ranging from *washoku* and regional cuisines to anime and manga to cosplay and maid cafes. This can be largely linked to the drive for commercial and economic benefits from soft power. In his paper ‘Like Me, Buy Me: The effect of soft power on exports’, Andrew Rose argues that pop culture assets like pop star Taylor Swift or Hollywood blockbusters like STAR WARS or sporting extravaganza Major League Baseball not only boost positive perceptions of America globally but also increase demand for related American goods in the form of cultural products or merchandising. ‘Countries are always concerned about their image but the soft power effect has a very tangible commercial pay-off’ (Rose 2016). Rose concluded that a 1% net increase in soft power can raise exports by about 0.8% (based on quantitative surveys of soft power in the BBC World Service/GlobeScan Poll). However, what exactly is the message of Japanese cultural initiatives such as cosplay or Kawaii Ambassadors? It seems unclear what sort of attractive Japanese values or norms these ambassadors are conveying to the outside world. How far can they be said to reflect core traditional Japanese ideals of peace and harmony? Or is the message about freedom of expression and independent creativity? Apart from generating revenue, do these initiatives such as the anime ambassador really help Japan achieve its diplomatic or foreign policy goals in a concrete sense? Countries overseas may embrace Doraemon, Japanese cuisine and culture but do not necessarily support Japanese security policies like Abe’s proactive contribution to peace. Indeed, key countries like China and South Korea score Japan very low in international polling by Soft Power 30 Index in 2016, despite their interest in Japanese culture and products. The spin-off movie *Stand by Me Doraemon* became the first Japanese movie in 2015 to be shown in China in the three years after Sino-Japanese ties deteriorated in 2012 over the Senkaku/Diaoyudao island dispute. While the movie interestingly toppled Hollywood blockbuster *Avengers: Age of Ultron* from the Chinese box office, the permission to screen the movie only came after Chinese President Xi Jinping expressed desire to improve relations, not before. Soft power tools such as movies and cultural exports in this case remain an instrument of policy, not independent of it.

The rather ephemeral and fragile nature of soft power generated through

cultural attraction can be further illustrated in the events of late 2016 and March 2017 when Korean cultural exports such as Lotte Mart stores, K-Pop concerts and Korean cosmetics firms became the target of a boycott in China over the Korean government and Lotte Group's decision to host the US Theater High Altitude Area Defence missile system in response to North Korean missile tests.

The Japanese government has been quite actively involved in promoting positive attractive cultural images overseas, but there are potential downsides to this visible hand of the bureaucrats and government pointed out by analysts: 'a heavy official emphasis on "Cool Japan" risks diluting the potency of the "Japan Brand" hip factor — while at the same time distracting attention from the real source of Japan's attraction' as Asia's democracy pioneer (Smith 2012). Berger (2010, 568) effectively summarises the conceptual drawbacks:

'As a relational concept, soft power has to be understood in relation to the outcome a country is seeking to achieve. Soft power depends on its impact on attitudes, and attitudes are extremely difficult to gauge. Surveys and polls suffer from well-known methodological flaws such as framing of question etc. Furthermore, the extent to which such attitudes translate into behaviour is even more unclear, even on the individual level, not to mention the governmental level. Trying to trace the relationship between the sources of soft power and its impact on the actual behaviour of states is thus a perilous enterprise'.

This can be well illustrated through the reaction of certain Chinese media to the appointment of Doraemon as anime ambassador and associated Doraemon exhibitions. In September 2014 the Communist party newspaper Chengdu Evening News called Doraemon the 'blue fatty' a threat, and that Japan is not really sorry for its war crimes; 'Doraemon is a part of Japan's efforts of exporting its national values and achieving its cultural strategy; this is undisputed fact' (Piao 2014). The Chengdu Daily continued that Doraemon an 'instrument of Japanese foreign policy' because of its appointment as Anime Ambassador (Piao 2014). Global Times columnist Wang Dehua warned that 'Doraemon is cute but he also represents Japan's soft power. We must never let a little robotic cat take control of our minds' (McCurry 2014). Other Chinese commentators however took a more relaxed tone, and felt that anxiety over Doraemon reflects China's lack of soft power as a weak underbelly to the outside world. In August 2016 Pakistan's Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI) opposition party submitted a resolution to ban Doraemon for negative influence on children, encouraging children to misbehave at school and at home. Critics argue that the use of gadgets often seen in Doraemon cartoons encourages children to depend on others rather than solve problems for themselves.

As for the second face of Japanese soft power in terms of Tokyo championing

access to the maritime commons and defending global norms, there has been some positive responses from key target audiences in south-east Asia (Heng forthcoming).<sup>2</sup> Former Philippines President Aquino once remarked that ASEAN together with Japan could work concertedly against Chinese actions that jeopardise stability in the region. Japan is being seen in a more attractive light through its overtures to other regional countries such as Vietnam that have expressed appreciation for its assistance. Meeting with Japanese Foreign Minister Kishida in May 2016, Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh cited Japan as Hanoi's most important and long-term partner, expressing gratitude for Tokyo's donation of used patrol vessels and requested 'prompt provision' of more newly constructed vessels. However, Tokyo's attempts to uphold maritime and aviation freedom of navigation vis-a-viz ASEAN states is having an impact to the extent that target states are already anxious about China anyway. They need less attraction to the Japanese position and in a way, Tokyo is perhaps preaching to the already converted. Furthermore, the donation of patrol vessels and equipment and training cannot be expected to make a significant dent in the vast asymmetry of resources and capabilities that exists between China and other claimant states.

With regard to Abe's lofty vision of the hydrogen society, Japan's inability to bring about deregulation paradoxically draws unwanted attention to Japan's complex, unwieldy regulatory environment. Pierre-Etienne Franc, director of advanced technologies for French industrial gas firm Air Liquide, said that 'In its superb ambition, Japan has failed in its strategy with extremely restrictive regulations', referring to safety rules to prevent leakage of the flammable gas (Beade 2015). Critics also argue that much energy is itself required to produce hydrogen in the first place. Furthermore, Tesla founder Elon Musk has dismissed the notion of hydrogen cars as a ridiculous and unfeasible notion. Recognising these shortfalls, PM Abe has called for regulations to be streamlined and for ministers to draw up a basic action strategy to advance towards the hydrogen society. Tokyo's green ODA to combat climate well-received especially in the South Pacific and Pacific Islands Forum but the linkage with overall energy policy is not particularly clear. Japan is the only country in the G7 to push coal-fired power and remains isolated in its position toward climate change and sustainable energy, according to the Japanese KIKO NGO climate network. Cars powered by hydrogen fuel cells will probably struggle catching on beyond Japan's borders although Toyota is pitching itself as a leader: Government subsidies of as much as 3 million yen a vehicle will probably be too high to be replicated elsewhere. This has been derided as yet another example of the 'Galapagos syndrome' that plagues Japanese companies for making hi-tech products that are only popular at home with limited market share overseas (Trudell 2014).

Finally, the deployment of JSDF assets for humanitarian assistance, capacity-

building and training as the third pillar of Japanese soft power shines a visible light on Tokyo's desire to play a more active regional security role. In this sense, a military force like the JSDF can help reinforce and underpin Japan's soft power approach to ASEAN championing access to the maritime commons as Tokyo seeks to grapple with the rise of China in its strategic backyard. Where once the prospect of JSDF contributing to UN Peacekeeping operations drew wary responses from even friendly close partners like Singapore, a more visible Japanese security role has been generally accepted in the region. New Filipino President Duterte, for his alleged pro-China inclinations, during his visit to Tokyo in October 2016 welcomed Japan's important role upgrading the capabilities of the Philippines in maritime security. On the issue of participation in PP exercises and providing medical and dental aid, there have been scarce evaluations of impact available publicly by the Japanese government. However, the Philippine media put a positive spin on a rare visit by Japan's Chief of Joint Staff during PP2012 to JMSDF personnel operating in the Philippines as part of the PP Exercise. Media outlets interpreted this as a signal of Tokyo's support for Manila's tussle with China over Scarborough Shoal. 'JMSDF participation in PP is, inadvertently or not, attracting target audiences toward Tokyo's agenda of championing maritime security and international law' (Heng 2015, 282-308). However, whether this positive reception to JSDF presence in the region can be attributed solely to soft power cannot be precisely determined. It may well be that other larger strategic factors are at play, as Manila-based analyst Rommel Banaoi remarked, 'we have put aside our nightmares of World War II because of the threat posed by China' (Bandow 2013).

This inability to pinpoint precisely the impact or success of soft power initiatives is a reminder that soft power cannot be expected to achieve results on its own instantly. More realistically, it can help create or shape a more favourable environment in the long-term, or it can be an instrument to help enable and implement policy decisions decided upon beforehand by politicians (eg the screening of the *Stand by Me Doraemon* movie in China). As Aso Taro (2006) reminded us, 'the more positive images pop up in a person's mind, the easier it becomes for Japan to get its views across over the long term'. However, the largest obstacle to Japanese soft power projection may well lie in the hands of Japan itself: Japanese elites' perceived failure to fully reconcile with the wartime past continue to trouble ASEAN countries. PM Abe's 2013 visit to the Yasukuni Shrine, for example drew negative responses even from otherwise close partners: Singapore's Foreign Ministry criticised such visits for re-opening old wounds, and undermining trust and confidence in the region.

## REFERENCES

Abe, Shinzo. 2014a. "Japan and NATO as natural partners," 6 May 2014, accessed

- September 8, 2014, <http://www.japan.go.jp/tomodachi/speech/201405nato.html>
- Abe, Shinzo. 2014b. "The Shangri-La Dialogue Keynote Address," 31 May 2014, accessed May 18, 2016, [http://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page4e\\_000086.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page4e_000086.html)
- Abe, Shinzo. 2014c. "Remarks by Prime Minister Abe to the Australian Parliament," 8 July 2014, accessed August 20, 2016, [http://japan.kantei.go.jp/96\\_abe/statement/201407/0708article1.html](http://japan.kantei.go.jp/96_abe/statement/201407/0708article1.html)
- ABS-CBN News. 2013. "Japanese Forces Coming to PH to Help," November 12, 2013, accessed April 8, 2017, <http://news.abs-cbn.com/nation/11/12/13/japanese-forcescoming-ph-help>
- Agence France Press. 2013. "Japanese Troops Welcomed Back in Typhoon-hit Philippines," November 22, 2013, accessed April 8, 2017, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/532651/japanese-troops-welcomed-back-in-typhoon-hit-philippines>
- Asahi Shimbun. 2007. "Soft Power: Strive to be a Caring to Help Others Less Fortunate," May 23, 2007.
- Aso, Taro. 2006. Speech on A New Look at Cultural Diplomacy, Digital Hollywood University, Tokyo, 28 April 2006, accessed April 9, 2017. <http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/fm/aso/speech0604-2.html>
- Aso, Taro. 2009. "Japan's Diplomacy: Ensuring Security and Prosperity," Speech at the Japan Institute of International Affairs, Tokyo, June 30, 2009.
- Associated Press. 2016. "Philippines to Discuss Lease of Japan Surveillance Planes," May 3, 2016, accessed January 12, 2017, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/seasia/2016/05/03/philippines-to-discuss-lease-of-japan-surveillance-planes.html>
- Bandow, Doug. 2013. "It's Time to End Japan's Defense Dependence on the United States," *Forbes*, January 28, 2013.
- Beade, Anne. 2015. "Japan's Lofty Hydrogen Vision Hampered by Cost," November 3, 2015, accessed December 30, 2016, <https://phys.org/news/2015-11-japan-lofty-hydrogen-society-vision.html>
- Berger, Thomas. 2010. "Japan in Asia: A Hard Case for Soft Power." *Orbis* 54(4): 565-582.
- Government of Japan. 2010. "*Pacific Partnership 2010: Highlighting Japan*," July 2010, accessed April 7, 2012, <http://www.gov-online.go.jp/pdf/hlj/20100701/18-19.pdf>
- Government of Japan. 2013. *National Security Strategy of Japan*, December 7, 2013, accessed May 8, 2016, [http://japan.kantei.go.jp/96\\_abe/documents/2013/\\_icsFiles/afieldfile/2013/12/17/NS.pdf](http://japan.kantei.go.jp/96_abe/documents/2013/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2013/12/17/NS.pdf)
- Harding, Robin and Kana Inagaki. 2017. "Japan Gambles on Toyota's Hydrogen Powered Car," *Financial Times*, March 29, 2017.
- Heng, Yee-Kuang. Forthcoming. "Smart Power and Japan's trouble-shooting approach to South-east Asia." In *The Routledge Handbook of Japanese Foreign Policy* edited by Mary McCarthy, New York: Routledge, forthcoming.

- Heng, Yee-Kuang. 2010. "Mirror Mirror on the Wall, who is the Softest of Them All? Evaluating Japanese and Chinese Strategies in the 'Soft' Power Competition Era." *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 10(2): 275-306.
- Heng, Yee-Kuang. 2014. "Beyond Kawaii Pop Culture: Japan's Normative Soft Power as Global Trouble-shooter." *The Pacific Review* 27(2): 169-192.
- Heng, Yee-Kuang. 2015. "Smart Power and Japan's Self-Defense Forces." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38(3): 282-308.
- Hornung, Jeffrey. 2013. "China's War on International Norms." *The National Interest*, December 12, 2013, accessed Jan 9, 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/chinas-war-international-norms-9547?page=2>
- Hymans, Jacques. 2009. "India's soft power and vulnerability." *India Review* 8(3): 234-265.
- Ifran, Umair. 2016. "Japan Bets on Hydrogen-Fueled Future." *Scientific American*, May 3, 2016.
- Jing, Sun. 2013. "The Journey Home: How to House Soft Power in Mainstream IR Literature." *Asia Policy*, 15: 151.
- Lam, Peng Er. 2007. "Japan's Quest for 'Soft Power': Attraction and Limitation." *East Asia* 24(4): 349-363.
- Lee, Hsien Loong. 2007. "America and Asia: Our Shared Future," *Speech at the Asia Society/US-ASEAN Business Council Gala Dinner*, 03 May 2007, accessed February 1, 2014, <http://asiasociety.org/america-and-asia-our-shared-future>
- Lee, Sook Jong. 2011. "Theory and Reality of Soft Power." In *Public Diplomacy and Soft Power in East Asia* edited by Sook Jong Lee & J. Melissen, 11-29, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Legewie, Jochen. 2011. "The View from Europe," *Japan Times*, 19 September 2011.
- McCurry, Justin. 2014. "Chinese Media Accuse Japanese Manga Star of Subverting Youth." *The Guardian*, 09 October 2014, accessed April 23, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/09/china-media-accuse-doraemon-japan-manga-cat-subverting-youth>
- McGray, Douglas. 2002. "Japan's Gross National Cool." *Foreign Policy*, May/June 2002.
- Ministry of Defense. 2010. *Defense of Japan 2010*, updated, 322-348.
- Ministry of Defense. 2016. *Japan's Defense Capacity Building Assistance*, February 1, 2016, accessed April 9, 2016, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000146830.pdf>
- Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI), 2009. *White Paper on International Trade* Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 2017. "Pop Culture Diplomacy," March 8, 2017, accessed April 8, 2017, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/culture/exchange/pop/>
- Nye, Joseph. 2004. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, New York: Public Affairs.



- Nye, Joseph. 2006. "Think Again: Soft Power." *Foreign Policy*, February 23, 2006, accessed March 27, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2006/02/23/think-again-soft-power/>
- Nye, Joseph. 2011. *The Future of Power*, New York: Public Affairs.
- Ordaniel, Jeffrey. 2013. "Japanese Troops Return to the Philippines." *East Asia Forum*, November 27, 2013, accessed May 4, 2016, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2013/11/27/japanese-troops-return-to-the-philippines/>
- Otmazgin, Nizzam. 2008. "Contesting Soft Power: Japanese Popular Culture in East and Southeast Asia." *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 8(1): 73-101.
- Piao, Vanessa. 2014. "A Warning in China: Beware the Blue Fatty Cat." *New York Times*, 29. September 2014, accessed April 9, 2017, <https://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/09/29/a-warning-in-china-beware-the-blue-fatty-cat/>
- Portland Communications. 2015. *Soft Power 30*, 2015, accessed January 30, 2017, <http://softpower30.portland-communications.com/ranking/#2015>
- Rose, Andrew. 2016. "How Hollywood Beats Military Might in the Global Marketplace," *University of California Berkeley Haass School of Business*, February 1, 2016, accessed April 3, 2017, <http://newsroom.haas.berkeley.edu/research-news/how-hollywood-beats-military-might-global-marketplace>
- Smith, Hanscom. 2012. "What's Really Cool about Japan." *Japan Times*, January 7, 2012.
- Trudell, Craig. 2014. "VW says Fuel-Cell cars Doomed to Struggle Beyond Japan," *Bloomberg*, September 8, 2014, accessed April 9, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-09-07/vw-says-fuel-cell-cars-doomed-to-struggle-beyond-japan>

**ENDNOTES**

---

- <sup>1</sup> Many of the ideas and examples in this section were first highlighted in Heng, Yee-Kuang. 2015. "Smart Power and Japan's Self-Defense Forces," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38(3): 282-308.
- <sup>2</sup> This argument is also evaluated in Heng, Yee-Kuang. Forthcoming. "Smart Power and Japan's trouble-shooting approach to South-east Asia" in *The Routledge Handbook of Japanese Foreign Policy* edited by Mary McCarthy, New York:Routledge, forthcoming.