

# Considerations about the nature of Japanese cultural exports

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September 2008

In the rise of a new desire for Japan led worldwide by contemporary forms of popular culture, original creations made in Japan are sold to foreign TV networks and media conglomerates (sometimes largely participated or even owned by Japanese companies). Those cultural exports are in effect multimedia content in “new” fields such as animation, videogames and pop music. Cultural content (“software”) contrasts with the more traditional assets that Japan has been exporting, such as food, *bonsai*, martial arts, poetry or, more recently, technology (“hardware”).

It is pertinent to ask about the special characteristics of those Japanese cultural products that make them desirable and popular far beyond the Japanese borders, and to reflect on “how Japanese” they are, and in what ways.

## **Cultural exports being non distinctively “Japanese”**

Koichi Iwabuchi and other authors have pointed out the distinctive *cultural asepsis* that is present in the Japanese audiovisual exports that are consumed in the West [Iwabuchi, 2002]. The term “*mukokuseki*” (“stateless”, “culturally odourless”) is used to describe such feature — or rather, such lack of features.

“Odourless”, in this context, metaphorically denotes a characteristic by means of which the authentic *Japaneseness* of cultural production is not explicitly asserted, but rather concealed and relegated to a secondary role. This concept is contrary to the idea of “fragrant” cultural creations — that

is, content with a cultural origin that is more apparent and therefore can be easily identified.

However, it is worth noting that such *neutral* approach in the way that Japanese artists and diplomats have presented their ideas to the West can be found in examples that go back far beyond the last two decades. As an example of that, we can consider the *Rokumeikan*, an outstanding building where relations between Japan and the West took place in a period spanning from 1883 to 1941. Daniel Rubio Pérez, in his paper dedicated to the *Rokumeikan*, writes something that, without mentioning it explicitly, seems to evoke the same “odourless” feature described by Iwabuchi:

*“The Rokumeikan was intended to be the prime stage for communication with the Western countries. Oddly, Kaoru Inoue thought that in order to achieve that goal, any Japanese reminiscence [in the building] had to be avoided.”* [Rubio Pérez, 2008] <sup>1</sup>

To what degree the *mukokuseki* nature of Japanese animation and video-games is intentional is a question that Iwabuchi leaves unanswered. Brian Moeran answers positively by saying that “the Japanese not only consciously avoid giving their own J-Cult products a ‘Japanese fragrance’ when marketing them abroad; they consciously deprive popular cultural forms from other countries of their odour by making them peculiarly ‘Japanese’ in Japan” [Moeran, 2004].

To me it seems plausible that precisely because those products are distributed by transnational conglomerates and therefore become a commodity in the globalised market the main force affecting their development is the market itself. From that point of view, dispossessing *Japanimation* of most of its distinctive *Japaneseness* would be an inevitable move that is nothing but natural to the market within which it competes. In such case, the fact that the *anime* TV series that are watched by young people in North America, Europe and Asia do not feature explicit assertions about the culture that originated them does not imply that Japanese productions are inherently “odourless”. Rather, one could argue in the opposite direction, and say that only the products that do not rely on traditional Japanese culture

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<sup>1</sup> “*El Rokumeikan debía ser el lugar por excelencia para la comunicación con las naciones de occidente. Kaoru Inoue pensó, curiosamente, que para ello toda reminiscencia japonesa debía ser evitada.*”

naturally *survive* better in foreign audiovisual markets, and some of them ultimately enjoy global success.

In any case, such process is not exclusive to Japan. “Transculturation” can be seen at stake in creative industries in the USA and may be another factor that has contributed to the American cultural hegemony. Iwabuchi himself seems to acknowledge this (“even American culture is conceived as ‘ours’ in many places”).

### **“Soft nationalism” and narcissism**

Iwabuchi draws attention to the fact that the “odourless” nature of the Japanese popular culture that is bought in other nations has even come to be positively regarded as a characteristic inherent in Japanese creations by those “soft nationalists” who are “in the desperate search for Japanese global cultural power” [Iwabuchi, 2002]. Moeran exemplifies the point recalling that “cartoon characters have long been commented on for their large eyes and generally ‘non-Japanese’ look” [Moeran, 2004]. According to that, the distinctive nature of the contents originated in Japan would reside precisely in not being tightly linked to their Japanese origins.

In my opinion, it is paradoxical for such nationalist movements to feel reinforced by those Japanese products that, while selling very well in Western societies, are essentially devoid of a clear Japanese character (*mukokuseki*).

Another point of criticism against Japan’s “narcissism” lies in the actual dimensions of this new *desire for Japan*. It is necessary to remember that, as Iwabuchi’s paper puts it, “the number of Western fans of Japanese comics and animation is actually rather small”.

At the root of the current “euphoria” within Japan about its own successes in Europe and in North America might be the relative indifference that, until recently, the Japanese government and institutions have displayed about the potential of their own original multimedia content as an asset globally. A signal in that direction is that speaking about the launching of the Overseas Exchange Council, the former Minister for Foreign Affairs, Taro Aso, has referred to some “prominent individuals whom, frankly speaking, the ministry has not interacted with much in the past.” [Aso, 2006].

## Globalised culture as the new democratic diplomacy

Regardless of the distinctive traits of exported Japanese cultural production (or the lack of them), what seems clear is that the surge in the number of consumers who are attracted to “J-pop, J-anime or J-fashion” that has been taking place since the 80’s cannot but contribute to a better image of the “brand ‘Japan’”, as Aso calls it.

For him, the way in which Japanese content creators contribute to the *Japaneseness* of their cultural production is related to the use of popular culture as a vehicle for diplomacy. In his speech at Digital Hollywood University, Aso is very clear in his definition for the “new cultural diplomacy” that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is pursuing:

*“We are very fortunate that in addition to the items of Noh drama and Bunraku, tea ceremony and flower arranging, Japan also boasts many newer forms of culture that have a high degree of appeal. This would be pop culture, including anime, music, and fashion among others, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is really going all out to ‘market’ this, so to speak. [...] Expanding across the globe the number of people who have a friendly feeling toward Japanese through increases in person-to-person interactions is what we might call the ultimate goal of cultural diplomacy.”* [Aso, 2006]

For Aso (a conservative who, at the time of writing, aspires to become Prime Minister) the intricacies underlying the nature of globalised Japanese culture do not occupy a primary place (although he mentions that he has “given a lot of thought to the question of what the Japanese brand really is, as well as what kind of country Japan is”). Instead, in his speech he focuses on the utility and the results that such products have brought, and can bring, to the Japanese people; especially to Japan as a political power in the world. One could say that his approach is more pragmatic than nationalist.

Through numerous examples taken from popular *manga* characters and animated TV series that are enjoyed by children in other nations, he illustrates his argument — namely, that in a globalised world cultural exports must be allies of Japanese diplomacy. Aso cites some examples of how Japan projects a positive image abroad and is regarded as a “cool” country. That positive image ultimately leads to achievements by Japanese diplomacy and brings prosperity to Japanese enterprises trading internationally. The key to

Aso is that “what created the climate in which all this could take place was Japanese culture”.

A big fan of *manga* himself, Aso instituted the *Kokusai Mangashō* (International Manga Award) one year after reading the speech in Chiyoda-ku.

## The flows of culture in a digital economy

At the bottom of the call by Taro Aso to “Japan’s cultural practitioners” lies the fact that culture has become more accessible and democratic and, in a way, so have relations between countries. Public opinion about Japan in Europe, North America and Asia depends, among other things, on the perceived image that Japan *broadcasts* to those regions. Diplomacy, in turn, depends on public opinion to an extent that has become more significant during the last decades.

It is not within the scope of this paper to go into this particular issue in depth, but I would like to point at other factors that in my opinion may have contributed to the resurgence of Japanese popular culture globally.

Such efficient communication of the Japanese “brand” would not have been possible without computers and the internet. Today’s digitised culture, entertainment and art (along with computer software as such) are distributed by global networks at tremendous speed; adapted, appropriated and “indigenised”; and consumed by individuals who are scattered world wide.

This transition to a digital economy has affected all developed countries. The change from “hardware” to “software” in cultural exports is a global tendency, and not exclusively Japanese. However, Japan appears as a country that has benefited especially from that tendency.

We could then raise the question of how much of its current cultural influence Japan owes to the fact that Japanese companies have been for many years at the forefront of digital technology, and to the early adoption of such technologies by the Japanese public. From that point of view Japanese media, creators and consumers simply would have been “ready” for the advent of intangible, i.e. digital, forms of culture before any other nation.

I believe that other recent changes in the global economy of cultural products merit further study. Certain side effects of this new universal access to digital content might have added momentum to the Japanese cultural rise. For instance, the shift to business models based on “long tails” on the internet could solve the apparent contradiction between the much celebrated popularity of *otaku* culture and the scarce number of Western *otaku* [Iwabuchi, 2002].

Online companies being able for the first time to target rare niches as described by Chris Anderson in his influential article *The long tail* could be partly responsible for *anime*, *manga* and *J-pop* reaching further than ever before [Anderson, 2004].

The relevance of such questions within the subject of the “Japanese versus odourless” debate lies in identifying the right balance of power between the causes that have favoured this recent *desire for Japan* in the West and in Asia. I have suggested two factors that may contribute to that (Japan being privileged as an early adopter of digital technology; and products that appeal to a minority being widely available for the first time). If research found that the weight of factors like these is high, the hypothesis of an “odourless” Japanese culture being exported and the pride that the Japanese narcissistic discourses take on it would become less influential.

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