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“Branding Japan for the 21st Century: An Abstract”

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Branding Japan for the 21st Century: An Abstract

Keiko Chino, Sankei Shimbun newspaper

Japan as seen from abroad: How the foreign press portrays Japan

I've been writing a column for the Sankei Shimbun newspaper since 1999 titled "How the World Portrays Japan." Every month I watch the major foreign print media and review the articles about Japan on a wide range of subjects like politics, economics, foreign affairs, society, and culture. I decide on a theme in the last week of the month and write a pair of articles that appear on consecutive days. For example, last September, the first article "Nukes on the Korean Peninsula" appeared on September 29, while the second article "Postal Service, Baseball, and the UN: Three Reform Issues" appeared on September 30. I covered the Korean peninsula as a result of a decision to broaden the scope of the article to include the rest of Asia. Starting in April 2004, the column was renamed "How the World Portrays Japan and Asia," after which the two Koreas and China appeared more frequently. And of course my articles tie these news items to Japan. The first 10 articles appeared at the end of 1999 as a review of the year, and it became the monthly column it is today starting in 2000. The column is already in its sixth year, which is a far longer run than I expected when it started.

So, what inspired this column?

Japan reached a turning point both politically and economically in 1999, and several eye-catching reports appeared in the foreign press and asked questions like "how does Japan see its role in the international community?" and "in what direction is Japan heading?" There were stories on the legislation of the Japanese national anthem and national flag, the guidelines for the new USJ defense agreement, and the U.S.–Japan joint research on theater missile defense systems. Looking at this series of events, some media raised questions about the rise of nationalism, the revival of Japanese militarism, and rightist tendencies, while other media chalked it all up to the process of Japan becoming a "normal" country. Often times, these reports gave me a new perspective on the issues as a Japanese national, but there were also stereotyping, superficial views and misinformed opinions. Yet, these are the views people hold, and I felt that Japanese people should be a little better informed about how they are portrayed in the foreign media. Japan's lack of participation and weak international presence is often decried and the importance of Japan's ability to project itself into the world

emphasized, but even in that case, the Japanese need to first gain an objective view of Japan's outward image. The motif of my column is based on this awareness.

So then, what is Japan's image as observed in the foreign media?

Over the last six years, the theme has definitely not been Japan as Number One. The stories have mostly been about Japan in “the lost decade.” The old phrase “Japan bashing” was replaced by “Japan passing” and then by the slightly disparaging “Japan nothing.”

If I had to choose five keywords that symbolized the reports during this period, they would be (1) structural reforms, (2) non-performing loans, (3) conservatism, (4) the aging society, and (5) nationalism. There is a common concern projected in all of these keywords. That is the question “Will Japan change, or not?”

At the same time, there has been a common theme to stories on Japan over a slightly longer period. This is bound up with the “folktales” that often circulate as reports on Japan, and can be similarly summarized with five keywords: (1) women, (2) whaling, (3) the royal family, (4) Yasukuni Shrine, and (5) nuclear weapons. According to newspaper reporters, the Japanese woman is filler for slow news days, a timeless theme that can be marched out when needed. Whaling, and the International Conference on Whaling, are almost always the topic of stories on Japan when the season approaches. It's a particular favorite of the European and American media, which is against whaling. The royal family doesn't need any explanation, does it? Yasukuni Shrine has become a particularly hot topic since the Koizumi administration took office. And finally, the foreign media always seems to be floating the idea of the possibility or temptation of Japan's nuclear rearmament, despite Japan's being the only country to suffer nuclear attack and the three non-nuclear principles that underlie its foreign policy.

The Emergence of the New Japan

Recently, a new trend has appeared in the news media that is strikingly different from that mentioned above and that bears some relation to the topic of today's session, “The Branding of Japan.” These are reports that focus on a wide range of Japanese “culture.”

I first took up this topic in an article for June 2000, titled “The Light and the Dark: Contrasts in Japanese Culture.” I covered reports dealing with the meteoric rise of Japanese pop culture in Asia and the West, such as Japanese animation, Pokemon, and

the explosive popularity of the character, Pikachu, as well as Japanese movies, television, and the young fashion called Tokyo Street. One story was about parents in Quebec Canada successfully lobbying for French versions of Pokemon for their kids, even after the push for separation by the majority French speakers in this province had died down.

Further testimony to the popularity of Pokemon in the U.S. was the release of the Pokemon movie “MewTwo Strikes Back” in November 1999, which became the top box office draw. The following excerpt was taken from the New York Times on November 8: “Pokemon...stands to become one of Japan's biggest, most successful cultural exports...Pokemon shows a gentleness and humor that reflects the best of Japan in a way that luxury cars and instant noodles cannot.”

What is behind the popularity of Japanese pop culture in East Asia? A Korean critic likens culture to water: “Culture is like water...It flows from stronger nations to weaker ones. People tend to idolize countries that are wealthier, freer, and more advanced. And in Asia, that country is Japan...Much of Japanese pop culture is Western culture with an Asian face...So Koreans and Chinese who are familiar with Western culture feel a unique Asian trait in Japanese culture that is very appealing.”

At the same time, the dark side of Japanese society is also reported, such as an increasing suicide rate in Japan, particularly among middle-aged men, as the down economy persists and worsens. On June 6 the New York Times coined the term “suicide express” for the many people who commit suicide by jumping in front of trains.

When I finished my assignment at the Singapore bureau and returned to Japan in 1998, the most dramatic change was the late commuter trains. It did not take me too long to figure out that suicides, referred to as “human accidents,” were the cause. These suicide-related delays in Japan's trains, which were known around the world for their reliability, were a dramatic symbol of the changes in Japan itself. At the same time, there has always been a gap in the suicide rate between the U.S. and Japan. According to the Washington Post on April 28, 2000, Japan had 32,863 suicides in 1998, compared with 29,264 in America. Considering that the U.S. has twice the population of Japan, this figure is quite low. There are, however, a tremendous number of deaths due to traffic accidents in the U.S., which is not the case in Japan.

In his book “The Japanese,” former ambassador to Japan Edwin Reischauer said that “The Japanese are still obsessed with suicide in the same way the Americans are obsessed with murder.” There remains in America the aesthetics and culture of fighting, and in Japan, the aesthetics and culture of suicide.

Let's return to the light side. There are news stories and reports that have greatly influenced the trend in reports on Japan.

First was the Golden Bear Award (the top award) given to Hayao Miyazaki's animated feature film *Spirited Away* at the Berlin Film Festival in February 2002. This award is equivalent to an Academy Award. Miyazaki's work is already famous among those that know it, but this was the first time in history for an animated feature to win the top award for the entire festival, not just the animated feature category. In addition to pushing the popularity and prestige of his work to new heights, it was an epoch-making event that indelibly impressed on the world the charm of Japanese animation. It was also given the Best Animated Film award by the New York Film Critics Circle.

The International Herald Tribune of January 22, 2002, ran an article titled "A Second Golden Age Animates Japanese Film," which acknowledged and analyzed the rise of Japanese animation, saying "Since Kurosawa's death in 1998, a number of gifted directors have emerged in Japan, including Takeshi Kitano... But none of them have been able to fill European and American art houses as their elders did in the 1950s and '60s, when Japanese film was in its golden age...In fact, Japanese film has probably never been as popular internationally as it is now. Its popularity, though, is not grounded in live action films, but in the animated features and television series that have come to be known as anime."

A special feature on the animation of Miyazaki in *Time Magazine* on October 21, 2001 said "the magic of a Miyazaki film lies not just in storytelling complex enough to ensnare adults. Every frame in *Spirited Away* is packed with visual detail, from the design on a painted vase to the splatter of bird droppings on a bolder. Unlike Walt Disney, Miyazaki is an animator who actually animates."

In the May/June 2002 issue of *Foreign Policy* magazine, journalist Douglas McGray wrote an article titled "Japan's Gross National Cool." The term "gross national cool" presents another criterion and set of values in contrast to the conventional GNP, and the focus of this article can be seen in the following excerpt.

"Japan is reinventing superpower—again. Instead of collapsing beneath the widely reported political and economic misfortunes, Japan's global cultural influence has quietly grown. From pop music to consumer electronics, architecture to fashion, and animation to cuisine, Japan looks more like a cultural super power today than it did in the 1980s, when it was an economic one."

In other words, today's Japan is not the Japan that was touted as the world's second

economic power. The writer instead looks at Japan's cultural power, gives it the name “gross national cool,” and suggests that this is where Japan's super-power influence lies.

Most of the phenomenon mentioned in McGray's article had already been noted elsewhere, but he gathered them all together to redefine Japan as a cultural super power.

As represented in the term “gaiatsu” (foreign pressure), Japan has many times been forced to change or re-evaluate its position as a result of external forces. McGray's article is no exception, as it created quite a response. At the same time, it has been a long time since Japan has been given glowing praise, and this praise has undoubtedly given Japanese people some confidence and made them feel good. This is because of the tendency to focus on Japan's failures and “the lost decade.” I too wrote about “gross national cool” in my last column of 2002, on December 25, because I looked back over the year, which started with an award for *Spirited Away* and ended with “gross national cool,” and thought that 2002 augured well for Japan's future. An assistant professor of Japanese studies at a university near Philadelphia was quoted in the *Chicago Tribune* on December 3. His words now seem prophetic.

“It's extraordinary to see what's happening. I wouldn't even call it a subculture anymore. Anime is becoming a worldwide phenomenon.”

After this, McGray's report was taken up in various media and forums, the concept of “Cool Japan” took on a life of its own, and discussions ranged from the novelty of the term itself to substantial discussion about what direction Japan has now set for itself.

The Possibilities for the Japan Brand in the Twenty-first Century

It is clear that we cannot even think about the Japan brand in the twenty-first century without considering the Cool Japan concept. Why? Because it “reflects the best of Japan” (*New York Times*). Yes, substance matters, but image and how other countries see Japan is also important. Of course image does not necessarily reflect reality. Sometimes image precedes reality. And there is nothing better than a good image. Among the future Japan brands that might fit the Cool Japan image, it is not too much to expect that some will sell.

Of course these do not necessarily have to be something completely new and different from what Japan has produced in the past. For instance, animation. Director Miyazaki's *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* was first released to rave reviews 20 years ago. There is already that much history. We could say that the world has just been slow to take notice, and we could also say that Japan lacked the strategic media reach to broadly disseminate Miyazaki's animation as a brand.

Manga, or Japanese comic books, is today's answer to the 12th-century scrolls known as *Chojugiga*, which featured fanciful illustrations of animals. In other words,

Cool Japan has its roots in the history and traditions of Japanese culture, which have always formed an undercurrent in Japanese art. If we look back in history, we find that Japanese culture has influenced Western culture under the conventional name of Japanism. The influence of Ukiyoe painting on Western art is well known.

After Japan's crushing defeat in World War Two, Japan was completely absorbed with economic recovery. Improving the standard of living meant improving economic indicators. There was a distinct split between pre-war and post-war Japanese culture. Ancient customs and culture were isolated from people's lives and modern living, and sealed off like ancient ruins that have outlived their usefulness, preserved only for posterity. Thus the recent attention being paid to the building momentum of Japan's cultural reach could be interpreted to mean that today, the Japanese are looking for Japan.

The April 2004 issue of *Gaiko Forum* had a special feature on “Cool Japan” that included the article “The Strategy to Foster Multi-layered Cultural Strength” by Aoki Tamotsu, professor at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies. In this article, the professor stresses the importance of a strategic culture policy. He writes, “the Cool Japan concept creates a vividly fresh image for Japan at home and abroad, and is the path the government should follow...The government should adopt 'Cool' as the slogan for its political message and should actively push the idea of the 'culture nation.’”

I would like to point out, however, that "Branding Japan for the Twenty-first Century" is not necessarily limited to the sphere of culture. Culture is only one sphere, albeit a very large one, and there is room in foreign affairs, economics, environment, agriculture, and a number of other areas that would support a twenty-first century brand.

For example, Japan's foreign ministry should cultivate the concept of “human security” as their foreign affairs brand.

In the environmental sphere, disaster prevention is a brand that Japan could promote with confidence. The UN Conference on Disaster Reduction is scheduled to be held in Kobe next year on the tenth anniversary of the Kobe Earthquake, and Kobe is striving to be the international hub of disaster prevention. According to disaster prevention experts, global disasters are concentrated in Asia because of global warming

and the explosive growth in urban populations, and these disasters produce enormous losses in property and life. As the leading country in Asia for disaster prevention, Japan could do a lot of good.

A Japan brand in agriculture is not only possible, it is being created right now. The perception of agriculture in Japan up to this point has been that it has become a barrier to trade liberalization and free trade agreements. Certainly that is one aspect, but I also want to consider the possibility of producing agricultural products that are competitive internationally. The market is not limited to Japan.

Take green tea for example. A general concern for health in Europe has driven the popularity of Japanese green tea, but it is difficult to get good quality green tea in Europe. Yet, nobody in Japan, not even the Japanese tea industry, has noticed this demand. Everyone thinks that only Japanese drink Japanese tea. They also say that high-end Japanese rice is popular among affluent Chinese.

The Kansai region, where I currently reside, is also a great Japan brand.

Looking at it this way, we could say that the Japan brands in the twenty-first century are the concepts of twenty-first century Japan. Thus, the most important thing is for Japanese themselves to be aware of the Japan brand and to build on it. They have to build them into brands that go beyond the boundaries of Japanese society, like Ichiro Suzuki and Hideki Matsui, and that attract the attention and capture the imagination of other societies and people.

Is a Japan Brand Important for the Twenty-first Century?

Today, praises are being sung for the virtues of soft power and public diplomacy as advocated by professor Joseph Nye. This does not mean that hard power has lost its place in the world—they complement each other—and what a nation does well, its brand probably selects itself.

As stated earlier, the Japan brand will probably be in the soft power category rather than the hard. Though it does not deal with soft power versus hard power, the bestseller *Smaller is Better: Japan's Mastery of the Miniature* by professor Lee O Young of South Korea, who is in attendance today, is rife with good ideas that could be useful when considering the Japan brand.

Why is a Japan brand important? In this age of globalization and transnationalization, Japan must leverage the Japanese essence so that Japan is not lost in the din of the international community and so that Japan can take its place in the world. The Japan brand should be looked at as a symbol of this position. Naturally, the creation of Japan's outward image is a vital prior step to making this a reality.

The Japan brand is not important just to Japan. I would like to point out here that it is important to the world at large. Earlier, I quoted a Korean critic who said that the popularity of Japan's pop culture is because it presents Western culture with an Asian face and appeals to Koreans and Chinese, who are familiar with Western culture. This concept is key.

American culture today has penetrated even the Mecca of global culture, France. Whether they like it or not, the people of the world today cannot escape U.S. influence that pervades in the form of American culture, the American Way of Life. A sort of ambivalence can also be found here. In Malaysia, a growing number of women are wearing the Islamic scarf as a symbol of their faith. They wear the scarf with their jeans. People do this kind of thing to maintain a certain psychological balance. The anti-American movement spreading across the world is not simply a protest against the unilateral military action in Iraq. It can be looked at more as a consensus of the international community that global homogeneity is not a healthy state. This may be the innate wisdom of human beings.

Cultural diversity, pluralistic culture, different values, alternative choices—no matter how you phrase it, the freedom to propose alternatives is vital to a free and democratic society.

The Japan brand shows the world another alternative, another possibility. This is what the world wants. The point of the brand is not to build a sort of Japanese monopoly. There are other options, like the Korean TV drama *Winter Sonata*, which is very popular and is being broadcast in many Southeast Asian countries and Japan. The fresh appeal of the Korean culture, customs, and art make it well received in Asian countries.

Korean style, Japanese style, Chinese style, and American Culture may compete, and even clash, at times. However, this is not the clash of civilizations, à la Samuel Huntington. Taking this a bit further, though it may seem a little contradictory, it is important for Japan to mold its brand, but it is not wise to try and keep it all to itself forever. At some point—and this has already happened in some cases—the brand may move beyond the Japanese domain and into the wider world. Take Hello Kitty products, for instance. There are between 12,000 and 15,000 products. Children around the world love these products because of Kitty, not the “made in Japan” label. Japanese people should be happy about this rather than disappointed. This kind of magnanimity will make Japanese brands shine even brighter.