

Contesting soft power: Japanese popular culture in East and Southeast Asia

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Abstract

During the last two decades, Japanese popular culture industries have massively penetrated East Asia's markets and their products have been widely disseminated and consumed. In this region, Japan has recently emerged as a cultural power, in addition to representing an industrial forerunner and model. The aim of this article is to explore the connection between popular culture and soft power by analyzing the activities of the Japanese popular culture industries in East Asia, and by examining the images their products disseminate. This study is based on export data, market surveys, and interviews with media industry personnel and consumers in five cities in East Asia, arguing that the impact of the Japanese popular culture lies in shaping this region's cultural markets and in disseminating new images of Japan, but not in exerting local influence or in creating Japanese-dominated 'spheres of influence'.

1 Introduction

In many cities in East Asia,¹ a variety of Japanese popular culture products are widely apparent. Many of the fashion journals in Hong Kong are

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- 1 In this paper *East Asia* refers to both Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia. As it will be evidenced throughout the paper, the circulation and impact of the Japanese popular culture was particular and eminent in the markets that encompasses both Northeast and Southeast Asia.

Japanese, either in Japanese or in their Cantonese version. Japanese comic books are routinely translated into the local languages in South Korea, Thailand, Indonesia, and Taiwan, and they dominate East Asia's comic book markets. Japanese animated characters, such as *Hello-Kitty*, *Anpan Man*, and *Poke'mon* are ubiquitous, depicted on licensed and unlicensed toys and stationary items in the markets of any typical Asian city. Japanese animation, usually in a dubbed version, is the most popular in its field. *Astro Boy*, *Sailor Moon*, and *Lupin* are successful examples of animated characters seen in almost every shop that sells anim  in Hong Kong and Singapore. In China's big cities too, now that the free consumption of culture is politically acceptable, Japanese popular culture products quickly fill local stores, opening doors into the country's expanding cultural market.

The dissemination of Japanese popular culture products has introduced East Asians to a new variety of cultural consumption options and images. For many in East Asia, Japan is not only a successful economic model and a heavyweight industrial giant, constantly producing and exporting automobiles, electronics, and other consumer goods, but also a cultural power, enduringly manufacturing and exporting its cultural goods and innovations. The 'old' Japan might be symbolized by its countless salary men, robotized machinery, and efficient manufacturing systems, while the 'new' and fascinating Japan is reflected through popular culture products.

The study of Japanese popular culture, in East Asia in particular, bares new insights into the relationship between cultural commodification and the notion of soft power. This topic, however, still tends to be relatively neglected in the IR discipline, even though it is a staple fare in Cultural Studies. The majority of conventional works on Japanese popular culture abroad consist of a series of anecdotal case studies with a strong tendency to privilege the text and its representational practices. This is partially understandable, owing to the specific interests of the academic discipline, and given the lack of comprehensive empirical information on the subject (see, for example, Craig, 2000; Alison, 2000; Ishii, 2001; Iwabuchi, 2004; Martinez, 1998; Mori, 2004; Otake and Hosokawa, 1998; Treat, 1996). No single study has so far provided comprehensive empirical evidence regarding Japanese popular culture in the East Asian region, yet alone examined the nature of the soft power that arises from this dissemination.²

The purpose of this paper is to examine the nature of the Japanese soft power that derives from the proliferation of its popular culture in East Asia.

2 Two exceptional works are Katzenstein (2005: 150–156, 162–167), who address the contribution of Japanese popular culture to the region-making process in East Asia, and Leheny (2006), who details the way popular culture has interpenetrated academic and policy discourse in Japan. Although analytically invigorating, both studies do not attempt to provide an overall data on this issue and rather employ specific cultural products or practices to exemplify their arguments.

The central argument is that soft power is highly effectual in the production and distribution stages, but the logic of consumption is more complicated. The 'power' that the Japanese popular culture hitherto generates in East Asia lies in the shaping of this region's cultural markets rather than in exerting local influence. This paper, thus, yields a more complex idea of soft power, as this concept does not entirely capture the dynamics of how people in East Asia consume, appropriate, and understand Japanese popular cultural products. Accordingly, it shows that the activities of the Japanese popular culture industries and the diffusion of their products have facilitated powerful machinery that has enabled the transnational flow of cultural products, has influenced the development of the indigenous industries, and constantly disseminates new images of Japan. It is, however, emphasized that there is no conversion of resources to diplomatic power, there is no creation of any substantial 'spheres of influence' for Japan, and this soft power can sometimes be counter-productive.

Although this study focuses on the case of the Japanese cultural industries in East Asia, it is important to emphasize that cultural confluences in this region are not unidirectional. Other cultural commodities, notably American, Chinese, and Korean, have also been diffusing throughout East Asia and concurrent transnational collaborations of non-Japanese cultural productions have been taking place. Hence, the analysis presented in this study does not mean that the Japanese cultural industries are forcing audiences in this region to predominantly consume their cultural commodities, lifestyles, or conceptions. The Japanese case, however, is noteworthy as it sets an example and a model for other cultural industries in East Asia, especially the recently emerging Chinese and Korean cultural industries. This is, for once, because the Japanese cultural industries are considered as the most advanced in East Asia. Examining the expansion of Japanese popular culture industries, the challenges they present to governments and markets, is thus beneficial for explaining, assessing, or prescribing other cases as well.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first part lays the discursive framework and debates the idea of soft power. It then examines the usage of the term 'soft power' in Japan in recent years and the responsive attempts of governments in East Asia to direct the flow of culture in their markets. The second part presents the premier essence of Japanese soft power in East Asia, in directly accessing consumers and in shaping this region's cultural markets. This part is based on export figures and market surveys, and analyzes the dissemination of Japanese popular culture in East Asia in the 1990s, with particular attention to the music and television markets. The third part follows the images that Japanese popular culture disseminates in East Asia using surveys conducted in case studies in Hong Kong, Bangkok, and Seoul. It shows how popular culture can efficiently diffuse across borders even under restrictive conditions, disseminating images that are being received through

consummate consumption; and includes a discussion regarding the nature of Japanese soft power in East Asia that emanates in the dissemination of its popular culture.³

2 A Japanese soft power?

‘We are a bunch that can have a cup of Starbucks coffee right after chanting ‘anti-America, Yankees go back home’ on the streets... for us, opposing the governments’ pro-Americanism and enjoying Starbucks coffee has nothing to do with each other. Why should ideology or faith hold one back from a good cup of coffee?’⁴

In today’s international politics the term ‘soft power’ is used in order to both supplement and conceal the exercise of military and economic power. The goal underlying the use of this concept is for a country, particularly one with

3 The empirical materials presented in this paper are based on three main sources. First, in order to establish that Japan’s cultural industries do have a major impact in East Asian markets, the investigation has relied on primary sources both in Japanese and in English, regarding the export, presence, and consumption of Japanese culture in East Asia. These materials include white papers, think thank reports, advertisement companies’ estimates, cultural preference surveys of consumers, and governmental statistics. The second empirical strategy consists of in-depth interviews with 65 personnel in the cultural industries, conducted between April 2004 and May 2005 in Japan and in five cities in East Asia. The interviews were conducted in person and were semi-structured. Meaning, the interviewees were asked the same set of questions but were also encouraged to develop their insights and tell more from their own experience. The interviewees were all engaged, directly or indirectly, in producing, promoting, marketing, regulating or studying culture in East Asia, especially Japanese music and television programs. They include personnel from prominent music and television companies in Hong Kong, Singapore, Shanghai, Bangkok, and Seoul (like *Sony*, *BMG*, *Pony Canyon*, *EMI*, *Universal*, and *AvexTrax*), as well as officials from government-affiliated organizations that are engaged in promoting or regulating culture, academics, media specialists, cultural entrepreneurs, and personas from other media-related organizations. The interviewees were posed with four types of questions: (1) general inquiry regarding the local cultural markets, especially regarding music, television, and the piracy markets; (2) inquiry regarding the popularity, appreciation, and capacity of Japanese cultural products in comparison to other cultural products in the market – both domestically produced and imported; (3) information regarding cooperation with Japanese cultural companies’ personnel, agents, and promoters; and (4) asking their opinion regarding various aspects of contemporary culture, society, and politics in East Asia. Thirdly, in order to examine the appreciation given to Japanese culture and the way this shapes urban youngsters’ attitudes toward Japan, an interpretative questionnaire survey was conducted among 239 undergraduate university students in Hong Kong (during June 2004), Bangkok (February 2005), and Seoul (April 2005). The surveys were conducted by the author with the help of local assistants, in The Chinese University of Hong Kong among 57 students, in Thailand’s Chulalongkorn University among 63 students, and in Seoul among 119 students from Korea University and Sungkonghoe University. The questionnaires included 19 open questions and 2 multiple-choice parts, asking about the students’ cultural consumption patterns in general and of Japanese popular culture in particular, and about their attitude and opinion regarding various aspects of Japan’s society and state (an elaborated explanation about the questions will be provided in the third part of this paper).

4 Kim Tae-ho, a 25-year-old sociology student from Seoul. Quoted in *Herald Morning* (South Korea) (2005) ‘The 20-Something, less Ideological.’ 15 February.

global influence, to convince the world of the correctness of its principles and ideas and to have these principles and ideas accepted. In this vein, culture is seen as a means of public relations and a method of strengthening a country's influence. Cultural industries play a major role in this process. Propelled by commerce, they are powerful carriers and distributors of values and beliefs; disseminating cultural products and images to accommodate a wide range of malleable audiences. Hollywood is the most glaring example. Considered to be at the forefront of America's tools to perpetuate soft power, it constantly extracts artistic innovations, translating them into accessible consumption products and marketing them worldwide.

The term 'soft power' was coined by Nye (1990) more than a decade ago, to describe the growing importance of non-traditional ways, such as culture and values, a country can wield to influence others. According to Nye, soft power lies in the ability to co-opt, rather than coerce, other countries, so that a country 'may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries- admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness- want to follow it' (Nye, 2004a:15). Initially, the term referred to America's ability not only to intimidate or persuade, but also to entice, attract, and fascinate other countries and societies by its mass culture and ideals. Europe, Japan, India, and China were only later mentioned as being noteworthy for their own resources of soft power (Nye, 2004a: 73–98).

Soft power, however, has its vast limitations. Nye also admits it is hard to measure, difficult to handle, and does not touch everyone. It is, therefore, easier for governments to wield their military and economic power than their resources of soft power (Nye, 2004a:1–32, 99–125). When dealing with culture, the limitation of soft power is even more apparent. In today's market economies the mechanism of creating and distributing cultural commodities is beyond the direct control of governments and is much more difficult to wield. Moreover, even if we accept the notion that cultural products contain subliminal images and messages, such as values regarding individualism, consumer choice or freedom, these do not necessarily oblige consumers to accept these ideas. The fascination and attraction derived from the exposure to cultural goods could be simply that, not power.

An important question is regarding the extent to which America's soft power has indeed increased its influence. A case can be made that soft power has not nurtured positive appreciations of the US but has even been counter-productive, generating anti-American reactions. In East Asia, for example, with the exception of Japan and Taiwan, the consumption of US-made forms of entertainment, considered as carriers and harbingers of Western 'liberal' values, has always involved critiques of America. The official fear, especially in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, is that liberal individualism would ostensibly make inroads into the Asian cultural sphere, leading it away from

‘traditional’ values and undermining local social cohesion (Chua, 2000: 9–13). Moreover, in places like South Korea, and Indonesia, where American material culture and fashion-styles are extremely popular,⁵ youngsters’ anti-American demonstrations are a prevalent sight.

While America possesses a global and contagious, sometimes intimidating, soft power, and a ‘European gentle’ soft power swiftly endowing humanity with a global consciousness,⁶ a Japanese case for soft power has long remained unknown. Indeed, during its period of excessive economic growth, from the mid-1950s until the end of the 1980s, it was unclear what Japan wanted to accomplish in the international arena, aside from keeping business going and accumulating more economic might. Ogura (2004), the President of the *Japan Foundation*, has recently warned that this lack of clear goals in international politics has underlined the country’s ability to wield its ideals and secure its influence overseas. Others have argued that exactly this evasion of participation in traditional international politics, such as by mobilizing military force or in presenting a solid political agenda, is what propagates a Japanese soft power. Funabashi (1993) and Inoguchi (2005), for example, are advocates of Japan becoming a *civilian power*, emphasizing Japan’s non-military and anti-nuclear policies alongside its worldwide humanitarian aid. Another ideal image for Japan, suggested by *the Economist*, is ‘the cult of the engineer’, depicting hard-working Japanese as intelligent yet practical heroes and Japan’s post-war economic achievements as an example for developing countries (‘The Cult of the Engineer,’ March 10, 2005).

Concurrent to the dispute over Japan’s global agenda, the export of Japan’s consumer goods has been swiftly changing the country’s image overseas in the last two decades, manifesting the country’s economic might and extensively paving inroads to a variety of audiences. Americans, Europeans, or Middle-Easterners may not have heard of Prime Minister Abe Shinzo or about *Keidanren*, Japan’s powerful business organization, but they drive Japanese cars in the tens of millions, they listen to music coming from Japanese-made electronic devices, and their home appliances are likely to include semiconductors manufactured in Japan. Likewise, Japan’s economic record is impressive, even taking into account the stagnation of the last decade.⁷

5 Hollywood movies, for example, occupied approximately 80 percent of the South Korean market in the 1990s. In 2002, American pop was the most popular international music among youngsters in Seoul, second only to Korean pop music. See *Newsweek* (2004), 3 May; *Hakuhodo News* (2003). On Indonesia’s American lifestyle shopping see description in Gerke (2000: 146–148).

6 *International Herald Tribune*, (2005) ‘Bush might give a nod to a soft power Europe.’ 18 January; (2005) ‘EU’s Growth Triggers Identity Crisis.’ 5 April.

7 Japan is the world’s second largest economy after the United States. In 2004, Japan’s gross domestic product (GDP) totaled US\$3.745 trillion (US\$29,400 per capita) and its foreign exchange reserve in 2003 amounted to US\$664.6 billion. More on the Japanese economy see *CIA World Factbook* (2005).

In culture, as well, Japan has exhibited a noteworthy capacity. According to the Marubeni Economic Research Institute (2003), Japanese global cultural export value, including the media, copyrights, publishing, fashion, and other related entertainments and fine art, tripled in the 11 years between 1993 and 2003, totaling as much as JPY10.5 trillion for the entire period. The rate of this export growth is stunning, especially given the fact that during same period the total manufacturing sector's exports from Japan increased only by 20 percent, totaling JPY52 trillion (Marubeni Economic Research Institute, 2003). Another report issued by Japan's Digital Content Association (2005) has indicated that Japan is the world's second biggest producer of culture, in 2003 occupying approximately 9.5 percent of the global content market, compared to America's 41 percent, China's 1.6 percent, and South Korea's 1.2 percent. It was also emphasized that Japan's cultural capabilities are not fully realized yet. The share of the content industries in Japan's GDP is still low, occupies only about 2 percent of the country's total, compared to America's 5 percent and the world's average of 3 percent.⁸

However, while Japan's image as an economic superpower is overwhelmingly perceived worldwide, East Asians have been less impressed about perpetuating Japan as a peaceful country and a civilian power. In East Asia, Japan's wartime conduct has not been overlooked and old animosities continue to sizzle.⁹ At the same time, East Asia is also where Japan's influence has been conspicuously extended to the field of culture. Few Japanese popular culture products, such as computer games and to a lesser degree animation, have successfully been marketed worldwide while others, especially in the field of media and fashion, have a constrictive circulation in East Asia. Many of the Japanese popular culture products, such as music, fashion accessories, and idol-culture, have rarely found receptive consumers outside the specific cultural geography of East Asia (Iwabuchi, 2002: 47,84).

A few have noticed the proliferation of Japanese popular culture throughout the world in general and in East Asia in particular, some indicating they can serve as resources of soft power. Craig (2000) for example, has observed how Japan had massively manufactured and exported popular culture during the last two decades, contributing to consumers' material lives as well as their everyday cultural lives. Iwabuchi (2002: 121–157), a prominent pioneer in the study of Japanese media overseas, has shown how Japanese television dramas became extremely popular in Taiwan. In an influential article from 2002,

8 In Japan, the Ministry of Economic, Trade and Industry (METI) virtually defines all kinds of artistic works with an industrial value as 'content'. Sometimes, the terms 'creative industries' is also used to describe 'creative' fields like culture, design, and multimedia.

9 A recent example from April 2005 is the wave of anti-Japanese sentiments erupting in China, South Korea, and Singapore over the approval of a junior high-school history textbook in Japan, which they claim whitewashes the country's wartime atrocities.

journalist McGray (2002) further described Japan's booming cultural innovations and lifestyles, especially in Asia. He noticed how Japan looks more like a cultural superpower today than it did in the 1980s, when it was appreciated as an economic superpower. The result is a powerful Japanese machinery of innovating, manufacturing, and exporting culture. In June 2004, Joseph Nye himself published an article in *Gaiko Foramu* (2004b), a journal supported by Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), underlining the opportunities emanating in the country's resources of soft power.

A few others have also evidenced the success of Japanese popular culture, examining their practices and manifestation among various communities overseas (in addition to the above-mentioned, see also Ishii, 2001; Martinez, 1998; Mori, 2004; Nakamura, 2004; Otake and Hosokawa, 1998; Treat, 1996). These works provide rich information and analysis related to the practice of Japanese popular culture overseas. For our purpose, however, two important issues are missing. First, not enough information or attention is given to the considerable advantage that the Japanese cultural industries obtained over the local industries in East Asia, which enabled them to provide a competitive alternative to American popular culture.¹⁰ Secondly, the literature mentioned here does not critically investigate this process's contribution to Japan's international agenda, and in particular to the soft power discourse.

2.1 Japan's heeding support for soft power

Throughout most of post-World War II, the Japanese government was late to consider 'culture' as being a possible object for profitable export (Watanabe, 1999: 91). In the case of East Asia, fears of resurrecting anti-Japanese sentiments and of being seen as ostensibly engaged in cultural imperialism were deeply compounded. However, the increasing popularity of Japanese culture in foreign markets, and the growing activities of Japanese media companies in East Asia during the 1990s, caught the attention of the Japanese government. It has since been heeding the advantages of culture as being both a potentially profitable export item and a means to boost Japan's image overseas. Concurrently, an alerted discourse in Japan has followed the proliferation of the country's popular culture overseas, often using the soft power terminology to encourage the state to intervene. Advocates have emphasized culture's economic benefits, at the same time aspiring for its possible contribution to the nation's diplomacy.

10 While there is a wide range of works dealing with Western-based cultural industries (recent prominent studies include Hesmondhalgh, 2002; and Hartley, 2005), there is almost none – in English or in Japanese – who comprehensively analyzes the mechanism and capabilities of Japan's cultural industries in East Asia.

There are a few initiatives that symbolize the Japanese government's support for cultural export, especially in the field of media. The first concrete action was taken by the Takeshita government in 1988, which explored the possibility of exporting television programs to Asian countries. In 1991, MOFA, together with the former Ministry of Post and Telecommunication (now Japan's Ministry of Public Management, Home Affairs, Posts and Telecommunications), established the Japan Media Communication Center (JAMCO) to subsidize the export of television programs to developing countries. From the time of its establishment until March 1998, JAMCO translated 586 programs into English and exported them to 35 countries, mostly in Asia (Japan's Ministry of Public Management, Home Affairs, Posts and Telecommunication, 1997: 3-4-3).

A few recent initiatives indicate MOFA's increasing interest in the possible connection between popular culture and diplomacy. In January 2003, a special issue of a *Gaiko Foramu*, featuring 'Japan Brand: How to Convey the Qualities the Nation Has to Offer,' discussed the role that popular culture could play in Japan's diplomacy. One of the articles in this issue covered a roundtable discussion to explore Japan's potential soft power. Other articles gave testimony to the popularity of Japanese music, *anime*, and movies in Thailand, China, Russia, Australia, and other parts of the world.

In April 2003, Japan Foundation's 'International Exchange Research Committee' (2003: 8-10) published its annual report on the prospects for Japan's diplomacy. The report highlighted the potential of Japanese culture to draw a sympathetic 'national image' of Japan and assist its overseas diplomatic aims, extensively emphasizing the rising importance of new powers in today's diplomacy, characterizing them as 'soft power' and 'Gross National Cool'.¹¹ These terms appeared again in July of the same year in a METI (2003) study group's report, to emphasize the importance of developing content and popular culture industries.

The Japanese government's efforts to promote the country's cultural exports are being encouraged by its realization that multimedia and culture-related industries are occupying a growing segment of the economy. In 1992, METI estimated that of the JPY55.3 trillion that the multimedia industries were expected to generate in 2015, approximately 62 percent would come from sales of software, motion pictures, artistic images and sound, video games, and broadcasting. It also predicted that the culture-related industries would soon occupy the largest segment of Japan's economy.

Media coverage in Japan and abroad was fast to deal with Japan's cultural export, conveying admiration and nurturing hopes for this sector to grow. In a

11 'Gross National Cool' is a term coined by McGray (2002) to describe Japan's booming cultural innovations and lifestyles.

representative series of twenty-three columns published in 2004 in the *Nikkei Shinbun* (2004: 5 January until 4 February), Japan's leading economic newspaper, the need to develop the country's cultural industries was repeatedly argued. The articles outlined the need to stimulate growth in Japan's cultural industries in the new digital age and recommended the government to provide adequate support by setting the right economic, legal, and educational infrastructures, and by offering complimentary incentives. Few of the articles indicated popular culture's appealing power in swiftly changing Japan image overseas, quoting Nye's 'soft power' and McGray's 'Gross National Cool', as well as other appealing terms such as 'Cool Japan' and 'National Image'. Many other Japanese and Foreign newspapers and magazines in recent years have also regularly dedicated articles of their own, evidencing Japan's cultural might and arousing interest in this subject.¹²

Clearly, cultural export promotion has been gaining momentum in Japan. The Japanese government has been examining ways to promote the country's cultural exports, in order to generate economic benefits and nurture positive appreciations of the country overseas. Official discourse in Japan has indulgently borrowed from the soft power terminology, advocating support for investments in Japan's cultural industries. METI and MOFA are major players in this practice, extensively emphasizing the rising importance of culture in today's economy and diplomacy, and its role in attaining Japan with 'soft power'. These developments have been taking place only recently, following the success of Japanese cultural export in the 1990s. However, in spite of advocating support for Japan's cultural industries and the wide usage of the soft power terminology, the term has been given a meaning that is very different from Nye's original definition. Nye's (1990; 2004a) idea of culture as carrying and disseminating subliminal values and ideals is strikingly missing in the Japanese discourse. The economic value of the Japanese cultural export is considered a first priority, though the diplomatic benefits that Japan may gain from related exports are regarded as complimentary. The nature of this image has been given very little attention and there is no obvious intention to disseminate subliminal Japanese values or ideals through popular culture.

In sum, the involvement of the Japanese government in the field of cultural exports is clearly a response to the country's cultural industries going transnational and not the product of a pre-planned strategy. No concrete plan to

12 Huge coverage is given in weekly magazines, featuring busting titles such as 'Conquerors: Why Japanese Pop Culture is Sweeping Asia', 'Cultural Export Machine' and 'Japan's Empire of Cool'. See, for example, coverage in *Asahi Shinbun* (2006) January 1; *Time Magazine* (2001) 22 October 22; (2001) 7 December; (2002) 25 March; (2003) 11 August; (2005) 16 March; *Newsweek* (2004) 3 March; *Nikkei Weekly* (2003) 12 May 12; *Washington Post* (2003) 27 December; *The Japan Times* (2002) 12 September. Moreover, for recent discourses of soft power in the United States and Japan see Leheny (2006: 218–224).

wield the export of culture as to obtain substantial soft power has been articulated. In this context, the term ‘soft power’ is used as an appealing phrase, echoed as a part of policymakers’ attempts to explore new arenas for state intervention in a newly emerging industrial sector.

2.2 East Asian governments’ response to Japan’s popular culture

Governments in East Asia have recurrently restricted the importation of culture, especially American and Japanese popular culture, in order to either prevent ostensible ‘cultural imperialism’ or to protect the local cultural industries. The political leaderships in East Asian countries have been explicit in their condemnation of ‘American’ decadence, alternatively promoting the adaptation/return to ‘Asian values’.¹³ The official discourse in Southeast Asia, especially in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, has been a trope of being ‘anti-West’, objecting to the ideological challenges that the liberal democracies instigated. American culture, and to a lesser degree Japanese culture, were considered as posing ideological threats to local traditional values, which could lead to their moral decline (Chua, 2000: 12–13; On South Korea see Haksoo, 2003: 133–158).

The Japanese case is especially noteworthy considering the historical animosity and political rivalry it could possibly resurrect. Thus, in a few markets, the Japanese popular culture industries had to transcend especially difficult obstacles, as censorship was sometimes more particular. In Taiwan, the importation of Japanese music, movies and television programs was banned after Japan officially reestablished diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China in 1972. The ban has been gradually removed since 1993 upon the normalization of relations between the two countries. In South Korea as well, the importation of Japanese popular culture was prohibited since independence, until a four-stage opening policy was set in 1998. Ever since, the South Korean government has gradually allowed the importation of popular culture (Japanese music and television programs are still banned from being aired on public radio and television channels). Other governments in East Asia have attempted to channel the flow of popular culture along desired lines and imposed restrictions on the importation of culture, including Japanese culture. In the Philippines, for example, Japanese comics and television animation were occasionally banned, because of their violent content, or because they threatened to overshadow the regime’s supported productions. For instance, young people in the

13 The ‘Asian Values’ discourse is an investigation into the imagery of an Asian community consolidated through shared values, such as respect for authority, avoiding public conflict, and accepting the primacy of the group. On the ‘Asian values’ discourse and its critics see (Kim Ho Jung, 2004; Emmerson, 2000).

Philippines never saw the ending chapters of the popular Japanese animation series *Voltage Five*, as it was censored in the 1980s. The official fear was that this animation, which depicts five heroes fighting against oppressive monsters, propagates revolutionary ideas against the government. In Malaysia, the Home Ministry must still approve comic book imports (most of which are Japanese) before distribution, to judge their educational and political risk.

These restrictions, however, have not been effective in preventing the transnational transfer and dissemination of popular culture products and the restricted products still found their way to consumers, through illegal channels. Piracy, in particular, has served as a powerful engine for the dissemination of Japanese products, demonstrating the incapability of governments in East Asia to control their people's cultural preferences, and eventually endorsing the opening of the markets.¹⁴ In Taiwan, for example, Japanese popular culture was widely present during the period of restrictions, due to the lucrative market of pirated Japanese music and television programs, as well as through Chinese-language cover songs of Japanese originals.¹⁵ Starting as early as the 1970s, Taiwan's pirated cable channels (the 'Fourth Channel') illegally broadcasted Japanese programs, among other foreign programs, and introduced Japanese television to local consumers. Furthermore, Japanese television dramas, music, animation, and magazines were readily available, even from street vendors (see evidence in Ching, 1996: 189; Iwabuchi, 2002: 138–139).

In South Korea, the need to integrate economically has superceded the desire to keep Japan from Korea culturally. As in Taiwan, the South Korean government's restrictions did not prevent Japanese popular culture from diffusing in the market. Even before 1998, Japanese animation, music, computer games software, and television dramas had been widely present, and South Koreans were able to access and consume the products through satellite broadcasting, through the country's pirated media market, and through the Internet.¹⁶ Karaoke bars also contributed to the popularity of the Japanese

14 Media piracy in East Asia, excluding Japan, is the worlds' biggest and includes the vigorously pirated music markets of China (the biggest piracy market in the world), Taiwan, and Thailand. According to the International Federation of Phonogram and Videogram Producers (IFPI) music piracy in China account for at least 90 percent, 85 percent in Indonesia, at least 50 percent in Taiwan, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines, and at least 30 percent in Hong Kong, Singapore, and South Korea. For a world and regional view of piracy level see (IFPI, 2000–2002; 2003).

15 There were more than one thousand cover songs of Japanese originals since the end of World War II but they started to decline since 1993, after the Taiwanese government's ban on Japanese culture was removed. (see Yabuki, 2002).

16 Approximately 30 percent of South Korea's illegal market for music consisted of Japanese music. The South Korean pirated music market is estimated to occupy more than 30 percent of all the music market in the country, which makes illegal versions of Japanese music alone reach as much

music popularity in South Korea by offering Japanese songs both legally and illegally. The word ‘karaoke’ itself was prohibited in public discourse in South Korea as a part of the Korean governments’ censorship, but South Koreans did access Japanese music through karaoke, as it was still possible to find the word written in the Roman alphabet (Otake and Hosokawa, 1998: 186–187).

East Asia’s pirated markets thus paved the way for the Japanese popular culture industries’ entry into new markets. The informal circulation of pirated versions of Japanese popular culture has effectively popularized the products in the markets they were legally banned from. By the time the Japanese popular culture industries were allowed to export to the newly opened markets, the demand for their products was already created and they could immediately generate sales.¹⁷ The consequence was a wider circulation of Japanese popular culture.

3 The creation of regional markets for Japanese culture in East Asia

In the 1990s, the macro-economic conditions for Japan’s media companies to enter East Asian markets were paved and a massive industrial mechanism of exporting and disseminating Japanese popular culture products was quickly assembled. Three main regional–economic developments have nurtured the transfer of Japanese popular culture. First, the transnational marketing of Japanese popular culture has been propelled by the intensifying regional economic and consumerist activities in East Asia in the last two decades. These are noticeably expressed in increasing trade, production, and financial interdependence in the last two decades: the importance of intra-East Asian trade has increased from 11.3 percent in 1975 to 19 percent in 1985, to 25.6 percent in 1995, and to 25.7 percent in 2001. The intra-regional FDI in East Asia (as a part of the world’s FDI) has also increased during that period, from 4 percent in 1980 to 8 percent in 1994 (Chirathivat, 2003: 2–3; Urata, 2003: 7–13).

Another comprehensive study by The *World Bank* has found that East Asian intra-trade has had a major positive influence on regional cooperation and growth in the last three decades. According to the study, trade relations between most East Asian countries have been growing sharply in terms of

as 10 percent of all South Korea’s music market, legal and illegal combined (Japan’s Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, 2002). On Internet piracy in the South Korean market see (Pack, 2004).

17 In interviews with media industry personnel in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Shanghai, some have indicated that the Japanese media companies are investing very little, or none, in fighting the piracy of their own products. This is in sharp contradiction to the American media companies. In this regard, a few have speculated that this was intentional, as ignoring piracy allowed the Japanese popular culture to become popular, while profit was generated after the markets had been opened and regulated (Author’s Interviews, June to August 2004).

their intensity and importance. The study also showed that since the mid-1980s, this region's intra-trade has been growing at a rate roughly double that of world trade, and at a rate higher than the intra-trade of NAFTA or the EU (Ng and Yeats, 2003). The successive growth of this region's economies in the last two decades has further nurtured the emergence of affluent middle classes with increasing purchasing power and leisure time, and boosted East Asia's consumerism (Chua, 2000: 13–16; Shiraishi, 2006).

Secondly, in the 1990s, Japan's economic–industrial involvement in East Asian markets had been already firmly established. Japan has shown a great interest in taking part in various economic activities in East Asia, even in acquiring some degree of an economically leading position.¹⁸ The *Plaza Accord* of 1985 was a major breakthrough. It was then that the appreciation of the Yen coerced many prominent Japanese industries in the field of cars, electronics, and telecommunication, to shift their production bases outside of Japan, to cheap-labored sites in the developing East Asian countries. Attempts by the Japanese government to harbor domestic politico-industrial relations to East Asia have consolidated the country's involvement in this region's markets (Hatch and Yamamura, 1996). The Japanese government's consent to continue its involvement in East Asia was re-enforced following the devastating consequences of the Asian financial crisis of 1997, as was shown in the binding financial and industrial functions it took in 'The New Miyazawa Initiative'.¹⁹

A third related development was the mass movement of people between Japan and East Asian countries. As early as the 1960s, growing in the 1970s and reaching massive scales in the 1980s and 1990s (6 million by 1990), Japanese tourists and businessmen have been coming to East Asia, creating what Brian Moeran calls a 'Japanese ethnoscape' (2000: 31). On the other hand, the attraction of Japan as a 'developed' and a 'modern' country has lured tens of thousands of young East Asians students to come to Japan. In 1984, approximately 12,410 foreign students studied in Japan. In 1995, this number has soared to 53,847, and to 117,302 in 2005. Ninety-three percent of the foreign students in Japan in the 1990s were from Asian countries,

18 An attitude that locates Japan's role and leadership in Asia within a set of various multilateral and global arrangements, and as complementary to American leadership, is found in (Cowhey, 1993; Katzenstein and Shiraishi, 1997). For an attitude that depicts Japan's leadership in Asia in a more independent and ambitious manner (see Blechinger and Legewie, 2000; Hatch and Yamamura, 1996). Moreover, public opinion polls in Japan in the 1990s have indicated that the Japanese public favors the adoption of an economic leadership in Asia, but peremptorily rules out the possibility of Japan acquiring any military leadership (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1991–2003).

19 As of September 1998, Japan had contributed roughly one-third of the total US\$127 billion financial assistance pack for the solution of the Asian financial crisis, compared to the United States' US\$12 billion and the European states' US\$7 billion. See (Katzenstein, 2002: 22). Moreover, to evidence how penetrating and bounding are the functions that Japan took on itself in promoting *The New Miyazawa Initiative* see (Kishimoto, 2000).

and the overall majority of them – unlike their European and American counterparts – enrolled in long-term degree courses (Nihon Gakusei Shien Kikou, 2005).

3.1 Japanese media companies in East Asia in the 1990s

In the 1990s, therefore, the entranceways of Japan's cultural industries were paved, and a growing number of Japanese media companies started to take an increasing interest in East Asia. Generated by both entrepreneurship and local demand, they have been constantly seeking new market expansion opportunities and intensifying their efforts to establish a presence within the region's newly emerging middle classes. *Pony Canyon* and *Avex Trax*, for example, two of the six big Japanese music companies, gradually broadened and deepened their entrance into East Asian media markets by moving from licensing agreements with local companies to eventually opening local branches. Moreover, *Amuse*, *Rojam*, *Fuji TV*, and *JET TV* are notable for their activities in the field of television in East Asia. They became engaged in various television broadcasts and productions during the 1990s, often based on Japanese formats, by establishing various ties with local companies and media organizations.

A few of the case studies²⁰ showed that the prominent Japanese media companies that entered markets in East Asia in the 1990s had already explored other markets, and possessed a global reach that started earlier, mostly during the 1980s. East Asia's markets represented new expansion opportunities for the Japanese media companies, especially during the 1990s. Japanese media companies, for their part, introduced popular culture products and initiatives, often based on their own experiences in Japan. During this process, indigenous promoters, media organizations and companies in East Asia have collaborated with Japanese media companies, producers and promoters, and in addition to marketing their products have facilitated a 'knowledge transfer' (A phrase coined by Aoyagi, 2000) of Japanese-style cultural production and marketing.

3.2 Japanese media products in East Asia

Japan's popular culture is not only 'fascinating' but is also a big export industry. Three Japanese companies, *Sony*, *Nintendo*, and *Sega*, lead the world's computer games market, in spite of *Microsoft's* launch of the *X box*.²¹ Sixty-five percent of the world's production of animated cartoon series is

20 *Sony Music Entertainment*, *Pony Canyon*, and *Avex Trax*. Other case studies researched by the author include *Amuse*, *Rojam*, *Fuji TV*, *JET TV*, and *Hori Productions*.

21 As for June 2003, *Sony's PlayStation 2* had captured 74 percent of the video games hardware market, while *Nintendo's GameCube* and *Microsoft's X box* had captured 13 percent each. The video games industry is believed to be a US\$30 billion industry. See *Time Magazine* (2003) 15 December.

made in Japan, with estimated annual sales of licensed goods worth US\$17 billion (Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, 2003: 8–9). In 2001, Japanese multimedia global exports, such as video games, music, movies, and advertisements, have become a 350 billion yen industry, exceeding the imports of multimedia to Japan by more than a third. This export is further expected to reach JPY1.5 trillion in 2010 (Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, 2003: 28; Hamano, 2003: 266). A wider definition of Japanese culture related exports, which includes multimedia, fine arts, fashion, copyrights, publishing, and the like, was valued in 2001 at JPY1.4 trillion, totaling almost JPY10.5 trillion in the eleven years between 1992 and 2002 (Marubeni Economic Research Institute, 2003; A report based on the same data in *The Nikkei Weekly* (2003) 12 May 2003).

It is impossible to evaluate the exact shares of the American, Japanese, Chinese, and Korean music in East Asia. The information is not comprehensively available, due to the difficulty in commodifying cultural items into numbers and the unavailability of data regarding sales in the (illegal) pirated media markets.²² It is, however, possible to show that there is no monolithic confluence of music in East Asia, and that consumers have been diversifying their preferences, or, alternatively, concurrently buying different musics. Moreover, by comparing the Japanese cultural presence in East Asia to that of America, it is possible to assert the position they have gained in the markets.

America is still the world's biggest exporter and consumer of culture. In 1996, for example, America's share of the world market for pre-recorded music accounted for 60 percent. In 2000, America's domestic market occupied more than a third of the world's sales of movies, television programs, music, magazines, and popular literature. In 2002, American industries occupied 41 percent of the world's contents market, including products such as motion pictures, software, TV games, music, publishing, and Internet software (in comparison to Japan's 9.5 percent, China's 1.6 percent, and South Korea's 1.2 percent). In Asia, Hollywood movies remain the most popular in Singapore, Taipei, and Bangkok, and American television dramas are broadcasted in local television stations throughout the region. American music is very successful in Asia, as in other parts of the world, accounting for between a third and a half of the music markets of Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, while Chinese, Japanese, and Korean music make up for most of the rest (the figures regarding America's popular culture global might are compounded from Hamano, 2003: 192; Rothkopf,

22 While online piracy has been rising in recent years in Japan and especially in South Korea, physical piracy remains the main concern in the other East Asian markets. For a world and regional view of piracy level, see (IFPI, *Music Piracy Report*, available at <http://www.ifpi.org> (accessed in October 2004).

1997; 43; Digital Content Association, 2005. On music sales figures see IFPI, 2000–2003).

Likewise, the Japanese music industry has managed to carve an integral position in East Asia's cultural scene in the 1990s. Japanese music export value to nine major markets in East Asia, as indicated in Japan's *Customs and Tariff Bureau* records, rose from JPY5.5 billion in 1988 to at least JPY13 billion in 2005, totaling more than JPY250 billion over the entire period.²³ Hong Kong was the leading destination for Japan's music exports, occupying 36 percent of the total value, followed by Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore; then China, the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand; Indonesia. Hong Kong and Taiwan are the biggest markets for Japanese music exports, though they also serve as hubs and transit stations for Japanese media companies to other destinations in the region.

The real value and manufacturing volume of Japanese music in East Asia is estimated, however, to be 10–15 times higher.²⁴ With the inclusion of the pirated music markets, the Japanese music industry in Hong Kong was estimated to occupy between 15 and 20 percent of the music market in Hong Kong during its peak-period from 1996 until 1999, and between 8 and 12 percent in 2003. In Singapore, the estimations are of 8–10 percent of the music market between 1996 and 1998, and about 5 percent in 2003. In Bangkok, the estimates for the years 2002 and 2003 are 4–6 percent. In Seoul, the estimates are between 10 and 12 percent of the music market share in the first 6 months after the opening of the market to Japanese music in 2002, and approximately 7–9 percent in 2004.

While American and Japanese musics remain appealing, it is, however, important to indicate that Chinese pop music is the most popular among young people in East Asia's Chinese-speaking cities (Hakuhodo News, 2003).²⁵ According to a cultural preference survey conducted in December 2002, among 15-to-24-year-olds,²⁶ 93.5 percent of young Hong Kongers said they listen to Chinese pop music (which is more than double the rate of those who said they listen to Japanese music). In Taipei, 83.3 percent listen to Chinese pop music, 25.2 percent in Singapore, and 76.9 percent in the three Chinese cities of

23 These figures were analyzed by the author based on data from (Japan's Ministry of Finance, 1988–2005). They represent conservative estimates of the export of Japanese music products to the nine biggest East Asian destinations: Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, China, South Korea, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

24 Estimates were given to the author between April 2004 and May 2005, in interviews with fourteen Promotion Managers of Japanese music companies' branches in Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand, and South Korea. Interviews and figures from managers of 47 leading music shops in these cities have further confirmed the estimates.

25 'Chinese pop' refers to music in Mandarin or Cantonese, which is mostly produced in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and China.

26 The survey was conducted by *Hakuhodo*, Japan's second biggest advertising company.

Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. American pop music was the most popular in Singapore (48 percent), Bangkok (25 percent), and Seoul (24.5 percent).

The export of Japanese television programs during the 1990s has increased remarkably as well, both in terms of television program export *hours* and of television programs export *value*. The total export hours of Japanese television programs have surged from 2,200 in 1971, to 4,600 in 1980, to 22,300 in 1992, and to 42,600 in 2002.²⁷ Japanese television program export value rose steadily as well, from JPY3.3 billion in 1991 to JPY5.3 billion in 1995, totaling JPY21.1 billion, with almost half of this export going to Asia.²⁸

Young audiences in East Asia like Japanese television dramas. According to a survey conducted in 2002, among 15-to-24-year-olds, Japanese television dramas were equal in their popularity to American television dramas in Bangkok, but more popular in Hong Kong, Singapore, and in three Chinese cities – Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou (Hakuhodo News, 2003). In Bangkok, Japanese and American television dramas were the most popular, equally preferred by 10.5 percent. In Hong Kong, the Japanese television dramas came second, watched by 22.5 percent of the youngsters, compared with 7.5 who watched American television dramas, and 64.5 percent who watched Chinese television dramas.

3.3 *The Japanese popular culture industry's regional model*

It is evident that regional markets for Japanese culture were created throughout East Asia, alongside other imported cultures. However, what essentially distinguishes the Japanese popular culture in East Asia from only being a second and sometimes third to the Chinese and American popular cultures, is that it has (more than the other two) served as a model for the indigenous industries. Meaning, many of today's East Asian popular culture industries are largely based on Japanese models, especially in music, television dramas, idol-fashion styles, comic books, and animation. In East Asia, many of the products might dovetail locally and internationally drawn motives and languages, even as the format is Japanese. In this sense, the impact of the Japanese popular culture industries in East Asia should not be exclusively evaluated according to the dissemination of their products and the sales records *per se*, but also by the processes they entail, their overall influence, and their conspicuous adaptation by the local societies.

27 The import–export ratio obviously favors Japan. In 2002, for example, only 2,800 hours of television programs were imported to Japan, mainly from America. See report in (Japan Media Communication Center, 2004).

28 Figures from (Japan's Ministry of Public Management, Home Affairs, Posts and Telecommunications, 2003). There are no complete figures for the export value of Japanese television programs after 1995, however, the figures at the end of the 1990s seems to be higher according to (Iwabuchi, 2002: 140).

One famous Japanese format is the production of idols. Japanese-style idols are young, usually between the ages of 14 and 24, and are supposed to be more than 'mere' music artists. Japanese-style idols appear in a certain structure, many times in a three-girl band, a five-boy singing group with a remarkable dancing ability, or as a lead female singer accompanied by five male band members. Singing ability and extraordinary physical attributes are less important. The idols are rather expected to maintain close contact with their audiences, to represent the notion that anyone can be a star, and much of their fame is achieved through frequent appearances on television programs and commercials. Many Japanese music artists have become famous in East Asia in addition to Japan, and were imitated by locally produced idols. To name but a few, Chage & Aska, Sakai Noriko, Chiba Mika, Yamaguchi Mamoe, Matsuda Seiko, Nakamori Akina, Amuro Namie, Hirai Ken, the duet *Chemistry*, and the boys bands *Wind* and *SMAP* have attained superstar and cultural idol status exceeding their mere status as singers, often also becoming fashion models for young East Asians.

Star-search programs and talent competitions represent another Japanese format, which was successful in Japan and was later adopted in East Asia. Japanese media companies, such as *Fuji TV* and *Hori Productions* were engaged in various such promotions in the 1990s, collaborating with indigenous media companies and organizations in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Taiwan, South Korea, China, and even Vietnam. Under *Fuji TV's* direction, the Japanese popular star-search program from the 1970s, *Suta Tanjo* ('A Star is Born') has found its way to East Asia's television through a same genre-program called *Asia Bagus!* ('Asia is Great' in Indonesian). *Fuji TV* produced *Asia Bagus!* as a star-search program, together with local companies in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Taiwan, and South Korea. The production and direction was mainly in the hands of Japanese staff. *Asia Bagus!* was broadcasted on prime time in five East and Southeast Asian countries, and became influential in shaping young consumers' fashion and lifestyles, in addition to their music (see Iwabuchi, 2002: 100–106). Many regionally-famous idols were produced according to the Japanese exported formats. In the 1990s, they included Jie Liu of China, Soteji-Wa-Idol, and Susie Kang of South Korea, Andy Lau, Vivian Chow, and Sammy Chen of Hong Kong; and Emile Chow, Vivian Hsu, and Tarsy Su of Taiwan (Aoyagi, 2000).

A last example is in the field of television. Japanese programs are setting the standard for many of East Asia's television programs through the ability to finance, produce, and market high quality television programs (Chua, 2003). They are now regarded as a leader in their field and an object for regional imitation in East Asia. The current so-called 'Korean wave' of television dramas in East Asia initially imitated the Japanese format in its intermixing of the marketing of television dramas, music, and idol-culture. In her study of Korean trendy dramas, Lee, for example, has demonstrated how producers substantially

borrowed formats and ideas from Japanese originals (Lee, 2004). The South Korean television productions have, however, gradually developed in recent years, sometimes to become even more popular than the Japanese (Lin and Kim, 2005).

The scope and impact of many of the Japanese popular culture industries is eminently regional. Although Japanese popular culture carries a global marketing ability, it has a conspicuous regional acceptance. The Japanese popular culture industries were seen as an example and a model, and have influenced the development of the indigenous industries, providing formats for local productions. In this process, Japanese companies have teamed with indigenous promoters and organizations and facilitated a region-wide collaboration. It is therefore accurate to accentuate the influence of the Japanese popular culture industries on the local markets in East Asia, and their conspicuous regional presence, rather than to discuss their mere global expansion.

4 Japanese popular culture's soft power in East Asia

4.1 *Disseminating new imageries of Japan*

As evidenced in Section 2 of this paper, Japanese popular culture has managed to rapidly penetrate and spread beyond nation-state boundaries in East Asia. This slippery nature of cultural diffusion is difficult to monitor or direct, yet extremely powerful in enabling a country, intentionally or not, to transnationally access different communities, possibly bringing them to admire its achievements and to emulate its example. In East Asia, as this part would further evidence, the Japanese popular culture products represent a group of highly appreciated commodities which effectively disseminates new images of Japan. These images invigorates young East Asians to develop an alternative view of contemporary aspects of Japanese culture and society, however, they do not generate 'power' in the conventional sense of authority or dominance.

Japanese popular culture products are highly regarded in East Asia, both among personnel from the local industries and in the eyes of consumers. In author's interviews with sixty-five persons from the local media industries in Hong Kong, Singapore, Shanghai, Bangkok, and Seoul, from April 2004 until May 2005 (note 3), they all agreed that the quality of Japanese popular culture products is very high. They themselves were fascinated about the way the Japanese popular culture has managed to encompass many receptive consumers in East Asia since the 1990s. The majority of them emphasized that Japanese products, such as music, television dramas and variety programs, Japanese comics and animation, are far better produced in terms of sound, image, and fashion, than any other local product, be it Chinese, Thai, Singaporean, or South Korean. They all thought that the cultural industries in East Asia are still inferior to those of Japan, in terms of the level of

production and sophistication and in the costs invested. As explained by a regional marketing strategist for one of the prominent music company in Hong Kong, the Japanese media products are successful because they are ‘artistically developed, esthetically designed and sophisticatedly marketed, much better than any other products in the [East Asian] market’ (Author’s interview, Hong Kong, June 21, 2005).

Television and music personnel in Bangkok and Seoul have expressed similar appreciation. In an interview with the President of one of Thailand’s biggest television production companies, for example, she had revealed that they use the Japanese television programs as useful model for their own productions. Their company’s production process thus includes a close study of Japanese television dramas, animation, and variety shows. She, however, complained the shortage in qualified Thai personnel and resources still hinders local productions from reaching to the standard set by Japanese production (author’s interview, Bangkok, January 25, 2005). In another interview with a promotion manager of one of South Korea’s biggest music company, he has emphasized that they frequently emulate the way Japanese music companies work, in terms of musical and image production, public relations, and marketing methods (author’s interview, Seoul, April 12, 2005).

The majority of the interviewees have also emphasized that the overall appreciation of the Japanese consumption and cultural products and their diversity in the markets plays an important role in the success of the marketing. Few have thought that the similar physical appearances of the Japanese idols (music artists and actors), such the shape of the hair, the color of the eyes, the height etc., makes it easier for East Asian consumers to become fans of and to idolize. Only two of the sixty-five interviewees suggested that the success of the Japanese popular culture emanates in the products’ embodiment of an ‘Asian cultural substance’, which easily resonates with local consumers. They, however, could not explain what comprises this cultural substance.

In an interpretative questionnaire survey conducted by the author among 239 undergraduate university students in Hong Kong (during June 2004), Bangkok (February 2005), and Seoul (April 2005),²⁹ Japanese popular culture

29 The questionnaires included 19 open questions and 2 multiple-choice parts, inquiring about the students’ cultural consumption patterns in general and of Japanese culture in particular, and about their attitude and opinion regarding various aspects of Japan’s society and state. The first part of the questionnaire included general questions regarding cultural consumption such as: What kind of music do you listen to? What kind of television programs do you watch? What kind of movies do you watch? The second part specifically inquired about the consumption and appreciation of Japanese popular culture products, and included questions like: Do you watch Japanese television programs? If yes, what kind of programs and how frequently? Do you listen to Japanese music? etc. The third part included various questions about Japanese contemporary culture, society, and state, focusing on the subjective experiences of the interviewees. This part included questions like: How are Japanese popular culture products different from American,

products were also highly regarded for their quality and artistic level. Japanese popular culture products, such as music, television dramas, and animation, were repeatedly described as ‘creative’, ‘interesting’, ‘funny’, and of ‘high quality’ (in comparison to the other American, Korean, or local made products). Many have said that the Japanese popular culture is different from the American or the local popular culture by offering a new and fascinating set of products, which they find easy to like. Japanese pop music melodies for example, according to a young female student from Bangkok, are much easier to memorize, ‘only after hearing the song once or twice’. Japanese animation was repeatedly described as a powerful medium that carries viewers away into a new imaginative world. Similarly, Japanese comics were thought to convey a high level of artistic innovation that is not found anywhere else. Many interviewees mentioned that it is much easier for them to become a fan of a Japanese idol than an American idol, because her or his physical appearance and behavioral nuances resemble their own.

In the questionnaires, the interviewees could easily recognize Japanese popular culture products and differentiate between them and others in the market, such as American or local. The overall appreciation of Japanese popular culture often harbingers the development of a new, respectful, and positive image of Japan. The majority of interviewees described Japan as a ‘developed’, ‘advanced’, and ‘modern’ country. The exposure and consumption of Japanese popular culture has additionally incited the interest of the young interviewees in other aspects of Japan, such as customs, sports, and fashion. Many of the interviewees stated that they like Japanese food, and almost all said they would like to visit Japan.

In one of the interviews, a young fan of Japanese pop music from Hong Kong expressed her appreciation of Japan saying that ‘we [Hong Kongers] can never be Americans, but maybe one day we could become like Japan’ (Author’s interview, June 2004). Her imagined Japan, as she later explained, was convened through watching Japanese television dramas and Japanese animation movies. In another interview in Seoul, a group of young animation-creators mentioned they studied Japanese language through watching animation and regularly visit Japan at least once a year, to learn new cultural trends. One of them later concluded, ‘Japan is our cultural capital’ (Author’s interview, April 2005).

An interesting result is regarding the role of history in the way the interviewees visualized Japan. Japan’s occupation period plays a very marginal role, if any, in the way the youngsters in Hong Kong and Bangkok conceive

Chinese, or Korean popular culture products? What do you think about Japan? What kind of country is it? What do you think about Japanese people?

the country.³⁰ Only 7 out of 120 interviewees in these two cities briefly mentioned the war and occupation period in describing their perceptions of Japan. This is compared to more than two-thirds of interviewees in Seoul (81 out of 119) who outlined Japan's wartime responsibilities in their descriptions. The results from Seoul probably emanates from South Korea's trauma of 36 years under harsh Japanese colonization, which is kept alive by the country's education system and mass media.³¹

At the same time, in the questionnaires in Seoul there was a strong ambivalence toward Japan. Most of the students choose to describe Japan in both positive and negative terms, differentiating between their criticism of the Japanese state and their admiration of contemporary aspiring aspects of Japanese society and culture. In the multiple choice part of the questionnaires, 24 out of 119 interviewees in Seoul chose to define their attitude toward Japan as both 'somehow negative' and 'somehow positive'. One university student explained: 'most of the Japanese people are kind but toward their government I am very negative...their policy toward Korea is very bad'. Another revealed that 'I like Japanese culture and have Japanese friends but I hate their right-wind government!' and her friend elaborated: 'I like their fashion, music and movies, but sometimes they make me mad because of the way they treat history'. In this regard, the case in Seoul is especially noteworthy as it suggests that the youngsters have developed their own attitude toward contemporary aspects of Japan. They still tend to accept the interpretation provided by the state regarding history, but refuse to see politics in their own appreciation of Japanese culture.

4.2 *The non-national nature of Japan's appreciation*

As it was reflected in the questionnaires, the Japanese popular culture products have become representative of high quality and innovation, which create some sort of emotional bond or a personal relationship between the product or the service and 'Japan'. It is difficult to explain how the consumption of the products evokes these emotions, but one can hardly contest that they do. Young East Asians have been developing a new image of Japan through their cultural consumption. In the cases in Hong Kong,

30 Japan's occupation in Thailand was relatively short and limited. Thais suffered much less than other Southeast Asians and are therefore less hostile to Japan. In Hong Kong, the consequences were much more severe: as much as half of the city population, approximately 600,000 people, were made refugees.

31 During the author's visit to South Korean in April 2005, for example, the local newspapers were highly critical of Japan over a sovereignty dispute of a small rocky island called *Docto* by Koreans and *Takeshima* by Japanese; and the concurrent release of a new addition of Japanese history textbook for junior high school students, which Koreans and Chinese claim whitewashes Japan's war-time atrocities.

Bangkok, and Seoul, they have been gradually acquiring positive viewpoints of Japan, and a fascination toward contemporary aspects of the country's society and culture. The 'producer' (Japan), is often associated with the Japanese popular culture products. The nature of this appreciation is constructed through the consumption of popular culture, and correlates with Nye's description (2004a: 15) of soft power, which emanates in the subjective fascination of a country. Moreover, the consumption of Japanese popular culture products does not stimulate allegations about an attempted 'cultural imperialism', as is prevalent in the American case. Rather, these products are seen as the non-nationalistic and non-dogmatic side of Japan, reflecting its positive and friendlier aspects.

At the same time, however, there is a fundamental differentiation between the way young urban East Asians relate to the Japanese state on the one hand, and their appreciation of other aspects of Japanese society and culture on the other hand. Thus, there are reasons that should not allow us to harbor excessive expectations regarding the tangible nature of 'power' that emanates in cultural consumption, as the soft power theory suggest. First, Japan's occupation and colonization of wide parts of East Asia, especially of Korea and China, have neither been forgotten nor overlooked. As evidenced in the questionnaire surveys in Seoul, rather than erasing historical events, young consumers have developed a more complex view of Japan, harboring positive imageries alongside negative historical recollections.

Young East Asians were able to access, recognize, and acquire a new image of Japan through cultural consumption. However, this consumption is obviously not automatically tantamount to the adaptation of the culture of the origin, nor does it oblige them to identify themselves with Japan. Popular culture, even when it propagandizes or has obvious economic intent (such as Hollywood movies), is consumer-mediated and therefore open to different readings. As the Japanese case shows, it is not used for indoctrinate hegemonic value nor to impose cultural imperialism. This consumption does not legitimate attempts to consolidate power or authority over the lives of East Asians. Consumers will most probably reject the notion that their cultural consumption might somehow cast them under external Japanese authority; in the same way they have demonstrated discontent with their governments' attempts to direct their cultural consumption preferences. The consumers are not being dispossessed of their sense of national identity and consuming other cultures does not seem to conflict with them being loyal Koreans or Thai.

Furthermore, the admiration of contemporary aspects of Japanese society and culture is not the result of conscientious coercion on the part of the state, but is rather cultivated through consumerist choice. In this context, governments in market economies can offer fairly limited guidance. Rather than

exerting local influence throughout pockets of fans throughout East Asia, as the soft power theory suggest, the regional role of the Japanese popular culture should be seen as endorsing the provision of new cultural alternatives and the dissemination of new images of Japan. This is effective in attributing Japan with a new, friendlier appearance in the region, but its tangible use to wield political influence is doubtful.

4.3 Concluding remarks

The dissemination of the Japanese popular culture in East Asia in the 1990s was driven by the market forces, facilitated by the mechanism of commodifying and distributing culture, and invigorated by piracy. The diffusion of Japanese popular culture products connects individuals and communities in a regional encompassment, and endorses the construction of regional markets for Japanese culture. The accommodating process of consumption incites new interests and appreciations, and encourages young East Asians to develop new images of Japan.

The distinctive ability of popular culture to penetrate and disperse beyond nation-state boundaries and to transcend governments' restrictions, together with the consequential impact it possesses on the way East Asia's cultural markets are being constructed, is the real essence of the Japanese soft power in East Asia. The dissemination of positive images, which were often recognized and perceived by young consumers, is of an additional value. For many young people in today's East Asia, Japan is not only an ex-militaristic aggressor, but also represents a developed country with a fascinating culture, and the embodiment of an achievable dream. They accept the official interpretation provided by the state regarding history, but acquire their own taste and priority when it comes to popular culture.

Positive images of Japan and the consequential incitement of interest and appreciation cultivate a new sympathetic perception of the country. Images by themselves, however, do not provide the country with any real essence of power in the sense of authority or domination. Images and appreciations impetus economic benefits and endorses the marketing of the country's products. In the long-term, they might encourage dialogue and cultivate an atmosphere of affinity among individuals, which is based on the experience of the consumption of the same genre of cultural products. Positive images of Japan are of a benefit for the country, but these spontaneously emerge and are, by and large, beyond the reach of state guidance. The nature of the Japanese soft power in East Asia that is exerted from the dissemination of popular culture possesses an immense impact on this region's cultural markets, but does not create new 'spheres of influence' for the Japanese state.

Based on the Japanese popular culture experience in East Asia, there are a few conclusions to be drawn for the idea of soft power in IR. The first is that popular culture does represent a non-traditional extension of a country, which provides a soft power of a limited nature. Secondly, the process by which popular culture diffuses is highly effective in reaching individuals and communities in a transnational encompassment, while obscuring nation-state boundaries and demonstrating the incapability of governments to control their people's cultural consumption preferences in a market economy. Thirdly, the nature of comprehension that arises from the consumption of popular culture can disseminate imageries of the 'producer', but these are rather limited as they do not affect everyone and the practicality of consolidating power from them is not yet evidenced. As the case in East Asia shows, consumer reception points strongly to apolitical consumers that remain politicized only by the politics of memory (war, textbook etc) but that refuse to see any politics in their affection to popular culture.

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