



# Shouldn't Cool Japan Be Changed?

Cool (smart and stylish) *Nippon* (Japan) should be pitched throughout the world. Under the slogan of Cool Japan, the movement for the transmission of Japan's hidden gems to the world has been brisk. From animation, video games, and other pop culture to Japanese cuisine, many foreigners are drawn to Japanese style. Under such circumstances, shouldn't the method for the transmission of information be changed? Director Watanabe Hirotaka, Institute for International Relations, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, the foremost authority on research in culture and diplomacy, points out what is missing in the current Cool Japan campaign.

**Watanabe Hirotaka, Director, Institute for International Relations, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies**

## What Abe Mario symbolizes

The main character that enlivened the final scene at the Olympic Games held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, was the Nintendo video game character, Super Mario, played by Prime Minister Abe Shinzo. The unexpected performance surprised the media around the world, which applauded it.

I think that Abe Mario symbolized two things. The scenario where Mario went underground from the big city of Tokyo and instantly appeared in Rio de Janeiro on the other side of the earth represented the aptitude that Japan, a high-tech country, boasts.

On the other hand, as aptly pointed out in an article from the U.K.'s quality newspaper the *Guardian* (online edition), Prime Minister Abe was dressed in the showy Mario costume only for a moment, with a conservative suit for the rest of the time. His modest performance of awkwardly waving Mario's cap also represented the typical Japanese person without a doubt.

These are two contrasting images where Prime Minister Abe left a good impression on people around the world. What attracted the world? Japan's aptitude is created by science and technology. Anyone who is exposed to Japan's aptitude should notice the high level of education, economic power, and social stability which supports science and technology.

On the other hand, the Prime Minister's embarrassed performance probably conveyed the characteristics generally seen among Japanese people, namely a self-effacing attitude, modesty, and great honesty. But it is not the first time that those characteristics have been conveyed.

In the past, an acquaintance in Europe who knew Japan well told me that the Japanese character was summarized by the words "frugality" and "saving." Of course, he had good knowledge about Japan and used those words well.



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From the perspective of the Europeans, Japan was once a small and poor island country in the Far East. Because the Japanese people were poor, they worked hard and learned a lot. They have to team up, so they are self-effacing and modest in their individual assertions. They are blessed with excessive complexity and a delicate sensibility.

Such characteristics seem to have been inherited to this day. People around the world perceived such things from the modest performance of Prime Minister Abe.

### **J-pop culture going beyond tradition**

Japanese culture is essentially modest. Consider an example in China, where they have performing arts like the Beijing Opera; where performers dressed in richly colored costumes dance with strenuous movements while Chinese gongs and bells are rung. Japanese cultural sensibilities are completely different. They do not have characteristics that overwhelm the audience with loud sounds or attract attention with visual effects.

Viewed negatively, Japanese culture is unexciting, uninteresting, and difficult to understand. It is a culture where a person cannot understand its value until they actually visit the country. In other words, it is a high context culture. That said, culture cannot be understood without certain prior knowledge.

However, if such a situation had been left untouched, Japanese culture would not have attracted attention as in the current situation. It is in contrast to Chinese culture, which has not yet broken through the limits of its old stereotypes. The J-pop culture has gone beyond existing barriers. *Anime, manga*, DVDs, and other media have spread the essence of Japan around the world.

Such content is fun, easy to understand, and bright. These things can probably be described as a low context culture, which can be enjoyed effortlessly without any prior knowledge. In addition, there is a high quality of work. That is the decisive factor of the acceptance of J-pop culture all around the world.

The Japan Expo, the J-pop cultural event that is customarily held in the summer in the suburbs of Paris, had its seventeenth anniversary this year. The first Japan Expo in 2000 was held to exhibit products in the classroom of an elementary school by three French aficionados. The number of visitors was about three thousand people at first; however, the Japan Expo has become a major event with over two hundred thousand visitors over four days. The major customers are youth between ten and nineteen years old. One in three people appears at the venue dressed up in costume portraying a character from *anime, manga*, and the like.

### **Cool Japan became the strategy for overseas expansion**

Cool Japan is the expression that Mr. Douglas McGray, a U.S. journalist, used in his article "Japan's Gross National Cool (Japan's National Power of 'Cool')" published in the May/June 2002 issue of *Foreign Policy*, a diplomatic journal. In the article, McGray highly appreciated the potential for Japan's pop culture, especially its content.

Therefore, Cool Japan is the phrase originally referring to Japan's cultural industry, centered on that content. Facing stagnation after the collapse of the bubble economy, Japan has different potential from the economic power represented by the manufacturing and financial industries. Japan should have more self-confidence. The source of such confidence is described as Cool Japan.

The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry tried to utilize Cool Japan as an escape from the stagnant economic situation. Apart from the essential meaning of cool (smart/stylish), Cool Japan has generated a wide range of meaning such as the Japan which the world sympathizes with and the Japan which the world wants. Anything highly valued overseas is regarded as Japanese and Cool Japan.

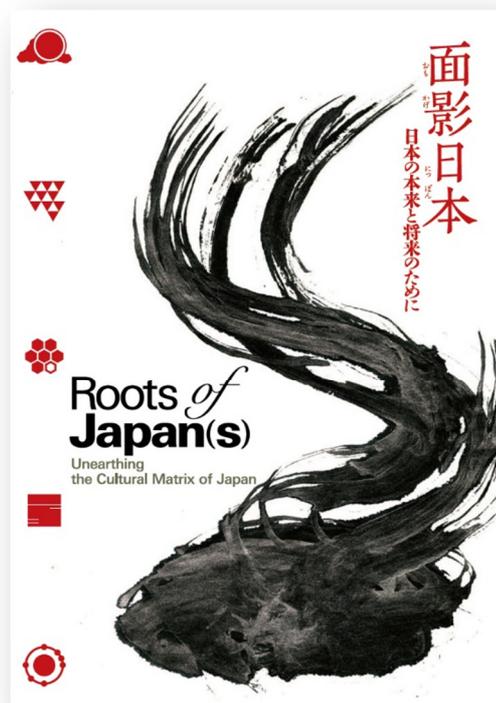
Cool Japan, which connects culture, history, and industry, has been used as a strategy for economic advancement into foreign countries by the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO).

However, anything with Japanese characteristics tends to be called Cool Japan, and Cool Japan has included anything eccentric at various points. The beginning of Cool Japan was positive; the reason for the lack of enthusiasm for everything Japanese was an extension of the meaning of Cool Japan. The things described as Cool Japan seemed vague and have become easily noticeable.

A cultural industry in its true sense must have a proper concept and clear linguistic meaning. The point that the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry understands is that a proper concept must be formulated, which has been the trend for the past seven to eight years.

The pamphlet that the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry publishes about Creative Japan, one step ahead of Cool Japan, "Roots of Japan — Unearthing the Cultural Matrix of Japan" has received favorable responses. This pamphlet clarifies the concepts of various long-standing words that have been passed down in terms of history and culture with an overview of traditional craftworks embodying those concepts.

The pamphlet has something in common with the concept of the exhibition of crafts "Design — *Wa* (Japanese)" that was held with great success around the world in accordance with the JETRO plan. *Minori* (harvest), *inori* (prayer), *appare* (honorable), *aware* (pathos), *omotenashi* (hospitality), *shitsurai* (furnishings) and other old words are explained with attention to their important details so that associations will be expanded.



*Roots of Japan — Unearthing the Cultural Matrix of Japan* published by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry

**Source:**

[http://www.meti.go.jp/policy/mono\\_info\\_service/mono/creative/OmokageNihon.pdf](http://www.meti.go.jp/policy/mono_info_service/mono/creative/OmokageNihon.pdf)

## From concept to context

A typical example of the successful implementation of a concept is Japanese food. It took many years before flavors not found in Western culinary culture such as soy sauce and raw fish gained a significant foothold. The four characteristics — diversity and freshness of ingredients, a healthy image, visual beauty reflecting nature and a sense of the season, and cuisine to complement annual events — are explained with the background of nature, history, and the culture of Japan, which was persuasive in the campaign for registration of *washoku* on the UNESCO World Heritage List.



Image from *WASHOKU, traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese* (Discuss Japan, No. 18)  
<http://www.japanpolicyforum.jp/archives/culture/pt20140130140607.html>

Take the example of France. France is the world's most popular country with tourists, visited by approximately 84 million foreign tourists each year (according to data for 2015 from the United Nations World Tourism Organization). But tourism was not officially included in the recent national strategy.

Only two years ago Atout France (the organization for the development of tourism in France) was established. Thirty action plans and five priority issue fields were specified. In addition to the traditional scenic and historic areas, it included sightseeing in mountain districts, slow tourism for a long stay to enjoy the traditional lifestyle, indigenous arts and night tourism.

It is possible to come up with equivalent fields for Japan; however, the French way is characterized by the clear intention to make the country of France understood by providing as many concepts as possible to foreigners, specifically what is to be enjoyed and learned.

A concept is not enough to expand the reach of an image. A concept alone cannot provide enough significance. Context or a story is needed.

In this regard, the Japanese characteristic of modesty is disadvantageous. The Japanese way of thinking tends to lead to evaluation by others without self-assessment.

## The ring of Chaumet which took the leading part of a story

Once the female director of the world-famous jewelry shop Chaumet, which was a purveyor to Napoleon, asked me if I knew who was the first Japanese person who bought a diamond ring at their shop.

The name that came to mind at once was Tokugawa Akitake, the younger brother of the last shogun of the Tokugawa shogunate, Yoshinobu. He had stayed for a long time in Paris while visiting Europe and the United States at the end of the Edo period (1603–1867). However, her answer was different. She said that it was Admiral Yamamoto.

Yamamoto Isoroku visited Paris as an attendant for the Paris Peace Conference after World War I. She wanted to say that they helped Japan's activities on the world stage for social discourse as a permanent member of the League of Nations, after it won a victory in World War I, joining the ranks of the advanced Western style nations, growing out of the backward country of kimono culture.

A mere ring from Chaumet played a major role in a grand story linking Western Europe and Asia. If you only said that their products were dramatized, that would be that, but the story made me sense the grandeur of the historical background.

Japan is also fully qualified to tell such a story. It has the culture and history that produced the world's oldest novel, *The Tale of Genji*. It is not impossible that a high appreciation of Japanese culture will be established with respect throughout the world.

There is an international index called the Nation Brand Index, created by Simon Anholt, an independent policy advisor in the United Kingdom. Japan is always listed in the top class of the Index. Six fields, such as exports and governance, are indexed and the rank is determined. Both economic power and culture are important elements.

The culture of a country increases in value with a supporting traditional culture of authority. That is needed at the root of Cool Japan. Japan's Nation Brand will come into being from that said root.

### **For transmission, careful preparation is needed**

The author served as the officer in charge of Public Diplomacy at the Embassy of Japan in France from 2008 to 2010. I have opinions about the transmission of information from Japan. I think that careful preparation is still needed.

With a busy schedule, the Prime Minister of Japan was caught in a traffic jam in a large city and had no choice but to go through the pipe underground at a high speed to visit Rio de Janeiro. That might be possible with the technologies of Japan. In addition, the Prime Minister of an economic power has achieved such a feat as self-effacingly greeting the people around the world with a nervous expression.

That is the success story of Japan, modesty and expectation for casually making the impossible possible cherished by those who see it. From this, a new image of Japan will emerge.

A future issue in the establishment of Japan's Nation Brand is to clarify the concept, define a target, and make a story (context), giving a definite role. Like the director of Chaumet, a farfetched interpretation may also be used. Now Japan can have the attitude to assert the attractiveness of its culture in a context that is understandable to the world.

*Translated from “Cool Japan wa imanomamade iinoka (Shouldn’t Cool Japan Be Changed?),” Fukayomi-Channel (in-depth column)/ Yomiuri Online, 30 September. (Courtesy of Yomiuri Shimbun) [2016 September]*

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Born in 1954. Watanabe specializes in French diplomatic history, analysis of French political diplomacy in the modern age, and theory of Europe including Pan Europe and U.S.-Europe relations. His publications include *Gendai Furansu—Eiko no jidai no shuen, Oshu e no katsuro* (Contemporary France — The end of the postwar boom and the opening to Europe), *Charles de Gaulle* and *Furansu gaiko senryaku ni manabu* (Studying from the French cultural diplomatic strategy).

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