

Minka Architecture as a Tool for Japan's Cultural Diplomacy: Strengthening Soft Power through Heritage Tourism

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the function of minka, traditional Japanese folk dwellings, as a tool of cultural diplomacy in enhancing Japan's national soft power through heritage tourism. This research analyzes the role of marketing and preservation of Minka in developing Japan's cultural charm on the international stage, using Joseph Nye's concept of soft power. A qualitative descriptive method is used in this study, examining government documents and academic literature, showing that Minka are authentic cultural assets that differentiate Japan's tourism reputation. The Agency for Cultural Affairs and the Japan Tourism Agency have cooperated to strategically position Minka within Japan's public diplomacy architecture. This research shows that Minka functions as a diplomatic tool that shapes cross-cultural understanding and strengthens Japan's national reputation building, in addition to being architectural heritage.

Keywords: *Cultural Diplomacy, Heritage Tourism, Japan, Minka, Soft Power.*

INTRODUCTION

States seek to shape people's perceptions worldwide by captivating them with their country's charm rather than using coercion, which makes soft power more significant in international relations. Joseph Nye (2004) explains that soft power is a state's ability to shape the preferences of others through non-physical means, such as culture, political principles, and foreign policy. "Cool Japan" (McGray, 2002) is a famous example of how Japan has used its cultural resources to enhance its image worldwide. Japan's brilliant post-World War II survival has made it one of the richest countries in the world, with continuously growing economic and industrial growth (Haryanti, 2013); this cultural impact is grounded in that. Japan has been able to spend large sums of money marketing its culture because of its strong economy. Although modern pop culture exports receive much enthusiasm, Japan's traditional cultural heritage remains an important part of its soft power (Watanabe & McConnell, 2008).

Modern diplomacy is no longer specific to nation-states. Van der Pluijm and Melissen (2007) explain that city diplomacy is a way to delegate how international relations are managed together, with mayors and city governments

becoming important diplomatic actors. Marchetti (2021) explains that local government institutions enhance social utility because of their proximity to citizens, making them capable media for cultural diplomacy. This perspective is highly up-to-date for understanding how Japanese rural communities, such as those preserving Shirakawa-go and other Minka villages, participate in cultural diplomacy through heritage tourism. The contribution of local actors in preserving and promoting traditional architecture represents that diplomatic functions can be carried out effectively at the sub-national level, thereby enhancing central government initiatives (Putri, 2022).

Minka, or traditional folk dwellings, are an authentic part of Japan's cultural heritage that showcase how the country appreciates beauty and how people lived in the past. Minka are made from ancient structures of wood and other natural elements, depicting how people made things traditionally and regional differences (Jimura, 2022). Despite their historical significance, minka are threatened by economic modernization and demographic changes in rural Japan. However, in recent years there have been increasing initiatives to protect and repurpose historic structures as living cultural assets that become part of heritage tourism.

Cultural diplomacy can be effectively accelerated at the intersection of tourism and heritage conservation. Urry (2002) states that tourism serves as a medium for cross-cultural exchange, as it involves the consumption of place and culture through the "tourist gaze." When international visitors engage with Minka by staying in renovated farmhouses or exploring open-air museums, they participate in the local cultural wisdom built by Japan, shaping viewpoints about a nation that values harmony and tradition (Jimura, 2022).

This paper examines "How does Japanese cultural diplomacy through heritage tourism utilize Minka architecture as a tool?" This research uses a qualitative analysis of academic literature and official documents, focusing on 2010–2024, during which Japan's tourism sector experienced substantial growth (Japan Tourism Agency, 2023).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Nye (2004) coined the idea of "soft power," which differs from "hard power" because it focuses on co-optation rather than coercion. A country's culture, political views, and policies can attract people from other countries without using force. After the stagnant economy of the 1990s, Japanese foreign policy reoriented toward cultural resources as an influential source (Otmazgin, 2012; Watanabe & McConnell, 2008). Soft power has become an important part of this policy. Cultural diplomacy is the utilization of cultural resources to enhance mutual understanding and strengthen relations between countries (Ang, Isar, & Mar, 2015). Cultural diplomacy, unlike commercial cultural exports, is often supported by governments and aims for beneficial long-term goals. Japan's Agency for Cultural Affairs promotes cultural diplomacy by supporting Japanese language education abroad and the protection of cultural properties (Agency for Cultural Affairs, 2023). Japan's annual Diplomatic Bluebook by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2022) states that cultural exchange is also part of its diplomatic policy.

Operating heritage tourism, or pilgrimage travel focused on visiting places that showcase the historic past, makes these activities a major business opportunity worldwide (Timothy & Boyd, 2003). Poria, Butler, and Airey (2003) reveal that heritage travel is not just about visiting the sites themselves but about how visitors genuinely feel and interact with the cultural heritage they visit. The UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2022) states that heritage tourism accounts for about 40% of international arrivals. This shows how important heritage tourism is both culturally and economically. Heritage tourism has diplomatic purposes; Suntikul (2018) states that tourism drives "people-to-people diplomacy," which can support or challenge national views. Using tourism infrastructure and heritage protection, governments invest funds to build a reputation visible worldwide. Japan intentionally identifies historic sites as cultural assets and cultural branding through its national tourism agency (Jimura, 2022).

Minka from the Edo period (1603-1868) are typical Japanese farmhouses made from natural materials such as wooden pillars, tatami floors, and thatched roofs (kayabuki) found locally. Japan uses these materials because they refer to the principles of appreciating harmony with nature and simplicity (Jimura, 2022). Minka shows the simplicity of the physical conditions where ordinary people lived and settled in the era before the industrial revolution, in contrast to castles or temples that use magnificent and monumental architecture. Preservation dynamics received more attention in the mid-20th century because post-war development threatened these buildings. Open-air museums such as the Hida Folk Village in Takayama and the Nihon Minka-en in Kawasaki were among the first initiatives to preserve

something (Jimura, 2022). By repurposing minka as tourist facilities, minka have become popular places among visitors because minka provide a unique travel experience, besides helping rural communities increase income.

Heritage sites are visited by many tourists, and they change how people think about local cultural wisdom. Cultural experience in national socialization shows that Japan's approach to heritage tourism aligns with the Japan Tourism Agency's "Visit Japan" campaign using images of traditional buildings like Minka to promote Japan (Japan Tourism Agency, 2023). "Nation branding" (Anholt, 2007) makes it easier to understand how heritage tourism helps a country manage its reputation to enhance its competitive identity. Minka are national characteristics that differentiate Japan from other Asian tourist destinations. In Otmazgin's (2012) opinion, the impact emerging across Asia by combining traditional and popular culture is an act of Japanese diplomacy. Wang (1999) distinguishes between existential authenticity (authenticity of experience) and objective authenticity (original authenticity) because the idea of authenticity is very important in heritage tourism. Minka are original historic buildings that give tourists a taste of Japanese culture as in the past. They show how Japanese people lived their daily lives.

METHODOLOGY

This research utilizes a qualitative descriptive research method to examine the importance of Minka architecture in Japanese cultural diplomacy through heritage tourism. The qualitative approach accommodates an in-depth exploration of complex social phenomena, including policy structures and cultural significance (Creswell, 2014; Aspers & Corte, 2019). This research uses secondary data from various sources, including government publications such as official documents from the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2022), the Japan Tourism Agency (2023), and the Agency for Cultural Affairs (2023), analyzing the systematic work for tourism promotion and heritage preservation. Additionally, primary sources include academic publications by Nye (2004), Anholt (2007), Otmazgin (2012), Jimura (2022), and journal articles on Google Scholar as well as other peer-reviewed academic books on soft power, cultural diplomacy, heritage tourism, and Japanese architecture. Case study materials from UNESCO (2023) and other credible sources, including Shirakawa-go and Nihon Minka-en, provide insights into Minka preservation activities, while tourism statistics from the Japan Tourism Agency (2023) and UNWTO (2022) align the impact of heritage tourism.

To find patterns in Minka's diplomatic function, Japanese institutional strategies, and heritage tourism project outcomes, this research uses thematic analysis of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This research combines Anholt's idea of nation branding (2007) with Nye's idea of soft power (2004). As a cultural asset, Minka is assessed as a tool triggering soft power growth manifested through international tourist attraction, enhanced cross-cultural understanding, and the dissemination of positive features of Japanese culture. Wang's (1999) framework of authenticity and Poria et al.'s (2003) research on heritage tourist experiences offer further theoretical support. Secondary data is used in this library-based research, which is considered a weakness compared to using primary sources. Additionally, the neglect of relevant Japanese-language studies may occur due to the prioritization of English-language sources.

DISCUSSION

Japan's Soft Power: Minka as Cultural Assets

For Japanese cultural diplomacy, Minka architecture is highly needed. Minka offers a more exclusive view of Japanese culture than famous symbols like Mount Fuji or geisha. For visitors seeking authentic experiences, visiting minka is a very attractive activity (Wang, 1999; Jimura, 2022). The authenticity and wisdom of Minka come from the fact that they were originally ordinary dwellings showing how ordinary Japanese people lived.

Jimura (2022) presents a comprehensive analysis of the preservation and utilization of traditional Japanese architecture, showing that minka are intended for tourism purposes. These buildings are highly adapted to local climates and materials. For example, they have thick thatched roofs for insulation, raised floors for ventilation, and sliding doors (fusuma) for flexible spaces. These characteristics have become shorthand for Japanese ingenuity and living in harmony with nature, values that are increasingly popular in other countries.

Minka has been featured by the Japanese government in cultural diplomacy programs. Cultural assets are preserved and promoted by the Agency for Cultural Affairs through storytelling from various parts of the world (Agency for Cultural Affairs, 2023). Shirakawa-go and Gokayama are two Minka-related sites that have been UNESCO World Heritage Sites since 1995. More than 1.5 million visitors per year, including many from abroad, are received by these two sites (UNESCO, 2023).

The Use of Heritage Tourism as a Tool for Cultural Diplomacy

The diplomatic role of tourism has been recognized by international relations academics. Meetings between hosts and guests are born through tourism, therefore barriers that arise will disappear, making opportunities for communication with people from other cultures easier (Suntikul, 2018). Minka-based tourism in Japan gives foreign visitors the opportunity to see traditional ways of life directly or realistically by letting visitors socialize with local residents.

A good example of this dynamic is shown through staying in renovated historic houses. The relationship between international visitors and Japanese culture through traditional accommodation in rural Japan is discussed by Jimura (2022). Visitor participation in daily activities is allowed so that impacts can be continuously created and their perspectives of Japan as a country that values community and tradition can be changed.

Wang's (1999) account of authenticity in tourism states that tourists are motivated to deepen more meaningful relationships in their search for authentic experiences. Traditional hotels meet this requirement by offering more than just a place to stay. They create what Wang calls "existential authenticity."

Data that before the pandemic cultural experiences were more followed by foreign tourists is presented by the Japan Tourism Agency (2023), where traditional accommodation became one of the top five most popular activities. After the pandemic, there has been an increase in interest in heritage-based and rural tourism.

Policies and Strategies of the Government

Japan has thought about their policies very carefully to demonstrate their country's soft power through minka. The Japan Tourism Agency explains in its annual Tourism White Paper that cultural resources are important for attracting foreign tourists and enhancing global reputation (Japan Tourism Agency, 2023). These rules strongly emphasize creating tourism experiences that showcase traditional culture and regional diversity, including vernacular architecture.

The Diplomatic Bluebook is used by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to incorporate heritage tourism into public diplomacy. The Bluebook lists cultural exchange programs and ways to promote Japan abroad (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2022). As part of campaigns organized by Japanese embassies worldwide, promotional materials targeting potential tourists feature traditional architecture.

A financial support system is very important. The Japan Tourism Agency provides funds to improve tourism infrastructure in heritage areas, and the Agency for Cultural Affairs provides funds to protect cultural sites through the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties (Agency for Cultural Affairs, 2023). It is stated by Otmazgin (2012) that Japanese cultural diplomacy is an arrangement to demonstrate soft power, because government efforts and private sector participation are united within it.

Examples of Cases

Shirakawa-go, located in Gifu Prefecture, features Gassho-zukuri farmhouses, or houses with a roof style like hands in prayer. In Shirakawa-go, there is a collection of the most famous minka in Japan, which has become an icon for ancient Japan. The UNESCO decision attracted international attention, and tourist numbers grew continuously over the past ten years (UNESCO, 2023). That this heritage site can meet global demand while staying true to its roots is shown through the use of sustainable tourism techniques, including bilingual guided tours and advance reservation systems (Jimura, 2022).

Nihon Minka-en in Kanagawa Prefecture is an open-air museum that protects Minka, traditional Japanese houses relocated from various locations across Japan. It is an educational place offering building tours, seasonal festivals, and lessons on traditional crafts. A wide variety of architecture is easily accessible to international tourists who want to see it because of its location near Tokyo (Jimura, 2022).

Challenges

Although cultural diplomacy through minka has several successes, it is also possible that there are several difficulties. Rural depopulation and aging certainly endanger the human infrastructure that supports Minka-based tourism. When young people move to cities, they may lose skills they learned about how to care for their historic buildings (Jimura, 2022).

There is also a problem because commercialization and preservation conflict. Wang (1999) warns that too many tourists visiting can damage the authenticity that attracts them, leading to what academics call "staged authenticity," when traditions are performed for tourists instead of being genuinely practiced. It is stated by Timothy and Boyd (2003) that to maintain a balance between accessibility and security of an object, careful handling and community involvement are necessary.

Japan competes with other countries that use their cultural heritage as a type of soft power. China's promotion of ancient towns, European rural heritage tourism, and South Korea's preservation of hanok (traditional dwellings) and their integration into tourism compete for foreign cultural tourists (Otmazgin, 2012).

Soft Power Theory's Consequences

The findings show that vernacular heritage functions as a diplomatic asset, thereby reinforcing the idea of soft power. High cultural and political values are emphasized in the initial formulation by Nye (2004). However, considerable potential for soft power in everyday heritage is shown in this research supported by Jimura (2022) and Otmazgin (2012), especially because of tourists' increasing desire for authentic experiences (Wang, 1999).

This research underscores "experience diplomacy" as a refinement of traditional cultural diplomacy. International visitors help shape how people perceive Japan by staying in traditional dwellings, attending local events, and talking with local residents. Interpersonal conversations are triggered by this interaction, culminating in significant changes in international attitudes (Suntikul, 2018).

The different backgrounds and perspectives of tourists are contributed to cultural sites, so heritage tourism experiences become subjective and personal according to Poria et al. (2003). Because of this subjectivity, the diplomatic outcomes of heritage tourism vary depending on how tourists interpret and integrate their experiences.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This research has analyzed the significance of Minka architecture in Japanese cultural diplomacy through heritage tourism. The many diplomatic roles of Minka are shown through analysis using the ideas of Nye (2004), Anholt (2007), Jimura (2022), and other experts. First, Japan's tourism brand is differentiated from other Asian countries through this authentic cultural asset. Second, the function as a meeting place and idea-sharing forum for people from other cultures is performed by Minka, where Japanese culture and way of life can be directly experienced by people from other countries. Third, important Japanese ideals such as living peacefully with nature, cooperating as a community, and appreciating traditional craftsmanship are represented by Minka. These findings show that the Japanese government has intentionally integrated Minka into its cultural diplomacy strategy through various policy initiatives, financial support systems, and promotional efforts, as evidenced by reports from the Agency for Cultural Affairs (2023), Japan Tourism Agency (2023), and Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2022). An effective way to attract foreign visitors seeking meaningful cultural experiences has been found through adapting Minka for use as tourist accommodation and museum displays. Furthermore, keeping this heritage alive and active depends heavily on local community involvement.

This research also shows that there are several problems that make it more difficult to use Minka for cultural

diplomacy. Rural population decline and aging population endanger the human infrastructure supporting Minka-based tourism. This is because young people move to cities, which means that knowledge of traditional building maintenance may be lost (Jimura, 2022). An ongoing problem is also found due to the conflict between preservation and commercialization. A warning is given by Wang (1999) that the authenticity that attracts visitors can be destabilized by overtourism, this leads to what academics call "staged authenticity," where traditions are performed for tourists instead of being genuinely implemented. Japan must also face more competition from other countries using their cultural heritage as a form of soft power. For example, South Korea preserves hanok and uses them in tourism, China promotes ancient towns, and Europe initiates rural heritage tourism programs (Otmazgin, 2012). To solve these problems, many different groups need to work together and find new ways to manage heritage.

A number of recommendations for policymakers, heritage managers, and other stakeholders are directed by these findings. First, as suggested by Jimura (2022), engagement in training programs should be carried out by government agencies to provide the skills needed by rural communities to preserve traditions and welcome international tourists. Second, sustainable tourism models should be created at heritage sites using carrying capacity assessments and visitor management systems to stop overtourism and maintain authenticity, as stated by Timothy and Boyd (2003).

Third, the international promotion of Minka should be further enhanced by the Japan Tourism Agency and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs through their continuous inclusion in campaigns targeted at cultural tourism markets (Japan Tourism Agency, 2023). Fourth, collaboration to document Minka preservation methods and their tourism impacts should be established by universities and cultural organizations to expand the framework already created by Poria et al. (2003). Fifth, cross-sector collaboration should be encouraged by all parties through the formation of partnerships between tourism agencies, cultural institutions, the private sector, and local communities for the development of creative heritage diplomacy strategies (Suntikul, 2018).

Future Research

Significant insights will be generated through comparative research that analyzes the utilization of vernacular architecture for cultural diplomacy in various countries. Understanding of how heritage generates soft power will be enhanced through empirical studies that include interviews with policymakers, tourism operators, and international visitors. Furthermore, further research is needed to produce the best ways to manage the balance between preservation and commercialization.

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