

From Anime to Digital Games: Japanese Cultural Diplomacy in the Perspective of International Relations

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ABSTRACT

Popular culture has become an increasingly visible part of state diplomacy, although its role in International Relations is still not examined as systematically as military or economic power. This article discusses how Japan employs anime and digital games as instruments of cultural diplomacy and soft power. Using a qualitative approach, the analysis draws on policy documents, media reports, and selected cases interpreted through soft power theory and constructivism. The discussion shows that the international circulation of Japanese popular culture initially developed through fan communities and commercial networks before being incorporated into state-led programs such as the Cool Japan Initiative. Anime and games contribute to nation branding, support the reconstruction of Japan's post-war identity, and generate substantial economic value. Their influence, however, is not unlimited. Historical tensions with China and Korea, competition from other Asian cultural industries, and dependence on global digital platforms continue to shape their diplomatic reach. Digital games are especially important because players do not merely watch a representation of Japan; they interact with narratives, characters, and values over time. The article therefore argues that cultural industries should be understood as both economic assets and practical instruments of contemporary diplomacy.

Keywords: *Soft Power, Cultural Diplomacy, Cool Japan, Anime, Digital Games*

INTRODUCTION

Power in international relations is no longer assessed only through military capability or economic size. Global media and digital communication have made attraction increasingly relevant to the way states build influence. Joseph Nye describes this capacity as soft power: the ability to shape the preferences of others through appeal rather than coercion. Its sources include culture, political values, and foreign policies that are regarded as legitimate. This form of influence does not replace hard power, but it helps explain why public perceptions of a country can affect cooperation, tourism, investment, and diplomatic support.

Japan provides a useful case for examining this shift. After its defeat in the Second World War, the country rebuilt its economy under a pacifist constitutional framework and gradually developed an international identity distinct from its wartime image. Economic stagnation during the 1990s also encouraged policymakers to look beyond the manufacturing sectors that had previously driven national growth. Anime, manga, music, fashion, and digital games were already attracting overseas audiences, so these cultural products offered both commercial opportunities and a less confrontational channel of international engagement. Their promotion helped Japan present itself as creative, technologically advanced, and accessible to younger generations.

The overseas popularity of Japanese media did not begin as a government project. For many years, anime and games circulated through television licensing, retail markets, fan clubs, conventions, and informal translation communities. Once this popularity became visible, the Japanese government began to treat it as a diplomatic and economic resource. The Cool Japan framework brought several ministries into efforts to support cultural exports, tourism, intellectual property, and public diplomacy. The underlying expectation was straightforward: repeated positive encounters with Japanese culture could strengthen familiarity with Japan and, over time, improve the environment for economic and diplomatic relations.

Assessing this strategy requires attention to more than the content itself. Production conditions, intellectual property ownership, distribution platforms, fan practices, and political reception all influence whether a cultural product generates lasting diplomatic value. Franchises such as Pokémon and Mario illustrate how creative intellectual property can connect entertainment, merchandise, tourism, and technology. Streaming services, online communities, esports, and virtual events have further changed public diplomacy from a largely one-way form of communication into a more participatory experience. This study traces the development of Japan's cultural diplomacy, examines its reception in Indonesia, considers the interactive role of digital games, and discusses the economic, institutional, and geopolitical limits of this approach.

In Indonesia, Japanese popular culture has established a deeply rooted presence across diverse social strata. From broad television broadcasts of anime in the 1990s to contemporary cosplay conventions and gaming tournaments in major urban centers like Jakarta, Bandung, and Surabaya, Indonesian audiences have actively consumed and re-interpreted these cultural goods. Interactive digital games and mobile platforms further amplify this engagement by transforming passive viewers into active participants. Through shared virtual environments, cross-cultural online communities thrive, fostering emotional resonance and building a highly favorable public image of Japan among younger demographics.

However, relying on cultural diplomacy exposes clear structural and geopolitical limitations. Commercial objectives within the "Cool Japan" strategy do not always align neatly with diplomatic priorities, and bureaucratic friction across ministries can weaken policy execution. Furthermore, soft power alone cannot automatically resolve historical sensitivities or hard-power geopolitical tensions in East and Southeast Asia. Ultimately, while cultural attraction serves as a valuable tool for building international goodwill, its diplomatic efficacy remains deeply dependent on how well it is integrated alongside credible foreign policy actions, mutually beneficial economic ties, and sustained bilateral cooperation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The analysis combines constructivism, soft power, and the concept of banal nationalism. Constructivist scholars such as Alexander Wendt, Peter Katzenstein, and Martha Finnemore argue that international politics is shaped not

only by material capabilities but also by shared ideas, norms, and identities. From this perspective, national interests are not fixed in advance. They are interpreted through social experience and through the identity a state develops in relation to others. Cultural diplomacy matters because it can influence those interpretations without relying on formal negotiation or coercion.

Japan's post-war transformation can be read in these terms. The country had to manage the political consequences of defeat and the continuing memory of occupation in East and Southeast Asia. Its later emphasis on pacifism, economic cooperation, technology, and cultural exchange was therefore part of a broader reconstruction of national identity. Popular culture did not erase the past, but it introduced other images of Japan into everyday international life. Anime characters, consumer technology, food, fashion, and games increasingly became part of how foreign audiences encountered the country.

This process also relates to banal nationalism, in which national identity is reproduced through ordinary and often unnoticed cultural practices. Anime and manga rarely function as direct political messages, yet they repeatedly present Japanese names, landscapes, food, social customs, and aesthetic conventions. Because these elements are embedded in entertainment, audiences may engage with them without the resistance that often accompanies official propaganda. Cultural familiarity is therefore built gradually rather than through a single diplomatic campaign.

Soft power provides the second part of the framework. Nye identifies culture, political values, and foreign policy as major sources of attraction. Japan's anime, manga, and digital games represent the cultural dimension most clearly. Their diplomatic relevance depends, however, on credibility and reception. A popular character may encourage curiosity about Japan, but it cannot automatically produce agreement with Japanese policy. The concept is most useful when attraction is treated as a resource whose political effects remain conditional.

Popular media can create what scholars describe as "synthetic experiences": encounters with places and societies that audiences may never visit directly. Through repeated viewing or play, foreign audiences become familiar with Japanese settings, social relations, food, language, and moral themes. These mediated experiences help form expectations about Japan, sometimes more strongly than official statements do. Public diplomacy can build on this familiarity through festivals, language programs, exhibitions, and educational exchange. The connection between cultural consumption and political support is not automatic, but positive cultural associations may make communication and cooperation easier.

Ultimately, the intersection of constructivism, banal nationalism, and soft power underscores that international influence is a two-way, dynamic process. In contemporary digital culture, audiences do not merely consume representations of Japan; they actively interpret, adapt, and integrate them into their own daily lives. Interactive platforms, fan-created content, and online gaming environments further transform these cultural exchanges from passive encounters into participatory relationships. This active involvement strengthens the subtle mechanisms of banal nationalism, making Japanese cultural motifs an enduring fixture in the global imaginary.

However, state strategy must recognize the inherent limits of relying on cultural appeal. While soft power can foster goodwill, soften diplomatic friction, and build long-term trust, it cannot overwrite geopolitical realities or hard national interests. A comprehensive foreign policy requires alignment between soft power narratives and concrete state actions. Thus, Japan's cultural diplomacy succeeds not by replacing traditional statecraft, but by creating an underlying environment of familiarity and mutual respect within which strategic, economic, and political partnerships can more effectively take root.

DISCUSSION

The Evolution of Cultural Diplomacy Policy: From Organic Diffusion to Systematized Strategy

Japan's present cultural diplomacy emerged through a gradual shift rather than a single policy decision. Popular culture first expanded through markets and fan activity; government institutions later attempted to organize that momentum under the Cool Japan framework.

From the 1980s to the early 2000s, much of the international spread of Japanese popular culture occurred outside official diplomatic channels. Television broadcasters, import stores, convention organizers, and fan communities introduced anime and games to new audiences. Volunteer translators and fansub groups also filled gaps when licensed

versions were unavailable. The expansion of broadband internet later changed this pattern. Streaming services and digital stores made legal access easier, but they also placed distribution in the hands of large platforms. Discovery now depends heavily on recommendation systems, licensing decisions, and regional catalogues. These platforms do not simply deliver Japanese content; they influence which titles become visible and how audiences consume them.

The scale of this distribution is reflected in the market figures cited in this study. In 2023, North American revenue from Japanese anime broadcasting and distribution reportedly exceeded USD 1.2 billion. China was also described as a major destination for Japanese anime exports, while Crunchyroll reported 13 million subscribers, most of them outside Japan. Netflix, meanwhile, expanded its anime catalogue through substantial licensing investment. Although the figures come from different sources and should not be treated as directly comparable, they point to the same development: digital platforms have become essential infrastructure for the overseas reach of Japanese cultural products.

The Japanese government responded by giving the content sector a more central place in economic and foreign-policy planning. METI and other agencies increasingly treated anime, manga, games, film, and music as industries with strategic value rather than as secondary entertainment exports. Recent policy documents describe the content industry as a “base industry,” reflecting its contribution to intellectual property revenue, employment, tourism, and international visibility.

This policy shift is supported by the rapid growth of overseas content sales. The creative sector now generates revenue on a scale comparable to several established manufacturing industries. Its significance is not limited to export earnings: successful intellectual properties also support merchandising, cinema, tourism, advertising, and digital services. Japan’s position as one of the world’s largest content producers therefore gives the sector both economic and diplomatic importance.

Table 1 compares the reported overseas value of the content industry with several major Japanese manufacturing sectors. As illustrated in Table 1, the creative content sector has established an overseas financial footprint that rivals established manufacturing industries such as steel and basic materials. While heavy machinery and automotive exports maintain larger absolute revenue figures, the content industry exhibits distinct economic advantages, including lower physical distribution overhead and higher intellectual property profit margins. Unlike physical goods, digital media and intellectual property can be reproduced and distributed globally at minimal marginal cost, allowing Japanese creative franchises to generate long-term, multi-tiered revenue streams through streaming, gaming, and character licensing.

However, converting commercial success into enduring diplomatic influence poses complex institutional challenges. State-led initiatives under the Cool Japan framework have frequently faced criticism for bureaucratic friction and a disconnect from organic consumer trends. While governmental support plays a vital role in protecting intellectual property rights and facilitating international access, top-down management risks diluting the creative authenticity that originally attracted foreign audiences. This ongoing tension demonstrates that while state policy can construct the infrastructure for cultural export, soft power ultimately relies on bottom-up appeal and genuine engagement that cannot be manufactured through official channels.

In summary, recognizing the creative sector as a primary economic pillar marks a fundamental evolution in Japanese foreign strategy. By positioning creative media alongside established industrial exports, policymakers have institutionalized soft power as an integral element of national competitiveness. As global media becomes increasingly digital, Japan’s capacity to maintain this momentum will depend on supporting creative industries without constraining the fan-driven networks that drove their initial global reach.

Table 1. Japan's Content Industry and Selected Manufacturing Sectors

Export Industry Sector	Export / Overseas Sales Value	Strategic Significance
Automotive Industry	~ ¥21.6 trillion	Japan's largest export sector and a major source of foreign-exchange earnings.
Content Industry (Anime, Digital Games, Manga)	~ ¥5.8 trillion (approximately USD 37.3 billion)	Overseas sales have reportedly tripled in a decade, making the sector an important source of export revenue and cultural visibility.
Semiconductor Industry	~ ¥5.5–5.7 trillion	A historically important technology sector whose reported overseas value is now comparable to that of the content industry.
Steel Industry	~ ¥5.1 trillion	An established manufacturing sector with slower reported growth than the digital content industry.
Source: Compiled by the authors from the references listed in this article.		

The comparison indicates that cultural products have become a substantial part of Japan's external economy. Franchises such as Pokémon, Hello Kitty, and Super Mario generate revenue across several markets at once, including games, film, publishing, licensing, and merchandise. Their diplomatic value comes from the same broad circulation: the characters remain visible in everyday consumer culture, while the income they generate strengthens the domestic creative economy. Soft power in this setting is therefore connected to commercial structures rather than operating separately from them.

Japan revised this approach through the New Cool Japan Strategy in 2024. The document was introduced at a time of sharper United States–China rivalry and wider geopolitical uncertainty. It frames the growth of overseas interest in

Japan, including the expansion of “Japan fans,” as relevant not only to exports and tourism but also to the country’s international resilience. The strategy thus links cultural attraction more explicitly with national economic and security interests.

The updated framework seeks to create a cycle in which successful intellectual property generates overseas revenue and part of that value returns to domestic creators. It also highlights long-standing problems such as poor working conditions, piracy, fragmented administration, and the need to adopt new technologies. Public–private cooperation is expected to improve copyright protection and market development, while coordination among the Cabinet Office, METI, and MOFA is intended to reduce policy overlap. In practice, the strategy will depend on whether these institutions can translate market information into support that reaches creators as well as large rights-holding companies.

Anime as a Diplomatic Instrument and Visual "Nation Branding"

One of the most visible features of Japan’s cultural diplomacy is its use of fictional characters in official campaigns. This approach draws on the familiarity audiences already have with popular media and turns that recognition into a form of nation branding.

In 2008, MOFA appointed Doraemon as Japan’s first Anime Ambassador. The character’s broad recognition made it possible to introduce Japanese culture to audiences who might not attend a conventional diplomatic event. As part of the initiative, *Doraemon the Movie: Nobita’s Dinosaur 2006* was translated into several languages and screened through Japanese diplomatic missions. The campaign linked a familiar children’s character with themes of technology, friendship, and contemporary Japanese culture.

A similar strategy appeared in the promotion of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. During the closing ceremony of the Rio 2016 Olympics, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe appeared dressed as Super Mario, connecting the Japanese government with one of the country’s best-known game franchises. Characters including Son Goku, Naruto, Monkey D. Luffy, and Sailor Moon were also used as promotional icons. These examples show how official diplomacy and commercial fiction can overlap: audiences recognize the characters first, while the state benefits from the modern and approachable image attached to them.

Anime is therefore more than a cultural export. It is part of an industrial and diplomatic network through which Japan presents itself as creative, technologically capable, and socially accessible. Its effectiveness still depends on the credibility of that image and on the way different audiences interpret it.

The strategic deployment of fictional characters operates through what media theorists refer to as “character diplomacy.” Unlike traditional state ambassadors, fictional icons carry minimal political baggage, historical controversy, or overt ideological posturing. Instead, they evoke nostalgia, innocence, and shared emotional connections often formed during childhood. When figures like Doraemon, Mario, or Hello Kitty are mobilized in official diplomatic settings, they effectively bridge the gap between formal state communication and everyday popular consciousness. Foreign audiences rarely perceive these campaigns as heavy-handed state propaganda; rather, they experience a familiar sense of warmth, creativity, and playfulness. This emotional resonance enables Japan to project an international identity that feels unthreatening and broadly accessible across varied cultural and geopolitical landscapes.

Furthermore, the multi-layered appeal of these characters allows for tailored public engagement across different regional contexts. In Southeast Asia, for example, where series like *Doraemon* and *Dragon Ball* have enjoyed decades of continuous television broadcast, these characters function as cross-generational cultural touchstones. In North America and Europe, franchises like *Pokémon* and *Sailor Moon* serve as gateways to broader gaming and anime fandoms. Japanese embassies, cultural institutions, and trade delegations routinely leverage these pop-culture icons to host exhibitions, language competitions, and community events. By aligning public diplomacy with pre-existing fan enthusiasm, the state can attract younger demographics who might otherwise remain indifferent to traditional bilateral relations.

However, relying on commercial intellectual property for nation branding also introduces structural limitations and diplomatic risks. Because these characters remain private corporate assets, official campaigns must navigate

intricate copyright regulations, licensing agreements, and commercial interests that do not always align with public diplomacy goals. Furthermore, there is a risk of infantilizing statecraft or over-simplifying national identity. While character branding creates a welcoming public image, it cannot fully mask complex domestic challenges, historical grievances, or controversial foreign policy decisions. If a government's political actions diverge significantly from the peaceful, cooperative values embodied by its fictional ambassadors, the soft power accumulated through media recognition can quickly erode.

Ultimately, the integration of fictional icons into Japan's international outreach highlights a modern synthesis of media power, corporate branding, and public statecraft. By transforming popular entertainment into diplomatic capital, Japan has established an innovative blueprint for soft-power projection in the digital age. The long-term efficacy of this approach will depend on maintaining a balanced alignment between the charming narratives of commercial fiction and the authentic, constructive reality of Japan's international relations.

Case Study of Cultural Diplomacy Effectiveness in Southeast Asia: Penetration in Indonesia

The effects of Cool Japan differ across regions because cultural reception is shaped by local history and existing relations with Japan. Southeast Asia, and Indonesia in particular, has become one of the most active settings for Japanese cultural exchange.

Indonesia is important to Japan for historical, economic, and strategic reasons. Wartime memory remains part of the bilateral relationship, but decades of trade, development cooperation, education, and cultural exchange have created additional points of contact. The Japanese Embassy, the Japan Foundation, private companies, and local partners support events such as Anime Festival Asia and Jak-Japan Matsuri. These activities provide spaces where audiences encounter Japanese music, food, language, fashion, technology, and popular media outside formal diplomatic meetings.

Jak-Japan Matsuri illustrates the combination of cultural and commercial objectives. Performances and community activities encourage cultural exchange, while corporate exhibitions and product promotion support market development. The festival's importance lies less in a single sales outcome than in the repeated contact it creates between Japanese organizations and Indonesian audiences.

Fan communities reinforce this process at the grassroots level. Cosplay events, manga readership, anime streaming, and interest in J-Pop create social networks that are not directed entirely by the state. The Japan Foundation's language-learning data cited in this study also suggests a strong interest in Japanese among Indonesian learners. Such interest cannot be attributed to popular culture alone, but media consumption often provides an initial reason to study the language or participate in exchange programs.

JKT48 offers another example of cultural adaptation. Created as a sister group to AKB48, it did not simply reproduce the Japanese model in Indonesia. The group used Indonesian members, language, media practices, and fan interaction to create a locally recognizable form of Japanese popular culture. This hybrid format reduced the distance between producer and audience and helped associate Japan with contemporary youth culture rather than only with historical or economic relations.

Language diplomacy complements these commercial and fan-based activities. Through the NIHONGO Partners program, Japanese language assistants and cultural facilitators work with schools across Southeast Asia. Programs of this kind create direct person-to-person contact and may produce deeper relationships than media consumption alone. Taken together, festivals, fan communities, hybrid entertainment, and language education form a broad cultural bridge that supports Japan's long-term presence in Indonesia.

In recent years, digital interactive media and the gaming industry have further expanded this cultural bridge. Popular Japanese game franchises and mobile platforms have found a massive and highly engaged audience among Indonesian youth. Online streaming services, esports tournaments, and virtual communities allow Indonesian fans to actively participate in global gaming cultures while regularly interacting with Japanese creative intellectual property. Unlike static media consumption, gaming offers an interactive environment where players build shared experiences and social connections. This participatory element deepens the sense of familiarity, embedding Japanese visual aesthetics, narrative structures, and technological innovation into the everyday digital lives of young Indonesians.

The cumulative result of these multi-tiered cultural encounters is a favorable socio-cultural environment that supports broader bilateral cooperation. High levels of cultural affinity and positive public perception among Indonesians serve as a diplomatic asset, easing economic negotiations and fostering trust. This soft power dividend translates into tangible benefits, including sustained foreign direct investment, infrastructure partnerships, and growing tourism between both countries. Furthermore, positive cultural exposure encourages human resource mobility, inspiring Indonesian students and skilled workers to pursue educational and professional opportunities in Japan. Cultural diplomacy thus serves as an effective multiplier, reinforcing political and economic ties through sustained societal goodwill.

However, Japan's cultural strategy in Indonesia operates within a competitive and evolving regional environment. The rapid global expansion of South Korean popular culture—including K-pop, drama series, and cosmetics—presents significant competition for the attention of Indonesian consumers. Furthermore, cultural diplomats and media producers must navigate local religious and social norms to ensure that exported content remains culturally appropriate and respectful. Despite these challenges, Japan's approach in Indonesia illustrates the strength of a multi-faceted soft power framework. By combining official public diplomacy with commercial flexibility, localized adaptation, and grass-roots fan engagement, Japan has built an enduring cultural foundation that continues to enrich its strategic partnership with Indonesia.

Digital Games: Interactive Soft Power, Gamification, and Geopolitical Significance

Digital games add an interactive dimension to Japan's cultural diplomacy. Anime presents stories to viewers, whereas games require players to make decisions, learn rules, and spend extended periods inside designed worlds. Through those worlds, players encounter Japanese approaches to character design, storytelling, technology, social relationships, and space. Games are therefore cultural artifacts as well as commercial products.

Their influence is strengthened by sustained participation. Progress systems, challenges, and rewards encourage players to return, while online communities extend the experience beyond the game itself. This repeated engagement can produce familiarity with a franchise and, indirectly, with the country associated with it. The effect should not be reduced to a biological reward mechanism; it also depends on narrative, community, memory, and personal experience.

Companies such as Nintendo, Sony Interactive Entertainment, and Square Enix have given Japan a strong position in the global game industry. Their franchises travel across language and political boundaries because they combine recognizable characters with accessible mechanics and long-running stories. Cross-media adaptations, including The Super Mario Bros. Movie, broaden this reach by moving game characters into cinema, merchandise, and tourism-related promotion. The result is a cultural presence that continues even when audiences are not actively playing.

Gamification has also entered official international events. At Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai, several pavilions used interactive digital experiences to present themes such as energy, sustainability, and future technology. The Electric Power Pavilion, for example, used participatory attractions rather than relying only on explanatory displays. This format invited visitors to engage with policy-related themes through play.

Interactive presentation can make complex issues more approachable, although entertainment does not remove the need for accurate information. By turning energy choices into a shared activity, the exhibition connected Japan's technological image with the broader discussion of decarbonization. The presentation of EyeMine, which enables people to control Minecraft through eye movement, added an accessibility dimension. It associated technological innovation with inclusion and demonstrated how game-related tools can support a public-diplomacy narrative.

The strategic value of games also makes intellectual property protection a major concern. The dispute involving Nintendo, The Pokémon Company, and Pocketpair over Palworld illustrates how closely commercial competition, patent law, and the protection of national creative assets can become connected. The conflict began in Japan and later drew attention to related patent activity in the United States.

Two implications follow from this dispute. First, Japanese companies are increasingly willing to defend game mechanics and related patents, not only characters and trademarks. Second, legal protection has become part of the wider policy effort to preserve the value of Japanese intellectual property in overseas markets. The case remains a corporate legal dispute, but it also fits the New Cool Japan Strategy's emphasis on preventing the erosion of content-industry revenue.

Copyright enforcement, patent strategy, and anti-piracy cooperation are therefore part of the infrastructure that supports cultural diplomacy. Without a sustainable revenue base, globally popular games may generate visibility for Japan while failing to improve the conditions of the domestic industry that produces them.

Beyond commercial IP protection, digital games foster decentralized diplomatic spaces through global esports tournaments and online multiplayer ecosystems. When international players collaborate or compete in Japanese-developed titles, they engage in a form of horizontal, peer-to-peer public diplomacy that operates without direct state mediation. Fighting game communities, massive multiplayer online games, and competitive gaming leagues establish shared virtual arenas where cultural boundaries soften through mutual fandom, strategic play, and digital communication. In these spaces, Japanese gaming culture is not merely observed as a static export, but continually performed and co-created by global communities. This participatory dimension deepens audience investment, turning casual players into long-term cultural stakeholders who maintain an active affinity with Japan's digital media landscape.

At the same time, sustaining this gaming-driven soft power requires addressing structural challenges within the domestic development ecosystem. High production costs, fierce international competition from studios in China, South Korea, and the West, and labor issues within creative industries pose long-term risks. If Japanese studios face economic stagnation or creative burnout, the pipeline of innovative intellectual property could weaken. Government initiatives under the New Cool Japan Strategy must therefore look beyond foreign distribution and legal enforcement. Supporting local developer talent, encouraging indie game development, and creating sustainable working environments are essential steps to ensure that domestic creators can continue producing culturally resonant work for global markets.

In summary, digital games represent a distinct and dynamic vector of modern soft power projection. By combining individual agency, cross-media synergies, and persistent online interaction, they cultivate a durable form of engagement that complements traditional foreign policy tools. As global public diplomacy becomes increasingly digital, Japan's ability to balance robust intellectual property protection with creative openness will determine whether its gaming industry continues to shape international perceptions. Ultimately, the true diplomatic power of Japanese gaming lies in its capacity to construct immersive, inclusive, and memorable worlds that bring diverse global audiences together through shared play.

Comparative Dynamics: Asian Pop Culture Epicenter Competition in the Web 3.0 Era

Japan no longer dominates Asian popular culture without serious competition. South Korea has expanded the global reach of music, television, film, and digital platforms, while China has become a major producer of mobile and high-budget games. The three countries differ in their funding systems, institutional coordination, platform strategies, and target audiences.

Cool Japan is often compared with the Korean Wave, or Hallyu. Both emerged from the international growth of East Asian cultural industries, but their policy development followed different paths.

Japanese popular culture gained a large overseas following before the government built a coordinated strategy around it. This history gave the industry strong brands, but it also produced administrative fragmentation. Responsibilities are divided among several ministries and agencies, and policy support has sometimes been criticized for moving more slowly than changes in global consumer markets.

South Korea developed a more centralized export-oriented system. Public funding, training infrastructure, specialized agencies such as KOFICE, and close cooperation with entertainment companies have supported the international promotion of Korean music and screen content. Artists such as BTS and BLACKPINK have also appeared in campaigns connected with international institutions, linking celebrity influence with messages about youth and global citizenship. Korean companies have generally adapted quickly to YouTube, TikTok, and other platform-based forms of distribution, giving Hallyu a coordinated and highly visible presence.

China presents a different challenge through the scale of its digital game industry. Companies such as Tencent and NetEase have expanded mobile and free-to-play models that are accessible across many developing markets. Titles such as Genshin Impact and Black Myth: Wukong demonstrate that Chinese developers can compete internationally

in both live-service games and high-budget productions. This development weakens the assumption that Asian game culture is primarily associated with Japanese consoles.

Chinese games increasingly draw on local mythology, landscapes, and historical traditions while using production standards familiar to international players. In this way, entertainment creates an informal route through which audiences encounter Chinese cultural references. The relationship with the Digital Silk Road is not always direct, but both developments benefit from large technology companies, platform infrastructure, state support, and access to a substantial pool of technical talent.

Japan's main vulnerability is not a lack of recognizable intellectual property but the production system behind it. Many animation and game studios continue to face labor shortages, uneven working conditions, and limited resources compared with larger Chinese platform companies. If these structural problems persist, Japan may retain famous franchises while losing flexibility in new markets. Competition in Southeast Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East will therefore depend as much on production capacity and platform access as on cultural reputation.

Furthermore, the struggle for Asian soft power supremacy is increasingly waged on the battleground of digital platform infrastructure. South Korea's mastery of mobile-first content formats, such as webtoons and short-form video content, alongside China's dominance in high-yield mobile gaming ecosystems, highlights a pivotal shift away from traditional broadcasting and hardware-bound platforms. While Japan possesses decades of rich intellectual property, much of its content relies on foreign-owned distribution networks and global streaming platforms for international reach. This dependency creates a vulnerability where algorithmic curation, licensing fees, and platform policies dictate which cultural narratives reach global audiences. Consequently, maintaining soft power in a hyper-digitized landscape requires not only compelling storytelling and creative character design, but also control over the digital infrastructure through which media is consumed and monetized.

At the same time, this intense regional competition has fostered an unprecedented level of transnational cultural hybridity across East Asia. The boundaries between Japanese, South Korean, and Chinese creative industries are becoming increasingly porous through cross-border investments, collaborative productions, and shared aesthetic styles. Chinese gaming studios frequently employ anime-inspired visual styles to attract global audiences, while Japanese animation firms adapt popular South Korean digital webtoons for international television broadcasts. In this interconnected ecosystem, cultural soft power operates less as a zero-sum geopolitical rivalry and more as a multi-directional web of influence. Audiences in regions such as Southeast Asia often consume these overlapping cultural products simultaneously, constructing a broader, composite affinity for East Asian popular media as a whole.

To remain competitive within this dynamic tri-polar environment, Japan must recalibrate its public diplomacy and creative industry policies. The New Cool Japan Strategy must look beyond superficial nation-branding initiatives and prioritize structural economic reforms that support creative talent, improve domestic working conditions, and promote technological innovation. Ultimately, soft power cannot be sustained solely by past artistic achievements or iconic characters. For Japan, preserving its global cultural influence will require combining its unmatched creative legacy with modern industrial efficiency, sustainable labor practices, and strategic digital distribution—ensuring that its cultural exports continue to engage, inspire, and connect with global audiences for generations to come.

Geopolitical Frictions and the Limits of Cultural Diplomacy

The global popularity of anime and games can improve Japan's image, but it cannot by itself resolve disputes rooted in war, territory, or national memory. Claims that soft power can neutralize these conflicts overlook the political conditions under which cultural products are received.

The legacy of Japanese military expansion in the first half of the twentieth century remains especially sensitive in China and on the Korean Peninsula. Popular culture has introduced more positive images of Japan, yet those images coexist with memories of occupation and unresolved historical disagreement.

This tension became visible again in early 2026 when a Pokémon-related event was linked to the Yasukuni Shrine. The controversy showed how quickly an entertainment brand can become part of a wider political dispute when its activities intersect with a historically charged location.

The issue began when a Pokémon Trading Card Game qualifying event was listed for a venue within the Yasukuni

Shrine complex in Tokyo. Although the event was intended as a commercial family activity, the location prompted criticism from Chinese media, officials, and social-media users.

Yasukuni Shrine commemorates Japan's war dead, including individuals convicted as Class-A war criminals after the Second World War. For this reason, visits and events associated with the site regularly generate diplomatic controversy. Once the Pokémon event listing circulated online, calls for cancellation and boycott spread rapidly, particularly on Chinese social-media platforms.

Chinese state-affiliated outlets framed the incident as evidence that Japanese companies were insensitive to historical memory. Some commentary went further by connecting popular franchises with the revival of militarist ideas. The language was highly politicized, but the response illustrates how commercial activity can be reinterpreted through an existing narrative of historical grievance.

The Pokémon Company responded by cancelling the event and issuing an apology in Japanese and Chinese. It stated that the listing had been arranged by a third-party organizer and had not received adequate central review. Regardless of how the error occurred, the quick response indicated the commercial risks of allowing a global entertainment brand to become associated with a contested political symbol.

The incident exposes an important limit of banal nationalism. Familiar characters may circulate as ordinary and non-political cultural objects, but their meaning can change when they are placed in a disputed historical setting. Audiences do not interpret Japanese popular culture in isolation; they connect it with existing memories, media narratives, and bilateral tensions.

For cultural diplomacy, the lesson is practical. Government agencies and companies need stronger political-risk review when events, partnerships, or promotional activities involve sensitive sites. Soft power is most durable when cultural attraction is supported by historical awareness and credible diplomacy. It is least effective when popular culture is expected to substitute for engagement with unresolved political issues.

Beyond immediate crisis management, the Yasukuni controversy highlights the psychological phenomenon of "selective compartmentalization" among foreign media consumers. Across East Asia, millions of young fans engage daily with Japanese popular culture, deriving genuine enjoyment from anime, manga, and digital games. Under normal circumstances, this affection operates in a mental domain separate from personal national identity and historical consciousness. However, when a high-profile commercial event collides with a contested symbol of wartime trauma, this separation quickly collapses. National identity and historical memory reassert dominance over consumer preferences. Fictional characters, once perceived as unthreatening tools of entertainment, are suddenly reinterpreted as representatives of state ideology or historical insensitivity, demonstrating how fragile soft-power gains remain when confronted by unresolved regional grievances.

This episode also illustrates the heightened geopolitical risks facing contemporary media conglomerates in an era of digital hyper-connectivity and rising regional nationalism. Global franchises operate in an increasingly politicized environment where online communities can rapidly amplify real or perceived cultural slights across international borders. A single organizational oversight—even if committed by a third-party vendor or local partner—can trigger instant social-media backlash, consumer boycotts, and official diplomatic pressure in major overseas markets. As a result, creative enterprises can no longer treat global intellectual property management purely as a commercial or legal discipline. It demands rigorous geopolitical risk assessment, historical literacy, and proactive cultural sensitivity embedded directly within corporate decision-making processes.

The structural limitations of soft power become particularly evident within East Asian trilateral relations. While economic integration and cross-border media consumption between Japan, China, and South Korea have reached historical highs, political and historical friction continues to flare up. This asymmetry reveals that soft power does not function as a political currency that can simply overwrite deep-seated diplomatic conflicts. Cultural attraction can create spaces for constructive dialogue, soften interpersonal perceptions, and foster goodwill among younger demographics. However, it lacks the institutional authority to resolve territorial disputes or alter official historical narratives. Expecting commercial cultural exports to achieve international reconciliation in the absence of genuine state-level diplomatic effort relies on an overly optimistic understanding of public statecraft.

Furthermore, the incident reveals an inherent paradox within state-backed cultural diplomacy initiatives like "Cool Japan." When governments attempt to mobilize commercial entertainment franchises for nation-branding and

diplomatic messaging, they inadvertently politicize those brands. Foreign observers and foreign states become far more likely to view corporate actions through a geopolitical lens, interpreting private corporate oversights as subtle projections of official state policy. Consequently, top-down attempts to institutionalize soft power can backfire, transforming benign commercial activities into targets for diplomatic friction and ideological critique.

The rapid spread of the controversy across social-media platforms also highlights how modern digital infrastructure accelerates political polarization around cultural products. Online algorithms prioritize high-emotion content, allowing local grievances to scale into transnational diplomatic incidents within hours. In this digital environment, nuanced context is easily lost, forcing commercial entities into immediate reactive crisis management. Navigating this landscape requires both state actors and media corporations to establish proactive monitoring systems and clear crisis-communication protocols that prioritize cultural empathy and historical responsibility over defensive public relations.

Ultimately, the Yasukuni Pokémon controversy provides a crucial case study for the future of international soft-power strategy. Soft power is most resilient when cultural attraction operates alongside historical accountability, empathetic statecraft, and respectful bilateral engagement. It is most vulnerable to sudden collapse when state actors or corporate entities treat popular culture as a shield against uncomfortable historical truths. For Japan's cultural diplomacy to remain effective in an increasingly complex geopolitical environment, creative excellence must be paired with historical mindfulness, ensuring that the appeal of its popular culture builds sustainable bridges rather than deepening historical divides.

Global Presence Quantification Index

Despite demographic pressures, security constraints, and economic challenges, Japan continues to rank highly in several international measures of democracy, global presence, and soft power. The indices summarized below do not measure cultural diplomacy in the same way, but together they provide context for Japan's wider international standing.

Table 2. Selected Indicators of Japan's Global Presence

Global Evaluation Index	Japan's Reported Position	Interpretation
Democracy Index (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2023)	Rank 16	Japan was classified as a "full democracy," indicating strong institutional performance in the index.
Elcano Global Presence Index (2022/2023 data)	Rank 4	The ranking reflects Japan's combined economic, military, and soft-presence indicators.
Global Soft Power Index (Brand Finance, 2024–2025)	Top-tier position	Japan remained among the leading countries for familiarity, reputation, culture, and

		international influence.
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Source: Compiled by the authors

CONCLUSION

Japan's use of popular culture is now embedded in its diplomatic and economic strategy. Anime and digital games help circulate images of Japan that are creative, peaceful, and technologically advanced. Their influence developed first through audiences and markets, then through government programs such as Cool Japan. From a constructivist perspective, this process contributes to the continuing reconstruction of Japan's post-war identity. From a soft-power perspective, it creates attraction that can support tourism, trade, educational exchange, and public diplomacy.

Through a constructivist lens, these media exports do not merely function as static tools of nation branding; they actively construct shared social meanings and normative expectations between Japan and global publics. By embedding Japanese aesthetics, social customs, and moral themes into everyday entertainment, popular culture cultivates a subtle form of banal nationalism. Over time, these repeated, non-confrontational encounters generate "synthetic experiences" that build cross-cultural familiarity long before formal diplomatic dialogues occur. Consequently, Japan has successfully reshaped its international posture, transitioning from its twentieth-century historical legacy toward a globally recognized identity centered on digital innovation, artistic creativity, and youth engagement.

The evidence also shows that cultural attraction has clear limits. Japan depends heavily on global platforms, faces stronger competition from South Korea and China, and must address difficult working conditions within its own creative industries. Historical disputes remain particularly important. The 2026 Yasukuni Shrine controversy involving Pokémon demonstrated that a popular franchise can quickly lose its diplomatic value when it becomes associated with a contested symbol. A more sustainable strategy therefore requires better coordination among government agencies, stronger protection for creators and intellectual property, careful political-risk assessment, and greater responsiveness to digital markets. Anime and games can support diplomacy, but their long-term value depends on the institutions and relationships surrounding them.

Furthermore, the evolving dynamics of East Asian media markets emphasize that soft power cannot operate in isolation from broader regional rivalries. The rapid expansion of South Korea's agile *Hallyu* ecosystem and China's growing dominance in mobile gaming demonstrate that global audiences have increasingly diverse options. In this tri-polar landscape, Japan's main vulnerabilities stem from structural bottlenecks, including heavy reliance on foreign-owned distribution platforms, bureaucratic fragmentation across government agencies, and persistent labor shortages within domestic animation and game studios. Without improving the economic conditions of creators, state-led promotional frameworks like Cool Japan risk depleting the domestic talent base that fuels the country's cultural appeal.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy depends on recognizing that popular entertainment cannot substitute for resolving real-world political conflicts. When commercial intellectual property intersects with contested historical symbols, consumer fandom quickly yields to national identity and historical grievance. A sustainable soft-power framework must therefore integrate commercial ambition with geopolitical risk assessment, historical mindfulness, and constructive statecraft. By supporting its domestic creative talent while practicing transparent and respectful foreign policy, Japan can ensure that its cultural exports continue to build authentic bridges of mutual understanding across the international community.

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