Japan Brand Strategy: The Taming of ‘Cool Japan’ and the Challenges of Cultural Planning in a Postmodern Age

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The production of a new and attractive ‘Japan Brand’—one that resonates with the emerging global image of ‘Cool Japan’ associated with Japan’s popular culture—is a national project incorporated in the Japanese Intellectual Property Strategy promoted by the state since 2002. This article critically examines the Japan Brand Strategy as a government-owned production site of Cool Japan imagery and as a cultural policy designed to promote a specific sense of cultural identity. Detailed reconstructions of the selective appropriation of cultural products in order to create a new cultural imagery for Japan, of the meanings attached to this imagery and of the tactics devised to spread it, highlight how problematical it is to appropriate market-made images of Cool Japan for national ends. Furthermore, by examining the various functions attributed to this national strategy, I show that while it is primarily promoted as a means for enhancing Japan’s industrial policy and cultural diplomacy, it is also devised as a mechanism to mobilize the nation during unsettled times. Through examining the Japan Brand Strategy, this article highlights the challenges faced today by cultural policy makers, questioning the contemporary relevance of the modernistic approach to the state as a regulatory cultural planning apparatus.

1. Introduction

Since the early 1990s and the collapse of the bubble economy, Japan has been undergoing a period of dramatic sociocultural and economic changes (Yoda and Harootunian 2006). One of the most noticeable was that as many industries grew sluggish, playful teen-centric products and services—fashion, telecommunication, entertainment and in particular the multimedia culture of anime, manga and computer and video games, including all related merchandising, collectibles and toys—became the fastest growing components and among the most successful export industries of Japan’s recession-stricken economy (Machiyama 2004: 15). Concomitantly, the long-standing ‘Corporate Japan’ image of a work-oriented ‘enterprise society’ (kigyō/shakai) (Yoda 2006: 31) has been gradually replaced with that of ‘Cool Japan’. This transformation in cultural imagery

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overstates a shift in power by overlooking the inherent complexities of sociocultural heterogeneity. It accentuates, however, what has become a common interpretation among scholars and observers that the rise of Japan’s youth-led popular culture was made possible by the collapse of traditional power structures (Daliot-Bul 2009). In contemporary Japan, the urban public space is flooded with images and consumption sites, the essence of which are the pleasures of excessiveness, unorthodoxy and the transgression of official culture (see Featherstone 1991: 22). The distinctions between everyday life, consumer culture and popular culture are becoming increasingly complex and dynamic as elements and values of the hedonistic and frivolous popular culture are incorporated even into the generally more conservative spheres of work and family. This ‘cross-over’ of popular culture forms over what were once strictly policed boundaries of the more orthodox culture produces unusual combinations and syncretisms, undermining a simple categorization of cultural spheres (see Featherstone 1995: 4). During unstable periods such as this one, when competing ways of organizing life are surfacing (see Swidler 1986: 279), it is particularly fascinating to follow how the institutions representing Japan’s official culture cope with the viral spreading of subversive practices, tastes and energies that emerge and proliferate outside institutional control and yet have become the driving force of lucrative markets.

Euphoric intellectual discourses on the global success of Japanese popular culture (see Iwabuchi 2002: 30–32) have prompted Japanese scholars to connect popular culture with economic, political and diplomatic power (e.g. Shiraishi 1997; Takenaka 2001). Shortly after the turn of this century, Japanese popular culture became widely referred to in the media, in academic circles and in government agencies as a national resource of what Joseph Nye labeled ‘soft power’ (1990: 167; 2004: 68–69). According to Nye, the proof of power in world politics today lies in the ability of leading nations to affect what other countries want—to shape others’ preferences. In a great shift from the more traditional power structures, ‘soft’ power derives mostly from intangible resources such as culture and ideology rather than from military action or economic incentives.

In an effort to respond to the significant decline in the international competitiveness of Japanese industry, the Japanese government introduced in 2002 a new national policy that focuses on intangible intellectual property in the form of innovative and creative products, spearheaded by Japanese media content such as anime, manga and game software [Chitekizaisan Suishin Keikaku (Intellectual Property Strategic Program) 2004: 3]. Concurrently with similar initiatives taken by other states (see American Council on Competitiveness 2004), the Japanese Intellectual Property Policy aims to stimulate and revitalize intellectual creation as well as properly protect and efficiently exploit the results of such creation (IPSP 2005: 2). Once the policy was effectively developed into yearly Intellectual Property Strategic Programs (Chitekizaisan Suishin Keikaku 2004 on), the need to create and reinforce a new and attractive ‘Japan Brand’—one that resonates with the emerging global image of Cool Japan (kakkoii Nihon) (ibid: 1)—in order to increase global demand for Japanese products overseas and to use as a resource of symbolic power for inducing pro-Japanese

1. For convenience’s sake, I use the abbreviation IPSP for Chitekizaisan Suishin Keikaku in this article. All references in this article are to the original Japanese versions of the IPSPs.
2. All translations from the Japanese in this article are the author’s.
sentiments especially in Asia, became a strategy on its own. The economic and legislative reforms devised and promoted by the Intellectual Property Strategic Programs provoke many important questions (see Ikeda 2003). In this paper, however, I examine the ‘Japan Brand Strategy’: the framework and tactics devised by the yearly Intellectual Property Strategic Programs (2004–2008) to produce a revitalizing cultural imagery for Japan by capitalizing on the global success of Japanese popular culture.

The efforts of the Japanese government to harness the global success of Japanese popular culture to intensify Japan’s global soft power and create an appealing cultural imagery for Japan have been drawing the attention of economists and political scientists in recent years (e.g. Leheny 2006; Kaneko, Kitano and Ogawa 2007; Lam 2007; Kadosh-Otmazgin 2008; Watanabe and McConnell 2008). These studies focus mostly on exploring the potential and limits of politicizing popular culture to enhance Japan’s international politico-economic leadership, thereby critically examining the concept of soft power. Discipline bound, they offer little insight into the cultural dimensions of what has become a major intervening cultural policy in Japan: namely, a government involvement through legislation and public institutions in cultural production processes, in ways that promote a specific sense of cultural identity (collective subjectivity) by encouraging and supporting certain cultural practices and values (Lewis and Miller 2003: 2–3). This article aims to address this lacuna by critically examining the Japan Brand Strategy as a cultural policy and a government-owned production site of Cool Japan imagery.

By unpacking the Japan brand concept and exploring the tactics devised for spreading its imagery, I offer detailed reconstructions of the selective appropriation of cultural products in order to create a new cultural imagery for Japan and of the meanings attached to this imagery. Furthermore, by examining the various functions attributed to this national strategy, I show that beyond its explicit functions as an industrial policy and of enhancing Japan’s global soft power, the Japan Brand Strategy is also devised as a mechanism for national mobilization during highly turbulent times when the institutional system has lost much of its appeal. Finally, by contesting the effectiveness of appropriating Cool Japan imagery to institutional ends, I argue that the Japan Brand Strategy is particularly useful to illuminate the complexities and challenges of cultural policies in today’s postmodern cultural environment. Quite opposite to the notion of modern cultural planning and its commitment to administered master narratives (on the crisis of the modernist planning project, see Beauregard 1989: 381; Goodchild 1990: 119), Cool Japan imageries are fragmented and pluralistic. Moreover, they are the result of ongoing interactions between local and international grassroots and corporate media in which the power of media producers and the media consumers intersect and sometimes collide in unpredictable ways (see Jenkins 2006: 2). This contemporary ‘participatory culture’, in which media producers and media consumers no longer occupy separate roles (Jenkins 2006: 3), calls for revising the modernistic approach to the state as a regulatory cultural planning apparatus. 3

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3. This paper is based on interviews with policy makers in Japan’s Intellectual Property Strategic Headquarters, in-depth analysis of the Intellectual Property Strategic Programs from 2004 until 2008 and several other related publications by the Japanese government and by professional organizations, as well as an exploration of the Japanese and international media coverage of the Japanese government’s efforts toward creating the new imagery of Cool Japan.
2. The Emerging Power of Japanese Popular Culture, or, Why and How Did It All Start?

Around the world, contemporary Japanese popular culture is first associated with content products such as *anime*, *manga*, video and computer games, as well as their related merchandizing and associated cultural practices. For many years, these products and practices were considered in Japan either simply as entertainment, hence getting little recognition for their cultural and industrial values, or worse, as vulgar and infantile, generated and consumed mostly by the controversial *otaku* community\(^4\) and therefore attesting to the pathologies of Japanese society (Kinsella 1998). In the 1990s, however, the domestic status of these products and practices, which already had lucrative markets, started to change because of their economic value and their increasing popularity.\(^5\) But probably what gave most stimuli to their promotion in Japan was their enthusiastic reception in overseas markets. Throughout the 1990s, the reception of Japanese popular culture in Asia, including *manga*, *anime*, computer and video games, and related merchandizing, as well as TV dramas and Japanese pop music was attracting considerable media attention in Japan and overseas (Iwabuchi 2002: 1). Soon after the turn of the century, Japan became known in the West, as well, as the ‘Empire of Cool’ (Daliot-Bul 2007: 179).

Somewhat ironically, the globalization of Japanese popular culture happened during a time of lingering recession in Japan. Moreover, the 1990s saw upsurges of anti-Japanese sentiment around Asia, echoing unresolved legacies of a shared past joined by legacies of severed relations during the Cold War, which now needed to be repaired within the context of newly forming regional economic-political and cultural ties (Seraphim 2006: 261). War memory and postwar responsibility, or what is seen around Asia as the inadequate official Japanese expression of remorse over its militaristic aggressive past, became topics of broad regional debates. These debates were recurrently enflamed throughout the decade by dramatic controversies, such as the grassroots campaign for official Japanese apology to, and compensation of, Asian ‘comfort women’ who were forced to serve Japanese troops during the Pacific War (e.g. Morris-Suzuki 2007); massive demonstrations around Asia in reaction to the commemoration of the war dead at Yasukuni shrine by government officials (e.g. Tanaka 2001) and massive demonstrations around Asia in reaction to revisionist Japanese high school history textbooks that whitewash Japanese aggressiveness in Asia during World War II (e.g. Nozaki 2002).

Trying to find new directions that would lead out of a lingering recession and would position Japan as a politico-economic leader in the emerging East Asia region, in February 2002, Prime Minister Koizumi Jun’ichirō declared in his yearly policy speech that the government of Japan would forthwith develop a national policy of intellectual property in the form of innovative and creative products such as content products. In March 2002, the Strategic Council on Intellectual Property led by the prime minister, related ministers and experts in the private sector was established. Two months later, in May 2002, the government announced the first comprehensive program to promote Japanese popular culture and intellectual property.

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4. *Otaku* is a Japanese term describing hardcore fans of sci-fi, computer games, *anime* and *manga* who are extremely knowledgeable but lack in social skills. Although used with pride by many Western fans to describe themselves, the term carries a negative connotation in Japan.

5. Kinsella (2000: 91–94) notes, for example, that it is during that time that *manga* and cultural critics began to address *manga* as an art form. Several *manga* museums and libraries were opened around Japan, and a new school of *manga* studies emerged.
2002, American journalist Douglas McGray published an article titled ‘Japan’s Gross National Cool’ in *Foreign Policy* (McGray 2002). Beyond describing how Japan is emerging as an Empire of Cool, McGray referred his readers to Nye’s argument that ‘Cool’ is some sort of soft power resource that can be used to achieve various ends. How can it be, asked McGray, that Japan, which already possesses vast reserves of soft power and the communication infrastructure of a superpower, has no political, ideological or social influence in the world? McGray’s article turned out to be extremely influential in popularizing the term ‘Cool Japan’ and linking it to the concept of soft power in the Japanese and international media and among policy makers in Japan (Lam 2007: 352).

In July 2002, the Strategic Council on Intellectual Property drafted the ‘Intellectual Policy Outline’ with the goal of making Japan an intellectual property-based nation. The policy outline states that ‘as concerns over the decline in Japanese industrial competitiveness are growing, the time has come to lay the Japanese industrial foundation on “the creation of information of value”’ (Japan’s Strategic Council on Intellectual Property 2002), replacing the traditional strategic emphasis on manufacturing industries. The Strategic Council on Intellectual Property adopted the term ‘intellectual property’ in a broad sense, including technology, design, brands and content products such as music, movies, game software and animation (IPSP 2004: 2–4). The new approach was supported by references to recent publications arguing that in the near future, a nation’s strength in international society will be determined by the attractiveness of its intellectual property: how cool, enjoyable and enriching it is (Digital Content Association of Japan 2004). In November 2002, the Basic Law on Intellectual Property passed the Diet (*Intellectual Property Basic Act* no. 122 of 2002), and it became effective as of March 2003, the same month in which the Intellectual Property Policy Headquarters (*Chiteki Zaisan Senryaku Suishin Jimukyoku*) was established.

Since being established, the Intellectual Property Policy Headquarters has been working with an obvious sense of urgency (as expressed, for example, in IPSP 2004: 1, 4; 2005: 1). As explained to me with charts and graphs when I was first introduced to the Intellectual Property Strategy in 2005 by a member of the Intellectual Property Strategic Headquarters, from the offset, task forces were established, strict timeframes were designated and clear short and long-term objectives were decided. The three-year period from 2003 to 2005 was declared Phase I of the Intellectual Property Policy. Phase I was devoted to institutional reforms and the initiation of industry–academia–government collaborative projects. In February 2006, Prime Minister Koizumi set the goal of Phase II of the Intellectual Property Policy to be ‘making Japan the most advanced intellectual property-based nation in the world’ (IPSP 2006: 5). But despite the determination and high anticipation, the 2008 Intellectual Property Strategic Program begins with a gloomy description of a decline in Japan’s international competitiveness according to various ranking systems (IPSP 2008: 2). The 2008 program is the first to argue critically that it is time to review, from an international perspective (the globalization of technologies, systems and markets), whether past strategic measures have sufficiently contributed to increasing Japan’s competitiveness and sustainable productivity and growth (*ibid*: 3). The rearticulated goal of the 2008 program was to ‘strengthen an intellectual property...

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6. This article was the subject of a *Time Asia* cover story and a profile in the ‘Year in Ideas’ issue of the *New York Times Magazine*, and it was reprinted in a number of international publications, including the *Guardian* (UK) and *Chūō Koron* (Japan), suggesting the huge impact it had on public opinion both inside and outside of Japan.
strategy that watchfully targets *the world* (sekai wo niranda chitekizaisan senryaku no kyōka) (IPSP 2008: 1).

3. Strategically Conveying the Attractiveness of Japan: The Production of a Neo-Japonesque Brand

The marketing approach of the Intellectual Property Strategic Programs from the outset was that globally promoting Japanese intellectual property requires a strategic grand design to exploit and enhance the symbolic value of Japanese brands (IPSP 2004). This is a major breakaway from the dominant Japanese exporting strategy up to the late 1990s of selling consumer goods as well as media content without any reference to a Japanese way of life and even by consciously erasing any remnant of Japanese ‘cultural odor’ (see Iwabuchi 1998: 167–168). The private sector, especially in the content business and related merchandizing, has been backing away from this strategy in the last decade, recognizing the growing appeal of Japaneseness among target markets and therefore strengthening the symbolic value of the products it sells as Japanese (Daliot-Bul 2007: 182). The government of Japan is actually following the lead of Japan’s most prominent export industries.

The first Intellectual Property Strategic Program (2004) focuses only on media content as a lever for enhancing the value of Japanese products abroad. According to the authors, considering the huge scale of the content business and the many industrial fields involved in it, the content business is not only expected to drive the Japanese economy but also to play a significant role in ‘improving the image of Japan abroad (Japan’s “soft power”)’ (IPSP 2004: 78). Japanese content products could be exported as a ‘national symbol’ (The Content Industry in Japan 2004: 4–5). All parties concerned should thus recognize the development and expansion of the content business as a ‘very important business for the national strategy’ (IPSP 2004: 78).

It is only from the subsequent Intellectual Property Strategic Program of 2005 that the idea of strategically manipulating the global success of the Japanese content business for economic and diplomatic ends was incorporated systematically into a more comprehensive concept of Japan as a ‘nation creator of content-based culture’ (kontentsu wo ikasita bunka sōzō kokka) (‘content’ is used here, somewhat confusingly, in the broad sense of intellectual property and not as a metonymic reference to the ‘content business’ only) (IPSP 2005: 84). In the strategic program of 2005, therefore, we find a new hybrid concept of a Japan Brand composed of Japanese content products largely responsible for the emerging global image of Cool Japan, as well as Japanese products that combine ‘Japanese creativity and tradition’, such as food, fashion and regional brands (ibid: 1). An entire chapter in the strategic program of 2005, titled ‘Efforts toward Building a Nation Creator of Content-Based Culture’, is devoted to measures designed to ‘dramatically expand the content business industry’ and to ‘promote a Japan Brand Strategy based on lifestyle’ (ibid: 85, 105). From now on it is stated, ‘through the collaborative efforts of tourism institutions and cultural diplomacy, we need to establish and strengthen a Japan Brand, by strategically conveying the “attractiveness” (miryoku) of Japan using the content business and lifestyle-based businesses such as food, regional brands and fashion’ (ibid: 84).

As one reads through the chapter, the problematic aspects of producing an all-inclusive brand for products as different as anime, kimonos and Kobe beef surface immediately. Instead of offering a pluralistic image of the new millennium Japan, the Japan Brand is designed as a tag name for an essential attractiveness common to all the above, whose origin can allegedly be found in Japan’s cultural tradition (ibid: 115). As has been pointed out to me time and again, traditional Japanese culture, aesthetics and thought live on in contemporary Japanese art, popular culture and other contemporary pursuits. Using Japanese tradition as a means to add uncontested respectability to recently invented
cultural products is a well-known tactic in modern Japan. Nevertheless, it is still intriguing that whereas the Japan Brand was conceptualized to offer a new and revitalizing imagery of Japan abroad, it merely resorts to a familiar and conservative self-exoticizing discourse that has often been used in postwar Japanese intellectual and popular discourses on national and cultural identity. This discourse portrays an attractive, yet evasive, ahistorical Japanese national character that is radically different from anything else and is expressed in a diversified range of symbolic forms, old and new (see Moeran 1996). We are given further insight into the articulation process of this discourse by Kondo Seiichi, the first director general of Japan’s Public Diplomacy Department (Kondo 2008). He describes how hard it has been to articulate linguistically the ideas promoted by the Cool Japan phenomenon. Nevertheless, after much consideration, in July 2005 the Council for the Promotion of Cultural Diplomacy submitted a proposal which was one of the first documents to clearly identify Japanese popular culture as a gateway to Japanese culture in general, and in which ‘harmony’, ‘compassion’ and ‘coexistence’ were defined (among others), as important values for Japan exhibited by its culture (ibid: 200).

The implementation of the Japan Brand Strategy in several projects sponsored by related government agencies are revealing. One example should suffice to illustrate my point. In 2007, the Japanese Embassy in the UK together with the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs produced a pamphlet titled Creative Japan. The pamphlet promotes contemporary Japanese (popular) culture, namely, manga, anime and computer games, as well as contemporary art, literature, architecture, design, fashion, food and technology. The introductory chapter starts by describing how creative activities in post-bubble Japan, which have engulfed creators and consumers alike, are giving Japan a new imagery quite different from the former ‘exotic images’ of Japan as the land of Mt. Fuji, geisha and kabuki. Nevertheless, what seems to be radically new and different is actually part of the same cultural tradition. The author describes contemporary Japanese culture as a site where old and new coexist, explains the character of the Japanese people as imbued with aesthetic sensibilities and positions the production of contemporary Japanese culture on a continuum of cultural production and creativity, the origins and inspiration of which lie in long-standing traditional values:

[Japanese] is a culture in which the old and the new co-exist, one that appeals to the general population and that anyone can enjoy. And what about the character of the people who give form to Japanese [contemporary] culture? We were brought up surrounded by beautiful natural scenery and landscapes and from olden times have honed a sharp appreciation of beauty. We approach the creation of objects with a love for their beauty and, with a long tradition of diligence and dedication, go about the task of creation with an uncompromising stance: while striving for simplicity and the eradication of the superfluous, we do not neglect attention to the tiniest detail. At the root of this approach lies a spirit of harmony which is evident in our philosophy of co-existence with nature.

7. The invention of tradition in Japan—the use of a discourse of traditionality and historicity on recently created modern forms—has drawn much scholarly attention (see Vlastos 1998). Particularly illuminating for this essay is Kinsella’s (2000: 19) argument that efforts of manga critics to link Japanese manga, a modern phenomenon, to a long cultural history of comic art tradition should be understood as efforts to legitimize this cultural form.

Even a superficial familiarity with contemporary Japanese (popular) culture forms is enough to realize that simplicity, the eradication of the superfluous and a spirit of harmony are not necessarily, and not even usually, their founding elements. Insisting that contemporary (popular) culture stems from a long aesthetic and cultural tradition seems to be more than anything else part of the government’s ambition to prove reassuringly to itself, to Japan and to the world that the potentially subversive Cool Japan ‘is still Japan’ (see Leheny 2006: 229). But, the positioning of contemporary popular culture as ‘good old Japan’ has even broader implications.

Until quite recently, similar narratives on a timeless national and cultural identity were constructed by way of reflecting, exploiting and reversing a hierarchical Orientalist world order promoted by a Western cultural hegemony. As Iwabuchi shows, this strategic binary opposition between the ‘West’ and ‘Japan’ was complemented by a third party of an ‘imagined Asia’, which represented in this triad Japan’s past of backwardness and pre-modernity (Iwabuchi 2002: 7). Nowadays, however, two decades after the end of the Cold War, the complex trajectories of cultural flows among multiple globalization centers and their peripheries and the rise of other economic powers in Asia, are creating a new world order in which Japan is reclaiming once again its ‘Asian’ identity (ibid: 11). The self-exoticizing narrative offered by the new Japan Brand can no longer be interpreted as a reflexive negotiation with ‘America’s Japan’ (ibid: 10)—a cultural representation that led to an estrangement of Japan from its Asian neighbors. The government of Japan is now consciously engaged in the production of a new cultural imagery of a more attractive Japan that needs to consider the emerging global environment and the ensuing complex regional geopolitical economic and cultural interests. And yet, by building the new Japanese brand around a cultural essence found in Japanese tradition and culture, it is ignoring altogether that the global image of Cool Japan in Asia and elsewhere is market-driven9 and paved by teen-centric consumer goods reflecting a Japanese postmodern hedonistic ambience that engages with tradition as a stylistic point of reference at most (Daliot-Bul 2007: 186), and not by traditional Japanese values or aesthetics. More dramatically even, it is ignoring in a very ethnocentric and forgetful fashion that for millions in Asia, Japan’s cultural tradition is associated with Japan’s history of imperial aggressiveness in the region and thus bears very little attractiveness, if any.

Unlike the image of Japan as it emerges from contemporary popular culture products, the new national imagery promoted by the Japan Brand is not of a cutting-edge culture that offers a model of and for Asian modernity (see Iwabuchi 2004) but of a country with a ‘clean record’ in which the present has seamlessly emerged from a past with no shadows. This is an effort at political capitalization coercively manipulated out of an otherwise disinterested consumer trend. By binding past and present, policy makers in Japan seem to believe that the success of Japanese popular culture in Asia can be used to induce collective amnesia in regard to Japan’s colonial past and launch Japan into a new political future in the region.

The more reflective 2008 program is still promoting the concept of a ‘cross-sectoral Japan Brand’ (bunyō odanbekina Nihon burando) (covering such fields as food, regional brands, fashion, content and traditional culture) (IPSP 2008: 100). However, introducing a new assumption that ‘foreign people have different images of Japan pending on where they live’ (kaigai no hitobito ga ware ga kuni ni

9. ‘Market-driven’ is used throughout this article in reference to a complex, fragmented and dynamic arena shaped by producers and consumers alike.
taishite idaku imēji ha chiiki gotoni kotonaru koto (ibid: 16, 100), it is now aiming to use the results of overseas surveys conducted by the Japan Foundation, JETRO and JNTO since 2007 (IPSP 2007: 116; 2008: 100) to devise slightly different strategies for different geographic areas and target audiences. At the writing of this article, it is still too early to evaluate and analyze the significance and impact of this new direction. What is clear, however, is the policy makers’ acknowledgment of the need to coordinate their efforts with differentiated global markets.

4. Tactics for Conveying the Attractiveness of Japan at Home and Abroad: Reshaping the Public Space as a Particular Topography

Several means to convey the attractiveness of Japan at home and abroad have been devised so far by the Intellectual Property Policy Headquarters. Each annual strategic program since 2004 outlines both the achievements of former initiatives and new ones. Therefore, the most recent strategic programs give a good idea of the tactics adopted so far.

Compared with the Intellectual Property Strategic Program of 2005, the 2006 program adopted a more aggressive approach in accord with Prime Minister Koizumi’s declared ambition of making Japan the most advanced intellectual property-based nation in the world. The 2005 goal to ‘dramatically expand the content business industry’ was replaced with that of ‘making Japan a top-class content world power’ (IPSP 2006: 89). The efforts to support contemporary Japanese popular culture products abroad with appropriate public relations greatly increased and included sponsoring-related international exhibitions, conferences and symposia; local competitions in the arts, design and media; ceremonial awards of prizes of excellence to Japanese students, established artists and designers; and hosting programs in Japan for non-Japanese artists. Among the most interesting initiatives is the awarding of prizes for excellence to non-Japanese manga artists in order to promote the manga style as an artistic expression (IPSP 2006: 97–114).

As early as July 2007, the first international manga award, a ‘Nobel Prize’ for a foreign artist whose work has helped to spread the manga form internationally, was presented to Lee Chi Ching, a Hong Kong artist of historical comics. He was chosen out of 146 entries from 26 countries. The winner and three runners-up were invited by the Japan Foundation for a 10-day visit to Japan that included the award ceremony, meetings with Japanese manga artists and visits to related organizations such as local publishers. According to then Foreign Minister Asō Tarō, the prize was invented in the hope that it will create among its recipients a feeling of ‘bonding with Japan’. A communiqué released by the Japanese embassy in the US stated that the award is expected to enhance the understanding of Japanese culture among overseas cartoonists. During the award ceremony, Asō

11. Asō Tarō was Japan’s Minister of Foreign Affair from 2005 to 2007. On September 2008, he was elected Prime Minister, a position he held until September 2009.
12. ibid.
congratulated the winners and said: ‘Manga is about love. Manga is about friendship. Manga is about growing-up. Manga is about everything—it knows absolutely no boundaries. Manga, in a word, is the most universal unifier of the hearts and minds that are young or young at heart.' If manga is seen by the government as a key to introducing Japan to the world, could it be that Aso was actually referring to the leadership potential of Japan as a peaceful nation that can unify minds and hearts all over the world? I shall return to this point later.

The Intellectual Property Strategic Program of 2007 addresses two new and related national policies adopted by the Japanese government under Prime Minister Abe Shinzo. The first, ‘Innovation 25’, is a strategy designed to promote innovation in science and information industries targeting the year 2025. The second, ‘Japanese Cultural Industry Strategy’, is designed to globally convey the attractiveness of Japan. According to the Intellectual Property Strategic Program of 2007 (IPSP 2007: 4), both national strategies were devised to stimulate the economic growth of Japan and to convey across the world ‘what is good about Japan’ (Nihon no yosa) and the notion of ‘Japaneseness’ (Nihonrashisa), reflecting the general agreement that intellectual property will become the main source of growth and revitalization of Japan.

Regarding initiatives that aim to enhance the image of an attractive and cool Japan at home and abroad, the 2007 program introduces several new ones, including sponsoring a Japan International Content Festival of games, anime, manga, music, broadcasting and movies (ibid: 22); reinforcing industry–academia–government cooperation in promoting Japanese aesthetics as a driving force of the economy and the decision to start (as of 2008) an international broadcast of anime, music and movies, as well as programs on tourism, fashion, food, industrial design and the like (ibid: 116–117).

Moving on to the 2008 program, the most prominent emphasis is on globally enhancing the presence and brand quality of Japan’s food culture, regional brands and fashion through education, training and marketing activities (IPSP 2008:102–108). Most of the initiatives are reprises of tactics which had been devised by earlier programs. Particularly interesting, however, are the governmental efforts to strengthen regional brands with the help of special advisors and experts (IPSP 2008: 105–106), as well as the production of a ‘collective [brand] system for Japan’s regional products’ (chiiki dantai shōbyō seido) (IPSP 2008: 106). In order to encourage participation in the project, it was decided that from 2008, those who have excelled in promoting and spreading the collective brand system will be officially recognized for their efforts by the government of Japan (IPSP 2008: 106).

Cooperation between the Japanese government bureaucracy and the business sector that goes beyond the realm of financial interests, including complicit cooperation in the production of globally circulating images of Japan, has been known for years as a major characteristic of the Japanese politico-economic structure (e.g. Moeran 1996: 95; Yoshino 1999: 19). Since the 1990s, however, the Japanese market structure has changed significantly and has become more fragmented and more

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15. Abe Shinzō was Japan’s Prime Minister between September 2006 and September 2007.
16. An interesting exposé of the concept, symbol and slogan of Japan Brand developed for regional small and medium-size companies can be seen in the multi-lingual website sponsored by the Japan Brand Development Assistance Program. Available at: http://www.japanbrand.net/about_japanbrand/index.html (accessed 12 May 2009).
decentralized, to the point that state-led collective action, such as the Japan Brand Strategy, seems much harder to implement. By the beginning of the third millennium, the Japanese state bureaucracy had lost much of its previous charisma and was seen by many as lacking any direction (Ikeda 2003). With powerful transnational corporations at work and advanced communication technologies that give new means to generate and disseminate information, market flows are now ever more complex, disjunctive and border crossing. More than ever before in postwar Japan, culture is generated bottom-up (see, for example, Kawamura 2006) as people have more means and legitimacy to create and share ideas, experiences and fashions, thus producing a vibrant exterritorial culture. A whole range of new technologies enables consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate and recirculate media content (see Jenkins 2006). As far as administering a Japan Brand that capitalizes on a consumer trend, the situation is even more complex since the contemporary global imagery of Japan is to a large extent produced by non-Japanese media, entrepreneurs and fans who engage in the reproduction of ‘things Japanese’ and the flaming of the new global postmodern Japonism hype (Daliot-Bul 2007). Increasingly unable to openly control or forbid content, the Japan Brand Strategy seemingly sticks to promotion. In doing so, the state is positioned as a cheerleader and coordinator whose role is to fund, sponsor, encourage and generally promote (see Abramson 2002: 303). In reality, however, through the Japan Brand Strategy, the state does not yield altogether to market forces but engages forcefully in its project of reshaping the public space into a particular topography.17

One particularly aggressive intervening measure introduced in 2006 by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, which has been assigned a share in the responsibility of ‘promoting and fostering a rich food culture’ (IPSP 2005: 105), is the idea to establish a certification system for Japanese restaurants outside Japan in response to ‘concerns about the quality and authenticity of dishes marketed as “Japanese”’. The ministry devised an inspection procedure in which undercover inspectors, dubbed the ‘sushi police’, visit a restaurant and grade the restaurant according to a set of criteria, including hygiene, safety, menu, ingredients, staff, and so on. According to a ministry report from November 2006 on the evaluation committee of Japanese food in France (where a trial experiment was conducted during the summer of 2006), the first objective of the committee was to educate French consumers on authentic Japanese cuisine and culture.18 Rumors regarding the sushi police have aroused concerns among Japanese food restaurateurs around the world over the fate of less traditional restaurants and restaurants owned by non-Japanese and, in general, a skepticism regarding the true intentions of the Japanese government and the relevance of the certification system to local patrons of these restaurants (e.g. Faiola 2006; McNeill 2006; Kyodo News on the Web 2007). In March 2007, the council of advisors for the Japanese restaurants certification program compiled a much friendlier proposal than the original one. It recommended that only restaurants that volunteer for certification be included in the program and that the program be managed by private local bodies and relevant parties that will be supported by the government of Japan. Moreover, the certification system

17. This became quite clear to me during an interview with a Keidanren employee who works as an expert advisor to the Intellectual Property Strategic Headquarters. During the interview I commented that the new Cool Japan imagery projected by the international media often does not fall short of describing Japan in eroticized and sometimes grotesque sensationalist narrative. Shocked, my interviewee spent the next half an hour trying to convince me (who needless to say, needs no convincing) that those eroticized images of Japan are simply false and need to be objected to.

will take into consideration domestication processes of Japanese food in terms of local tastes and ingredients and would not be discriminatory or exclusive in any sense. The council concludes the proposal by expressing its hopes that this program will contribute to a further ‘understanding of Japan and Japanese cuisine around the world’.  

The previously mentioned manga award and the government certification of Japanese restaurants around the world are extreme examples of intervening measures, but even in other measures devised to enhance the Japan Brand that are less plainly intervening, the Japanese ‘promotional state’ engages not only in material economy but in symbolic economy as well. After all, what enters the Intellectual Property Strategy ‘cultural basket’, whoever wins the government-sponsored competitions, and those who are chosen to be exhibited become Japan’s ‘attractive and valuable information’.

5. Beyond an Industrial Policy: From Creating Soft Power to Recruiting the Nation

Japan has a long tradition of government ‘administration of culture’ (bunka gyōsei), including the management of artistic heritage and the protection of cultural assets and copyrights through cultural policies (McVeigh 2004: 165). Whether targeting domestic or international markets, cultural policies in Japan were used until recently to justify, legitimate and rationalize the Japanese politico-economic machinery by way of promoting cultural nationalism (ibid: 19). Put differently, cultural products in these policies, like in the Japan Brand Strategy, are interpreted as manifestations of a national ethos—a Japaneseness—supporting the ongoing production of a differentiated cultural identity. The Japan Brand represents a step up from the traditional explanatory and informational approach of former cultural policies targeting the international arena. It is no longer designed to introduce Japan to the world or to explain Japanese behavior to non-Japanese but to create soft power by producing an influential national message.

Whether the enthusiastic consumption of Japanese popular culture globally that is dramatically affecting consumer tastes around the world can be harnessed to influence other nations’ political and ideological priorities is presently a highly contested issue among scholars. It has been convincingly argued that for young, middle-class Asian consumers, Japanese popular culture offers a vision of modernity (Iwabuchi 2004) or a vision of a future (Leheny 2006: 230). In that sense, Japanese popular culture has an influence that exceeds setting trendy fashions. Nevertheless, recent studies contend that Tokyo’s pursuit of soft power by harnessing popular culture is undermined by its failure to overcome the burden of its history (Lam 2007) and that the power of Japanese popular culture in East Asia lies in shaping this region’s cultural markets and not in producing political spheres of influence for Japan (Kadosh-Otmazgin 2008). An interesting recent contribution to this debate is the argument that while exposure to Japanese pop culture does not wash away negative memories of the past, it has been creating shared positive memories (in childhood and adolescence) across East Asia (Nakano 2008: 125).

The debate on the impact and limits of Japan’s soft power policy is far from concluded (e.g. Watanabe and McConnell 2008) but that is not the main concern of this essay, which deals with how Japanese policy makers try to harness Japanese popular culture to national interests. They work...
under the assumption that soft power works. Their general guideline (which is explicit both in the manga award project and in the restaurant certification proposal) is that through the transmission of Japanese (popular) culture the ‘understanding of Japan’ (Nihonrikai) abroad will be greatly improved (e.g. IPSP 2005: 85), so that Japan will become loved and respected throughout the world (ibid: 105). This logic is revealed time and again, recently in the crowning, with much media fanfare, of anime character Doraemon as Japan’s ‘anime ambassador’ by Japan’s Foreign Minister Komura Masahiko.20 Addressing a three-dimensional Doraemon doll, the foreign minister stated his hopes that Doraemon will work hard to ‘deepen people’s understanding of Japan so they will become friends with Japan’ (Lewis 2008). As was pointed out by Leheny (2006), Japanese policy makers try to articulate with Japanese popular culture the message that the Japanese are kind and decent people, creative and curious and not to be feared. After all, what could be more reassuring than a foreign minister shaking hands with a Doraemon doll?

For years, Japan has been striving for better political representation for its economy. In a speech delivered in August 2005 in commemoration of the 60th anniversary of Japan’s defeat in the Pacific War, Prime Minister Koizumi Junichirō described Japan’s long positive record in coming to terms with the wartime past, through peace education and official developmental assistance (ODA) and linked it to Japan’s current right and duty to assume a leadership role in regional and global affairs (Seraphim 2006: 285–286). In the previously mentioned proposal submitted by Japan’s Public Diplomacy Department in July 2005, the Council argued that the Japanese value system could contribute to world peace by serving as a bridge between diverse cultures (Kondo 2008: 201, emphasis mine). By using Japanese popular culture as leverage, policy makers in Japan have been trying the term ‘bridge’, as a softer synonym for ‘leadership’. This was overtly formulated in a short 2007 video clip which was part of the Yokoso! Japan (Welcome to Japan) campaign, featuring then Prime Minister Abe Shinzō introducing the natural beauty, tradition and futuristic technology and pop culture of Japan and concluding by saying that ‘Japan is ready to become the bridge between Asia and the rest of the world’.21

But the Japanese government also has other expectations from Japan’s popular culture. The euphoric narrative on the global ‘discovery’ of Japan’s national cultural power and on the need to produce an influential national message is also channeled to fuel national pride as is revealed by the recurrent self-congratulatory and ethnocentric assertions embedded in the Intellectual Property Strategic Programs. This goes beyond simply advancing the (perceived) national interest—the primary goal of any national strategy. It echoes the ongoing national malaise and anxiety over how a country beset by rapid social transformation and economic downturn can avoid a collapse of its institutional system, as well as maintain a powerful role in a changing Asia (see Leheny 2006: 212). Thus, for example, explaining the philosophy (rinen) underlying the Intellectual Property Policy in the 2005 Intellectual Policy Strategic Program, the authors explain that the national policy focuses on, among other things, encouraging the Japanese people to sufficiently ‘utilize [their] outstanding capabilities in inventing and creating’ (Nihonjin no motsu sugureta sosōryoku sosakuryoku) and on contributing to the development of the world’s cultures and civilizations with the inventions and creations of

20. Komura Masahiko was Minister of Foreign Affairs from September 2007 to September 2008.
Japanese people, aspiring for Japan to ‘uphold an honoured position in the world’ (sekai de meiyo aru chii wo shimeru koto wo mezasu) (IPSP 2005: 2, emphasis mine).

Characterizing the Japanese people as imbued with ‘outstanding’ skills for innovation is as valid, or non-valid, as the better-known discourse, which is also played with in the previously mentioned ‘Creative Japan’ pamphlet, describing the outstanding aesthetic sensibilities of the Japanese (e.g. Keene 1969: 293). Creativity, innovativeness and aesthetic refinement are not collective, but personal attributes that can be used also in reference to certain cultural production fields. More than anything, such a claim can be interpreted as an attempt at re-enhancing a national identity by means of a celebrated ethnic essence. Cultural nationalism is transformed into ethnic nationalism. An even more interesting argument is hidden in the way the Intellectual Property Strategy is packaged in the seemingly progressive wrappings of a dedication to contributing to the world’s civilizations and cultures. This progressiveness, however, is immediately revealed to be a strategy to prove to the world (yet again) the worth of Japan and to finally attain an acknowledged honorable position for Japan, a position more befitting its achievements.

The Japan Brand Strategy is thus also seen as a means to revitalize patriotic pride and recruit those patriotic feelings for national ends. The Japan Brand is presented as a joint project of the government, the private sector and the citizenry. Some prerequisites for the success of the Japan Brand Strategy are ‘that the people of Japan be proud of Japan’s outstanding lifestyle (sugureta raifusutairu) and background culture; that they work hard to promote their culture and provide cultural education; that they actively expand international business by targeting foreign markets in which they had only little interest until now; and that they strategically disseminate information conveying the attractiveness of Japan’ (IPSP 2005: 105). The key to promoting the understanding of Japan’s attractiveness among the Japanese people is to encourage education on Japanese culture and tradition (ibid: 115).

The expressed need to improve the global understanding of Japan because Japan is presently ‘misunderstood’ and thus not appreciated enough, and to educate Japanese so that they can voluntarily become Japan’s global cultural agents, is very reminiscent of Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro’s approach to cultural politics and diplomacy. In a speech given in September 1986, Nakasone argued that in order to promote world peace and prosperity, Japanese must know their own traditions and be proud enough of them to want to correctly inform people in other countries about the ‘real’ Japan, which is badly misunderstood abroad (Wetherall 1987: 86–87). To mend this wrong, during Nakasone’s term as prime minister, he promoted an ‘internationalization’ (kokusaika) policy (Mouer and Sugimoto 1986: 377), which was intended primarily to globally disseminate knowledge of the Japanese culture and thus to promote Japan’s political and economic interests (Iwabuchi 1994).

This similarity between the Japan Brand Strategy and the kokusaika project is not coincidental. It attests to a long Japanese political tradition of what is labeled by McVeigh as ‘recurring renovationist nationalism’: a government-sponsored national project of state-nation construction and improvement (McVeigh 2004: 11). Renovationism here refers to a broad, inclusive and mutable ideology that has been able time and again to bring together a range of official interests and popular sentiments. ‘In Japan, when the going gets tough—too much international scrutiny, failure to achieve domestic

22. In the 1980s, and specifically during Nakasone’s tenure as prime minister (1982–1987), cultural diplomacy (bunka gaiko) increasingly came to be seen as an integral component of foreign relations (Aso 2002: 32).
political goals, loss of confidence in political economic institutions—a common response is to bring up “culture” (ibid: 198; see also, Aso 2002). ‘Culture’ (bunka) is thus often positioned at the rhetorical core of national renovation projects. Culture is used as a semantic cluster linking ethnicity, aesthetics, citizenship, economic progress, race and the renovation of Japan (McVeigh 2004: 186). Because culture is associated with progress, Japanese citizens are expected to follow state guidance and support and engage actively in promoting, elevating and encouraging it, thus participating in the economic growth of Japan (ibid: 189, 201).

In the early 1990s, as part of the kokusaika policy, the Japanese were encouraged to participate in government- and business-sponsored cross-cultural events, such as international parties, family-stay hosting programs and international festivals, devoted to enhancing ‘international communication’ (kokusai kōryū) with non-Japanese living in or visiting Japan. In 2006, during a public speech, Foreign Minister Asō urged ‘everyone in Japan’s content business’ (kontentsu gyōkai no minnasan) to cooperate with Japan’s traditional cultural diplomacy channels in polishing the Japan Brand.23 The foreign minister added that he would like to see clear delineations of roles and a positive reciprocal relationship between diplomats and the private sector. Furthermore, in order to encourage citizens’ participation in the Japan Brand Strategy, as I mentioned earlier, the government publicly acknowledges and praises those who have contributed in various outstanding ways to this project (e.g. IPSP 2008: 99, 102, 106). The Japan Brand Strategy is thus another example of how the Japanese state is simultaneously outward- and inward-looking in its multiple uses of culture as a mechanism for national mobilization (see Aso 2002: 33).

Clearly reflecting the function of the Japan Brand Strategy as a cultural renovation strategy, the 2007 strategic program explains the Japan Brand Strategy as follows:

In order to build a ‘beautiful country of Japan’ (utsukushī kuni, Nihon) that is trusted, respected and loved in the world, and for the Japanese themselves to re-acknowledge and re-appreciate the ‘attractiveness’ (miryoku) of Japan, we must improve the ‘cultural creativity’ (bunka sōzōryoku) of our country and as a nation establish and reinforce an attractive Japan Brand. Then, we must actively disseminate abroad [this image of] an attractive Japan’ (IPSP 2007: 108, emphasis mine).

The loss and the hopeful future rehabilitation of national pride in Japan is exposed here as a major concern of the Japanese government. The recovery of national pride through cultural renovation is seen as a prerequisite for successful economic and political participation in the global arena.

6. By Way of Conclusion: Is This the Death of Cool Japan?

The Japan Brand Strategy allows a glimpse into the government laboratory in which the market driven imagery of Cool Japan is being tamed and appropriated to suit national interests. Through selective appropriation, promotion and combination of cultural products, this strategy aims to construct politically meaningful images of Japan for domestic and international audiences. The exploration of the Japan Brand Strategy is therefore significant for understanding the contemporary economic and political climate in Japan. It is also significant for re-examining the role of the state as a cultural

23. See footnote 10.
planning apparatus in an emerging global space of ‘media convergence’: an environment in which new communication and information technologies are reshaping almost every aspect of contemporary life, including how people create, consume, learn and interact with each other, thus altering the ways that consumers interact with core institutions of government, education and commerce (Jenkins 2006). Government agencies cannot forbid, control or manage the cultural production and the often subversive vitality of Cool Japan imagery which is (re)produced in this environment. As I have shown, at most, they can produce their own politically motivated and carefully reinvented imagery which thus becomes a competing sterilized version of the original. Ironically, the more widespread the institutional imagery of Cool Japan becomes, the faster the market hype dubbed Cool Japan is likely to fade away.

What is Cool is of course a tricky question. But it seems to me safe to generalize and argue that Japanese cool can be characterized as well-designed, hedonistic, sometimes whimsical and always cutting edge and therefore challenges in a non-aggressive and imaginative way the banality and orthodox structures of everyday life. But Cool Japan is often more than this. It can be provocative, audacious and explicitly countercultural. It can also be very violent and pornographic. Whether dripping sweetness or shockingly aggressive, like a subcultural style, Cool Japan is a form of refusal, interrupting the process of normalization. As such, it challenges the principle of unity and cohesion and contradicts the myth of consensus (see Hebdige 1979: 18). The private sector in Japan and abroad, multinational distribution companies, consumers and the media have been the main propellers of the production and dissemination of the imagery of Cool Japan. Unlike them, the Japan Brand Strategy is not committed to promoting but to fleshing out selected ‘information of value’ and an essential Japanese cultural attractiveness. In doing so it elides the notion of uninhibited diversity and localized protest embedded in the cluster of cultural forms that has become Cool Japan. Put differently, the Japan Brand Strategy is constructed as a corporate marketing strategy devised to please and attract consumers and yet it is crucially different from other market strategies devised by ‘merchants of cool’ who are only economically motivated. Creators and sellers of popular culture reproduce and intentionally enhance without reservation the desires of their target markets in ways that are indeed manipulative and yet seem to be real and true to the consumers’ lives and attitudes (Goodman 2001). The government of Japan, however, is embarking on a project to reshape the Japanese public space as a particular ‘respectful’ topography. When used by government agencies, Cool Japan becomes an oxymoron. It is stripped entirely of its particular potential to question and challenge culture. The current government appropriation of Cool Japan imagery is thus taking away its cutting-edge, countercultural appeal, speeding its merging into mainstream.

But the potential cultural demise of Cool Japan imagery might be brought about not only by its institutional taming. Cool has become the central ideology of late consumer capitalism (Frank 1997). In consumer capitalism, cool is ephemeral by definition, always to be replaced by something newer and more exciting. Unsurprisingly, there are doubts among observers as to how much longer Japan’s cool cultural production will be able to maintain its global avant-garde position (Aoki 2004: 16, cited in Lam 2007: 352). As I have shown, the rhetorical appeal of Cool Japan as a desirable and

24. It is for this reason that acclaimed comic writer and cultural critic Otsuka Eiji opposes all government involvement in manga or anime expression (see Otsuka and Osawa 2005).
yet indefinable concept has enticed government employees to tie it with several unrelated export industries. Furthermore, Cool and Cool Japan have also become the marketing slogans for unrelated government-led policies and projects. Not unlike other slogans advocated by Japanese elites in post-war Japan, which were always closely related to political circumstances (see Iwabuchi 1994), Cool and Cool Japan are used as attractive symbols around which people might be willing to gather. Cool, as a government slogan, manufactures an empty space in the dominant ideology in which the government invests its hopes. The result, however, is its trivialization and the exhaustion of its rhetorical appeal. To slightly rephrase blogger David Marx’s astute comment, as the Japanese Cabinet embarks on doing Cool Japan, it adds nails to Japan Cool’s threateningly awaiting coffin. Cool Japan, with its subversive potential, and the official civilized ‘system’ can coexist only by maintaining their mutual contempt.

One possible conclusion is that in the contemporary cultural environment dominated by various local and international market forces, instead of authoritative cultural planning (more reminiscent of propaganda than anything else), governments should truly adopt the stance of engaged facilitators, stimulators and network hubs and allow market forces to do their work with the least possible intervention. As far as the Japan Brand Strategy is concerned, it is encouraging to see that the 2008 Intellectual Property Strategic Program advocates critical reflection toward past measures. It remains to be seen if future programs will articulate a more progressive approach.

References


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25. Thus, Prime Minister Koizumi’s cabinet introduced the ‘Cool Biz’ campaign designed to reduce air condition use in offices by relaxing office dress code. During Prime Minister Fukuda’s administration, one of the three channels on the Japanese Government Internet TV site was dubbed Cool Japan. Here were posted several unrelated videos, such as an announcement on new immigration procedures, a report on the national commission on social security, the deliberations over the FY2008 budget, the introduction of nursing care robots and more (available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ugeVlgS3EYM, accessed 6 July 2009). And more recently, Prime Minister Asō introduced the ‘Cool Earth Partnership’ global program for reducing global warming.


27. While Kondo (2008: 202–203) reflects on the role of public diplomacy in enhancing soft power and not on the more general idea of governments as cultural planning apparatuses, I think that my own views reverberate well with his views on the need of governments to adjust to new multiple-actors and complex environments.


