Japan’s Cultural Diplomacy, Past and Present

Kazuo Ogoura

I. Cultural Diplomacy, Cultural Exchange and Public Diplomacy

In many countries, particularly in Japan, the terms cultural diplomacy and cultural exchange policies are often confused. Although it is true that cultural diplomacy overlaps in practice with certain aspects of international cultural exchange, this does not mean that the two concepts are the same. Cultural diplomacy is the use of cultural means to enhance a nation’s political influence. As part of a nation’s foreign policy, it naturally carries political implications. International cultural exchange, meanwhile, is not necessarily linked to a nation’s political intentions or strategies, at least in the short term. Under this concept, cultural activities are undertaken not as a political means to bolster a nation’s image but as creative endeavours valid in their own right—that is, for the purpose of mutual inspiration through international exchange.

There is also an element of public policy which is included in the concept of cultural exchange but which is not always covered by the ordinary concept of cultural diplomacy. This is the idea of the “internationalisation” of Japan through various exchanges with foreign countries. Indeed, Japanese policy on international cultural exchange has sometimes emphasized the importance of exchange as a means to promote Japanese understanding of foreign cultures in order for the Japanese to have a more “internationalized” outlook.

In the formal report of the deliberations in the Forum for Discussion on International Exchanges in a New Age, there was a special section devoted to the “internationalization of the Japanese people and Japanese society”.(1)

The advisory groups established under successive prime ministers to discuss and formulate Japanese cultural policies were generally called “forums on international cultural exchange”.(2) The body created for a similar purpose under the Koizumi cabinet, however, was called the “forum for discussing the promotion of cultural diplomacy”.(3) At around the same time, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs merged the section in charge of international cultural exchange with the public relations

Kazuo Ogoura
Invited Professor of Aoyama Gakuin University and President of the Japan Foundation
office and named the new section the Public Diplomacy Department.\(^{(4)}\)

These moves implied that the Japanese government was focusing its attention on cultural diplomacy instead of cultural exchange. Indeed, Japanese government policy for international cultural exchange appears increasingly geared towards fulfilling national political objectives. Whether this is a healthy trend or not is debatable, particularly when we see that numerous countries around the world have begun emphasizing public diplomacy. One of the most effective means of public diplomacy is, undoubtedly, cultural and intellectual exchange.

It may also be pertinent here to define \textit{public diplomacy} and how it differs from cultural diplomacy, at least in the context of Japanese foreign policy.

Public diplomacy refers to a national government’s efforts to influence international opinions on its national or foreign policies through public relations activities or intellectual exchange targeting the media or citizens’ groups. Public diplomacy is therefore not the same as cultural diplomacy, in that the former is always closely associated with a well-defined political objective and aimed at certain pre-determined targets while the latter is not necessarily linked to a specific political objective. The two sometimes overlap in the sense that the forms public diplomacy takes include efforts to improve the nation’s image by means of cultural activities. But even in this case, there is a subtle difference between the two because public diplomacy is usually linked with an effort to improve the nation’s image for some specific strategic purpose.

In any event, one cannot reduce the significance of international exchanges in fine and performing arts or intellectual exchanges to that of mere political exercises in the guise of culture. Even when they are sponsored by governments or quasi-governmental organizations, not all international cultural activities are—or should be—directly linked to narrowly defined national interests. This is especially true in our increasingly globalized world, where short-term national interests may conflict with wider, long-term global interests.

The subsequent chapters deal mainly with cultural diplomacy as defined above, but they touch also on some aspects of Japan’s cultural exchange policies and public diplomacy over the past decades.

\textbf{II. The History of Japan’s Cultural Diplomacy}

If the main objective of cultural diplomacy is to improve a nation’s image and prestige through such aspects of culture as fine and performing arts, language education, and intellectual traditions, the first question we must ask ourselves in relation to Japan’s cultural diplomacy is, “What kind of national image has Japan sought to project to the world through its cultural diplomacy?” In this regard, Japanese cultural diplomacy has undergone several stages of evolution.
During the 1950s and early 1960s, the goal of Japanese cultural diplomacy was to transform the prewar image of Japan as a militaristic country into a new image of Japan as a peace-loving democracy. It is highly symbolic that the first step taken by postwar Japan to restore its status in international organizations was to join UNESCO in 1951. In other words, the effort to construct a peace-loving, democratic Japan was closely associated with the promotion of cultural activities, through which Japan sought to establish a new national identity.

In line with these developments, when engaging in cultural activities overseas, the Japanese government emphasized such traditions as the tea ceremony and ikebana (flower arrangement), with the intention that they would convey Japan’s serene, peace-loving nature to the rest of the world. Many of the pamphlets and brochures on Japan distributed during this period, featured photos of cherry blossoms and a snow-capped Mount Fuji, both of which conveyed a sense of tranquility and serenity. It was also in this period that the Japanese Foreign Ministry started distributing ikebana calendars to people and organizations in other countries, a practice that continues to this day.

During this period, the overseas promotion of certain elements of traditional Japanese culture, particularly those related to the samurai spirit or feudal traditions, was discouraged. Likewise, until the early 1970s, Japanese language education abroad was not actively encouraged because many Japanese intellectuals, as well as citizens of former Japanese colonies in Korea and China, recalling Japan’s prewar efforts to propagate the Japanese language in Asia, still felt a connection between such efforts and Japanese imperial ambitions.

Japan’s cultural diplomacy entered a second stage in the late 1960s and early 1970s. During this period, particularly after the Tokyo Olympics of 1964, emphasis shifted from projecting an image of a “peaceful Japan” to painting a picture of an economically advanced Japan. This was partly in response to American and European reactions to Japan’s economic development, which began attracting international attention in the late 1950s and early 1960s. During this period Japanese products were still considered “cheap” imports in many countries, and Japanese exporters encountered various obstacles, such as allegations of market disruption, dumping and other criticism. To counter such arguments, cultural diplomacy was mobilized to promote the idea that the Japanese economy was about to reach a new stage and to project the image of Japan as a technologically and economically advanced nation. In other words, in the late 1960s and 1970s, Japan deployed a more positive cultural diplomacy in place of the “reactive” diplomacy aimed at dispelling its pre-war militaristic image (although it should be noted that this positive diplomacy was still partly based on the reactive motive of dispelling Japan’s “negative” economic image).

At the same time, however, this shift in Japanese cultural diplomacy was rooted in something new; namely, Japan’s newfound status as a responsible member of the international community. Hosting the Tokyo Olympics in 1964, establishing the Economic Cooperation Bureau and restoring
the Cultural Activities Bureau in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, joining the OECD—all these moves were manifestations of Japan’s growing status in the international community and its new identity as a democratic, economically developed nation.

This trend was reflected in a strengthening of overseas cultural activities, most clearly manifested in efforts to consolidate Japan’s overseas cultural infrastructure. Notable examples of this include the establishment of overseas cultural and information centres attached to embassies, the establishment in 1962 of the Japanese Language Society for Foreigners and its later consolidation, and the conclusion of a series of cultural exchange agreements with eight socialist countries between 1969 (with Yugoslavia) and 1979 (with China). This period also witnessed the enthusiastic introduction of Kabuki and Noh theater to the international community.

The establishment of the Japan Foundation in 1972 was further evidence of this positive cultural diplomacy. Created with a ¥20 billion endowment (later increased to ¥50 billion), the foundation’s major activities were (1) assistance for Japanese language education abroad; (2) cultural exchange, including exchanges among artists and musicians; and (3) the encouragement of Japanese studies abroad.

In light of Japan’s economic development, the government’s efforts in promoting Japanese studies abroad included a special focus on the study of the Japanese economy. Among the initiatives in this field was the establishment of the Tanaka Fund to support 10 major universities in the United States in promoting their Japanese studies. The contribution of 1 million dollars each to 10 American universities has helped a great deal in expanding the institutional framework of Japanese studies in the U.S.

The 1970s brought another shift in Japan’s cultural diplomacy, this time in response to the rise of an anti-Japanese sentiment in Asia, as typified by the eruption of feelings in Southeast Asia against the perceived Japanese economic onslaught. Rapidly increasing economic dependence on Japan in terms of trade, investment, and development assistance provoked a backlash in many parts of Asia. Some people sarcastically labelled the country “Faceless Japan” or “Banana Japan”, the latter implying that the Japanese did not understand Asia because they were yellow on the outside (Asian in appearance) but white on the inside (Western in thinking). Others complained that Japan was always represented by Sony and Honda or by the yen note, without any direct person-to-person contacts with its Asian partners.

Such criticism spurred Japan to strengthen its cultural activities in Asia. The establishment of Japan Foundation offices in most Southeast Asian countries was clear evidence of the new policy, which later led to the opening in 1990 of the Japan Foundation ASEAN Culture Center, a facility tasked with introducing the culture of ASEAN countries to Japan in order to enhance Japanese knowledge of and interest in the Southeast Asian region.
It was also during this period that the Ohira School was established in China to promote Japanese studies, mainly from the standpoint of sharing Japan’s experiences of economic development for the benefit of China’s new policy of modernization.

It is worth noting that Japan’s new, positive cultural diplomacy was partially motivated by a desire to change Japan’s own perception of itself. This desire was in evidence in some of the statements made by members of the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee as they debated the establishment of the Japan Foundation.

During the debate, the then Foreign Minister Takeo Fukuda, who took the political initiative to create the Japan Foundation, declared: “Japan should now seek its own prosperity in the prosperity of the world, and the whole nation must be conscious of this goal.” In other words, the Japanese people should foster a keen awareness of Japan’s involvement in international activities.

The next stage in the evolution of Japan’s cultural diplomacy commenced in the late 1980s. As the Japanese economy matured and the country’s importance on the international stage increased, expectations for Japan to make more contributions as a responsible partner in the international community began to grow. Cultural diplomacy was perceived as one of the “three pillars” of Japan’s foreign policy—the first being the country’s contributions to peacekeeping operations or similar activities and the second being its official developmental assistance or economic aid policies.

The novel concept of “cultural cooperation” began to play a role in Japan’s cultural diplomacy during this period. Cultural cooperation encompassed such activities as helping developing countries to stage theatrical performances, providing them with lighting or recording equipment, furnishing showcases for museums, and giving them technical assistance in art management. It was in this spirit that Japan created a special fund within UNESCO in the early 1990s for the purpose of preserving the cultural heritage of developing countries.(7)

One of the goals of Japan’s cultural diplomacy in the late 1980s and early 1990s was to counter the sense of threat felt by American and European businesses as Japan’s investment and export activities started to have worldwide impact. “Revisionist” American intellectuals advocated measures to ward off what they viewed as the Japanese “threat” and characterized Japan as an alien society whose fundamental nature would never change. Their reaction was representative of those Americans and Europeans who felt threatened by Japanese economic inroads.(8) In order to alleviate these concerns, the Japanese government employed public diplomacy to emphasize its desire and willingness to form partnerships in the international community, particularly with other developed nations. This diplomatic campaign led to the establishment of the Center for Global Partnership (CGP) in 1992, with the goal of promoting new types of cultural and intellectual exchange with the United States. Supported by a ¥50 billion endowment, the CGP was intended to promote various programmes that could be broadly categorized as the “global agenda”. Several programmes were
formed to promote intellectual dialogue between the United States and Japan on items on the common agenda, such as democratization in developing countries, environmental problems and infectious diseases. The CGP also sought to promote new types of citizen-to-citizen exchange, such as contacts between NGOs in both countries.

It was also around this time that the Japanese and U.S. governments together launched the Common Agenda for Cooperation in Global Perspective. This involved pooling human and financial resources to enable U.S. and Japanese experts to carry out projects with global implications in such fields as democratization in El Salvador and coral reef conservation in the Pacific Ocean.\(^9\) Although the actions taken under the Common Agenda were not necessarily in “cultural” fields, this exercise could be viewed as a part of the public diplomacy conducted by Japan to counter the views of revisionists.

Misgivings over Japanese economic inroads in Asia and revisionist theories in America gave rise to counter-arguments in Japan, typified by *The Japan That Can Say No*, written by Akira Morita and Shintaro Ishihara. The revisionist argument also triggered a feeling of *Ken-bei* (aversion to America) and criticism against “Americanism” in some Japanese intellectual circles, which can be interpreted as the flip-side of Japanese public diplomacy in the 1990s.

Another effect of the international criticism of Japan was a shift in the mentality of the Japanese, in that the Japanese people became more conscious of the need for them to share the thoughts and sentiments of other countries and to deepen and broaden their contacts with the international community.

The result was the nationwide call for Japan to become more “internationalized” by opening up culturally and intellectually to the international community. This trend gave rise to the establishment by local governments of sections dealing with international exchange. The launch of the JET Programme, in which hundreds of foreign language teachers and international exchange coordinators began to be invited to Japan each year, was a further attempt to internationalize Japan’s local communities.\(^10\)

Looking back on these developments of the late 1980s and early 1990s, one can again detect a desire to establish a new identity for Japan in the international community—that of a responsible, respectful and unselfish Japan striving to realize global peace, prosperity and security by non-military means. It was with this spirit in mind that the Debating Group on International Cultural Exchange established under the cabinet of Prime Minister Noboru Takeshita concluded that one of the ultimate aims of international cultural exchange was to contribute to national and global security.

In the mid-1990s Japan had again to adapt its diplomacy to a new era as countries around the world began to experience the waves of globalization. At the same time, a decade of slow economic
growth and a ballooning fiscal deficit required Japan to find a new orientation for its cultural diplomacy. First, Japan was forced to redefine its own cultural identity in this globalized world. Having been more or less fully accepted as a responsible partner in the community of developed, democratic nations, Japan had to project an image of itself not as a newcomer to the developed nations’ club but as a truly responsible and mature partner.

This meant that instead of emphasizing the exotic aspects of Japanese culture, Japan had to present itself as a pioneer of postmodern culture. Anime, manga, fashion, pop music, cuisine and novels from young writers all began to occupy an important role in Japan’s international cultural activities. Most of these activities, however, are commercial in nature, and consequently Japan’s cultural diplomacy became closely associated with its trade policy, such as the protection of intellectual property rights or participation in international film festivals and book fairs. This new direction was best symbolized by the spread of the concept of the “content industry”, which refers to music, anime, film, fashion and related service industries. The combination of Japanese electronic technology with traditional culture also began to attract attention. Contemporary robot technology, for instance, is related to the traditions of the karakuri-ningyo (mechanized marionettes) of the Edo period. In other words, Japanese cultural diplomacy began to focus on the relationship between the country’s time-honoured cultural traditions and its modern technology.

Globalization, however, had another significant impact on the orientation of Japan’s public and cultural diplomacy. A noticeable aspect of globalization has been the rapid economic progress of China, South Korea and certain Southeast Asian countries. As a result of their economic development, many Asian nations can now afford to deploy their own cultural diplomacy around the world. Consequently, the image that Japan used to project to the rest of the world—which suggested that it was the only nation in Asia with an advanced economy, democratic institutions and ancient cultural traditions—became blurred in comparison with other Asian nations. Japan, in carrying out its cultural diplomacy, was faced with the need to distinguish itself more clearly from China, South Korea and other Asian nations; the areas in which Japan differs from other Asian nations in terms of cultural tradition thus took on greater importance. Japan’s status as “unique” in Asia was also weakened, if not eliminated, and the significance of Japan as an economic model changed, partly due to the Asian economic crisis and Japanese recession in the 1990s. Consequently, Japan’s traditional cultural diplomacy, through which it sought to project an image of itself as the sole economically advanced nation in Asia and therefore a model for other Asian nations to follow, began to be reconsidered.

It was, therefore, more of a hybrid vision of Japan, a combination of the old and the new, that was emphasised in the country’s cultural diplomacy in this period. The Great Edo Exhibition, which opened in London in 1995, can be seen as an attempt to demonstrate the image of Japan as a
combination of the old and the new.

Then came the new century and yet another phase in the evolution of Japan’s cultural diplomacy. This new phase is characterized by the growing interdependence and development of common cultural perceptions among young people in East Asia, particularly Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and coastal China, as evidenced by the popularity of Korean TV dramas in Japan and China and by the widespread admiration for Japanese pop music in South Korea and China.\(^{(12)}\)

It is in this context that many international cultural exchanges in East Asia have been carried out on a commercial basis and that the roles of the government and quasi-official organizations have begun to be redefined. Another phenomenon in East Asia is the rise of “nationalism” in South Korea and China. National pride in achieving economic progress, coupled with the sense of being historically exploited by colonial powers, have given rise to increasingly assertive nationalism in South Korea and China, which is sometimes directed at Japan because of these countries’ wartime or colonial experiences with Japan.

These developments have prompted several new directions in Japanese cultural diplomacy. In China, for instance, the Japan Foundation has begun creating the Heart-to-Heart network of small information centres introducing contemporary Japanese culture to young Chinese.\(^{(13)}\) And in South Korea, some voluntary organizations, with the support of the government and the Japan Foundation, organized Matsuri (carnival-type citizens’ festivals) in central Seoul, enabling Korean and Japanese citizens to share the experience of joining together at the same cultural event, thereby consolidating a shared sense of belonging to the same community.

**III. The Current Phase**

Today, Japan is confronted with several new challenges. One is the increasing difficulty of mobilizing financial resources for overseas cultural activities. There is a feeling that any cultural exchange programme should be able to demonstrate immediate benefits that can be explained to taxpayers and other stakeholders. This means that it is getting more and more difficult to channel resources to projects of which the outcome can be verified only after a long period. Intellectual exchanges, for instance, can be put into this category. The decline in the activities of many think tanks in Japan is one consequence of this trend, but it has also exacerbated the decrease in Japanese participation in international discourse.

In a related trend, there are growing calls in political circles for Japan’s overseas cultural diplomacy to be geared more to propagating Japan’s ideas, culture and traditions to the rest of the world.\(^{(14)}\)

However reasonable this view may appear at first glance, there is a flaw in this way of
thinking, for it is based on the assumption that Japanese culture and traditions belong fundamentally to Japan and the Japanese and that Japan should make others understand its cultural traits.

In this increasingly globalized world, however, each nation’s “unique” culture is becoming more and more indistinguishable from those of other countries. In other words, cultural goods and services are being internationalized in the global market. Some “Japanese” cultural products may be better produced or performed by non-Japanese, just as some types of French cuisine may be better made by Japanese chefs instead of French cuisiniers. It is, in fact, questionable whether Murakami Haruki’s literature, anime and otaku culture are really “Japanese” phenomena. They may represent certain traits of an ultramodern culture that does not necessarily “belong to Japan”.

Against this background, many players engaged in contemporary Japanese cultural diplomacy, including the Japan Foundation, have adopted the policy of viewing “Japanese” cultural traditions not as Japan’s property but as the precious heritage of all humankind. This implies that Japanese cultural diplomacy should not only propagate Japanese thought and traditions to the world but also aim at introducing non-Japanese culture to Japan to enrich the cultural heritage of the world. This helps to preserve cultural diversity, thereby contributing to the maintenance of a rich cultural environment for all humankind.

In an innovative development, Japan has begun to harness cultural exchange as a means of building peace. This new concept of peace building through cultural exchange demonstrates the multi-functional nature of cultural diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy now has various dimensions, some of which were not clearly perceived until recently. Stimulating the renaissance of local communities and helping ethnic groups with different cultural backgrounds to achieve peaceful coexistence are among the diverse goals now pursued through Japan’s international cultural exchange.

“Soft power” is another concept that has come to influence Japan’s cultural diplomacy. Although the notion of soft power as a policy instrument should be handled with care, it has become a central argument of those in Japan who advocate more aggressive cultural diplomacy. Some policy measures have already been taken that can be characterized as concrete applications of this concept.

When Japan’s cooperation with the United States in the Iraq war threatened to tarnish its image in the Middle East, Japan decided to pursue “soft power” diplomacy in the cultural domain in order to mitigate the damage. The distribution of picture books, written by a member of the Imperial Family of Japan, to elementary school children in the region where the Self-Defense Forces were stationed, the invitation to Japan of the Iraqi national football team, and the broadcasting on Iraqi TV of the football-themed Japanese anime Captain Tsubasa are examples of Japan using its “soft power” to maintain its positive image in the Arab world.

The establishment of the Heart-to-Heart Information Centers in provincial cities in China,
which was referred to earlier, can be included among these attempts at a new type of Japanese cultural diplomacy.

A Foreign Ministry initiative to give awards to young foreign manga artists is another example of an attempt to harness ultramodern aspects of Japanese attractiveness for the purpose of international exchange. The products of Japan’s postmodern culture, however, are not particularly suited to government-sponsored activities as they include, in some cases, anti-social or anti-establishment elements. Consequently, while Japan’s “ultramodern attractiveness” is felt around the world, it is not easy for the Japanese authorities to mobilize such elements as an instrument of cultural diplomacy.

IV. Concluding Remarks

Looking back on the development of Japan’s cultural diplomacy over the past half-century, a basic trend is evident.

Japanese cultural diplomacy has always aimed to dispel negative images of Japan or, to put it differently, has always attempted to “correct” misconceptions regarding Japan in foreign countries. The basic message of Japan’s cultural diplomacy has been “Japan has changed” or “Japan is not what you may think it is”. Now, however, Japan must think beyond the traditional patterns of cultural diplomacy. It must have more confidence in its time-honoured cultural traditions and should work to share them more widely and deeply with people in other countries—not for the purpose of enhancing Japan’s image abroad but as a contribution to the enrichment of human society and the maintenance of global peace and cultural diversity.

(1) *Atarashii jidai no kokusai bunka koryu* (International Cultural Exchange in a New Era), Chapter 3: “Nihon shakai to Nihonjin no kokusaika” (Internationalization of the Japanese and Japanese Society), June 1994. The relevant passage reads: “It has on the other hand been recognized in many local communities more strongly than ever that international exchanges not only promote mutual understanding (between different nationalities) but also play a large role in internationalizing Japanese thinking and the Japanese social system . . . we have come to the age where international exchange in which each individual can participate is indispensable for the internationalization of Japan as a whole.”

(2) A forum established in 1994, for instance, was called “Kokusai bunka koryu ni kansuru kondankai” (forum for discussing international cultural exchange).

(3) A forum established in 2002 called, in Japanese, “Bunka gaiko no suishin ni kansuru kondankai”.

(4) The department dealing with international cultural activities in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs used to be called the Cultural Activities Department and was later (in 1984) renamed the Cultural Exchange Department. The process of Japan’s entry to UNESCO is explained by Masayoshi Matsumura in *Kokusai koryu shi* (History of
The P.R. pamphlet “Japan of Today”, published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, used to feature a photo of cherry blossoms and snow-capped Mount Fuji.


This fund, originally intended to support the conservation of monuments or historical sites that might be neglected in the course of economic and social changes in developing countries, later expanded its scope to encompass the preservation of intangible cultural assets such as music and dancing. In a similar vein, the Japanese government, in the early 1990s, organized international demonstrations of various types of traditional sports in Asia by inviting to Japan exponents of archery and ancient ball games mainly practiced by minority tribes. This served to put the sports in the international spotlight, which, it was hoped, would encourage the efforts of these people to maintain such traditions.

Representative views of American revisionists can be found in James Fallow’s article in the Atlantic Monthly of May 1989.

For details of the Common Agenda, see http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/agenda/gpers.html

The JET Programme was initiated in 1987. Its budget in fiscal 1989 was 300 million yen and has now (in fiscal 2008) reached 1.1 billion yen. Under this programme nearly 4,000 to 5,000 young people are invited to Japan each year from nearly 40 countries, either as teaching assistants of foreign languages or international coordinators attached to various provincial governments. See Jun Wada, “Higashi Ajia ni okeru Nihon no kokusai bunka koryu to bunka gaiko” (Japan’s International Cultural Exchange and Cultural Diplomacy in East Asia), in Soeya and Tadokoro ed., Nihon no Higashi Asia Koso (Japan’s Vision for East Asia) (2004, Keio University).

A forum for the promotion of content industries was created under the Prime Minister’s Office in 2002.

The percentages of people who watched Korean TV dramas in China and Japan reached a high level, as the table below shows.

As of the end of 2008, there are three full-scale centres (in Cheng Du, Chang Chun and Nanjiing) co-managed by the Japan Foundation and local public organs and two small-scale centres mainly managed by local public organs (Nanton and Yenbian).

The report published in 2005 at the end of the deliberations of the Discussion Group on the Promotion of Cultural Diplomacy emphasized the “growing importance of the diplomatic aspect of international cultural activities” and advocated the strengthening of the “capacity for propagation”.