

# The French Cultural Strategy and the Japanese Paradigm How to Seduce in International Relations in the 21st Century?

Pierre-William Fregonese and Kazunari Sakai

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Article abstract

France used to have one of the most powerful cultural diplomacy: it needs nowadays to modernize its strategy to hold on to its international position. France has a long history of foreign cultural policy and is one of the few countries that have placed great emphasis on fostering its culture abroad. However, the French position is currently being challenged by emerging international rivalries. Establishing a cultural strategy in the 21st century requires not only a consistent approach between the projection of an elite culture and of a pop culture, but also a joint action between public and private players. Japan could be a model, even a paradigm for France and its cultural action abroad, as well as an ally through a cultural alliance.



# The French Cultural Strategy and the Japanese Paradigm: How to Seduce in International Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?

af alternative francophone  
pour une francophonie en mode mineur

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*Pierre-William Fregonese à*

pierre-william.fregonese@sciencespo-lille.eu

Université Paris 2 / Sciences Po Lille

*Kazunari Sakai*

kazu@harbor.kobe-u.ac.jp

Kobe University

**Abstract.** *La France possédait l'une des plus puissantes diplomaties culturelles : elle doit aujourd'hui moderniser sa stratégie pour conserver sa position sur la scène internationale. La France, qui a une diplomatie culturelle historique, est l'un des rares pays à avoir autant mis l'accent sur la promotion de sa culture à l'étranger. Cependant, cette démarche française est actuellement remise en cause par des rivalités internationales émergentes. Mettre en place une stratégie culturelle au XXI<sup>ème</sup> siècle nécessite non seulement une approche cohérente entre la projection d'une culture d'élite et d'une culture pop, mais aussi une action conjointe entre acteurs publics et privés. Aussi le Japon pourrait être un modèle, voire un paradigme, pour la France et son action culturelle à l'étranger, ainsi qu'une opportunité d'alliance culturelle.*

**Mots-clés :** *stratégie culturelle, influence; soft power; diplomatie culturelle; France; Japon*

**Abstract.** *France used to have one of the most powerful cultural diplomacies: nowadays, it needs to modernize its strategy to hold on to its international position. France has a long history of foreign cultural policy and is one of the few countries that have placed great emphasis on fostering its culture abroad. However, the French position is currently being challenged by emerging international rivalries. Establishing a cultural strategy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century requires not only a consistent approach between the projection of an elite culture and a pop culture, but also joint action between public and private players. Japan could be a model, even a paradigm, for France and its cultural action abroad, as well as an ally through a cultural alliance.*

**Key words:** *cultural strategy; influence; soft power; cultural diplomacy; France; Japan*

## INTRODUCTION

Culture holds a specific position in France, where cultural policies are seen as one of the vectors making the country attractive. Such a specificity not only influences domestic policy, it also provides a key advantage in a globalized world. Culture supports public action in many fields, including diplomacy. France has undeniably an impact on an international level when the country promotes its heritage, values, creativity or institutions. The French approach of cultural influence tends to be original: being a leader that promotes its own culture while remaining a neutral mediator on the international stage. These two diplomatic positions can be referred to as “standing out” and “reaching out” (Doeser and Nisbett). ‘Standing out’ gives priority to soft power while ‘reaching out’ focuses on cultural diplomacy. France has always made use of both leadership and collaboration. On the one hand, promoting national gastronomy, haute couture or the French Tech pertains to ‘standing out’. On the other hand, one of the best illustrations of ‘reaching out’ may be former French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin's eloquent speech, against the war in Iraq in 2003 at the United Nations. Similarly, two guiding principles embody the French position: cultural exception and cultural diversity. Both are intrinsically bound: France tends to defend the latter through the former by enhancing artistic cooperation, providing hospitality to foreign artists, and fostering mutual understanding between nations.

Nevertheless, influence in global affairs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has evolved, giving prime importance to ‘mainstream culture’ (Martel) through the emergence of non-governmental players (Nye, *The Future of Power*) – mainly companies from the creative industry. Such a new context forces France to rethink its cultural strategy (Fregonese) while maintaining its ability to remain attractive to other nations. Japan could therefore be an inspiration for such a policy change, since it has managed to remain a powerful soft power (Nye, *Bound to Lead*) thanks to a multimodal influence exerted through public but also private incentives. This paper will not merely tackle public diplomacy and French public agents, since hundreds of theses, books and articles about cultural diplomacy and domestic policies have already been written on the topic.<sup>1</sup> It will rather aim at delineating and analyzing the potentialities of a combined policy bringing

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<sup>1</sup> Dulphy, Anne *et al.* (eds.). *Les relations culturelles internationales au XX<sup>ème</sup> siècle : De la diplomatie culturelle à l'acculturation*. Peter Lang, 2010; Haize, Daniel. *L'action culturelle et de coopération de la France à l'étranger*. L'Harmattan, 2012; Mollard, Claude. *L'ingénierie culturelle et l'évaluation des politiques culturelles en France*, PUF, 2012.

together public and private sectors in order to maximize French influence and keep culture as a source of economic growth in the country.

After providing a brief overview of French cultural strategy and its issues in a context of increasing international competition, this paper will consider the evolution - or lack thereof - of French influence, its achievements and weaknesses. It will then consider the significance of Japanese influence in France and eventually conclude with the possible formation of spheres of influence, understood as key elements in the development of a powerful soft power.

## THEORIES ON SOFT POWER: CULTURE IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

In the study of International Relations, hard power - the military or economic ways through which a state can force others to follow its will - has long been prominent. Following the end of the cold war, soft power has been recognized as an indispensable element to complement hard power. This change can be understood through the increase of international issues where power resources and actors tended to diversify. In the 1990s, Huntington's *Clash of civilizations* (1996) sought to be the new grand theory on international politics, claiming that in the post-Cold war era, a war may erupt no longer between states, but along the "fault-lines" of civilizations. Cultural elements such as religion and language rather than national interests from sovereign states could be sources of conflicts in such situations.

Realist theories that considered exclusively hard power (mainly military) and held states as the only legitimate entity in international relations, were not able to explain international events effectively, while soft power elements like religion, language, culture and identity emerged as indispensable factors to understand ethnic conflicts, reflecting the "return of culture and identity in IR theory" (Lapid & Kratochwil). Social constructivism partly took the place of realism to reflect on the new aspects of the post-cold war events.

From a constructivist perspective, neglecting culture means taking the risk of seeing the world only through one's own:

If we do not fully understand other countries including their culture, America's sense of superiority ... and patronizing attitudes toward other countries will simply be perpetuated, which is a disaster for American foreign policy ... if we fail to pay serious attention to other countries' cultures, we perpetuate ethnocentrism, defined as the inability to understand other societies except through our own, rose-colored, and often biased lenses ... The attacks of September 11, 2001, and rising anti-Americanism throughout the world caught almost all Americans by surprise. The question was and is: Why do they hate us so? If we understood other cultures and countries better, we would know the answer to that question ... unless we understand other countries, societies, cultures, and peoples, both our place in the world and our foreign policy will suffer. (Wiarda 11-12)

The message is clear: neglecting cultural aspects leads to a high probability of unintended negative results. If a country does not properly grasp the culture of others, it will then similarly lose the understanding it was enjoying, damaging its own image and diminishing its presence in international society. Diplomacy's primary purpose of reaching an agreement is highly dependent on mutual understanding, including cultural aspects.

The concept of soft power has usually been used in assessing the role and the functions of cultural aspects in international relations. Soft power has an indirect rather than direct effect on people's way of thinking and behavior. Walter Lippmann offers a useful reminder:

What each man does is based not on direct and certain knowledge, but on pictures made by himself or given to him. ... The way in which the world is imagined determines at any particular moment what men will do. It does not determine what they will achieve. It determines their effort, their feelings, their hopes, not their accomplishments and results. (Lippman 25-26)

This is a century-old argument, but it grasps the essentials of human behavior. Soft power affects the way people conceive the world, even influencing governmental institutions. Of course, hard power has not lost its prominence as a key factor for political decision making. However, soft power holds a growing importance in the process of world politics: in a proactive way towards foreign actors, or at least as a safety net to avoid serious conflicts between states so as to keep their relations running (Vaïsse 523).

Cultural diplomacy has been developed as a political tool to use soft power in a strategic objective. As analyzed by Vaïsse, “culture can be a political weapon, an element of soft power, instrument of cooperation but also of competition, even of rivalry among states” (523). Many Western countries have tried to establish their own style of cultural diplomacy based on their historical relations with foreign countries and traditional political culture. The cultural diplomacy of each country has a common ground, *i.e.* it does not target diplomats but foreign populations, hence its name ‘public diplomacy’. As E. H. Carr pointed out in *The Twenty Years’ Crisis*, “[p]ower over opinion is ... not less essential for political purposes than military and economic power, and has always been associated with them” (132). Public diplomacy can be defined as the “process by which direct relations are pursued with a country’s people to advance the interests and extend the values of those being represented” (Sharp 106) and thus understood as “one of soft power’s key instruments, ... recognized in diplomatic practice long before the contemporary debate on public diplomacy” (Melissen 4).

According to Nicholas Cull, public diplomacy can be defined by its time frame (from short to very long term), the flow of information (inward or outward), a typical infrastructure, a source of credibility fostered by perceived connection to (or distance from) government into 5 types: 1) listening, 2) advocacy, 3) cultural diplomacy, 4) exchange diplomacy, and 5) international broadcasting (Cull, *Lessons* 18-28; Cull, *Foundations*). In this analysis, France is shown as a typical example for cultural diplomacy, and Japan for exchange diplomacy.

As far as cultural diplomacy is concerned, Cull explains that the time frame is typically long; the flow of information, outward; cultural centers and libraries are mentioned as typical infrastructure; proximity to cultural authorities as a source of credibility; and close relationship with government can work in a positive way. French authorities have consistently placed cultural diplomacy as a priority and produced steady results. It would be important, however, to take into account Cull’s argument that a close connection between French agencies responsible for cultural diplomacy and the French government may reduce the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy. On the other hand, with regards to exchange diplomacy for which Japan is put forward as a typical example, the time frame is very long; the flow of information is both inward and outward; exchange administrators and educational offices are shown as typical infrastructure; and mutuality is perceived as a source of credibility. Since the opening of the country to the world in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Japan “has always emphasized exchange as an organizing concept for its [public diplomacy],” and “Japanese diplomats routinely use the term ‘exchange’ to refer to the entire world of public diplomacy” (Cull, *Lessons* 20-21). Japan learned the usefulness of exchange in the process of modernization after the opening of the country and exchange has taken root as its style of public diplomacy.

Melissen investigated the evolution of public diplomacy and, distinguishing it from propaganda, pointed out a change from the one-way and top-down messaging to a type of interactive relations that puts the emphasis on dialogue. Public diplomacy is “fundamentally different from [propaganda] in the sense that public diplomacy also listens to what people have to say,” it is “not one-way messaging” (Melissen 18). Public diplomacy works better when a two-way cultural exchange between nations promotes dissemination of cultural elements into other countries; conflicts among people may be avoided and cultural elements can be accepted favorably, enabling the growth of influence on others.

Both France and Japan are referred to as typical examples, showing that public diplomacy works very well. Although there are undoubtedly some differences between the two countries’ styles of public diplomacy – due to their respective cultural and historical background – it may be possible to point out the importance of a two-way/interactive messaging style as the reason why public diplomacy usually works well in increasing soft power. But it is diplomacy, which implies that an active engagement of governments and/or their agencies is indispensable, and that the art of magnifying influence without being coercive must be requested. The cooperation between governmental and private sectors is desirable in both cases, in France and Japan.

## THE PILLARS OF FRENCH CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

First, cultural diplomacy is seen as a subset of diplomacy - in the same way as scientific diplomacy - that fosters prosperity. A country is more attractive when it showcases its culture by offering a positive image, a national brand made of a specific language, traditions, lifestyle, values, and so on. Therefore, cultural diplomacy has to support sectors of strategic importance for France, such as cultural industries. Moreover, culture and heritage are assets for tourism and Paris remains one of the most visited cities in the world. As Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord (1754-1838), Napoleon’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, said to French ambassadors: “Make them love France” (Chaubet and Martin 117).

To put it in simpler terms, French cultural diplomacy’s current and main missions are to promote the country’s attractiveness, to encourage the teaching of the French language and, of course, to spread French culture abroad. This specific type of diplomacy is undertaken by three key agents: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its embassies, The French institute, which has become the main operator of cultural diplomacy for the past seven years, and finally the French alliances, independent local institutions created in 1883 and working in cooperation with other agents. In addition to such institutions as these, France still enjoys a solid influence thanks to one of the largest cultural networks in the world. The International Organization for La Francophonie (IOF), the foreign media framework (France Médias Monde, TV5 Monde, Agence France Presse), and a whole educational network abroad complete the picture.

For example, IOF is a group of 88 States and governments that represents 16% of the world’s population. The organization defends the French language and encourages its learning in foreign countries, a task also undertaken by the French alliances. According to official figures from the IOF, there are an estimated 900,000 French teachers worldwide and 25 million people studying French. More significantly, 60% of French speakers are under 30 years old and 55% of French speakers live in Africa. The French language is thus mostly spoken by non-French people. According to IOF studies, the number of French speakers could experience a sharp increase in the near future, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Nowadays, French is spoken by 300 million people (*La Francophonie au rythme du monde (2016-2018)*) and remains one of the official languages in many international institutions (the Olympics Committee, the United Nations, the European Union, and UEFA).



### *Diplomacy of influence*

Laurent Fabius, French Foreign Minister between 2012 and 2016, developed his own conception of soft power, calling it “diplomacy of influence”. Contrary to cultural and scientific diplomacies that both focus on a specific field to develop, diplomacy of influence includes politics, economics and culture with the ambition of promoting France abroad in the 21<sup>st</sup> century through traditional cultural diplomacy, but also through brands, gastronomy, cultural industries or luxury industries (private vectors) – both at the heart of the French brand. However, has Fabius’ concept embodied a real shift in cultural strategy?

France wishes to be more pro-active in the matter of cultural influence, no doubt because the competition in soft power is fierce with some countries – like China in Africa (Thussu). Yet some countries in Africa used to be reserved areas of French influence due to history, colonization and cultural imperialism, according to several authors (Saïd). This is not the case anymore. Being more pro-active means that a country must strengthen its cultural strategy. For years, this strategy has targeted Asia, Latin America, and Africa, where it was deemed to be highly tactical because of the emerging new middle class and the rise of new markets for cultural products. To correct a number of deficiencies, France tried to develop new tools, for example digital ones, to reach new categories of population and expand French influence online, even though such an initiative seems not as effective as the American and the Chinese approaches.

Some significant projects and public institutions, such as Expertise France, have been launched thanks to the diplomacy of influence, but France has still much to do regarding public soft power. For instance, French authorities have long understood the importance of educating large numbers of foreign students and attracting researchers, but the country has not yet managed to structure its network to make foreign students and researchers ambassadors of its culture and values when they return home. This can only be achieved through significantly reinforcing France’s *alumni* networks. Furthermore, the country could also increase the share of cultural and creative industries in French exportations. Reinforcing the position and visibility of French content and creations on the global market ultimately generates employment in the French cultural sector.

### *An old-new diplomacy*

The classic scheme of cultural influence consists in purposely building up a “cultural story” or narrative by choosing some cultural references while leaving others behind. A cultural story can be defined as a “cultural base” desired by elites and shared by citizens of a country (Martigny). In other words, this is a baseline highlighting a selection of artists, writers, intellectuals and, ultimately, values. With a cultural story, countries are able to show cultural unity – real or not, in global affairs and international cultural relations. This is a way to facilitate the projection of a country’s cultural power abroad to strengthen its soft power. While France has made up and crystallized its cultural story for centuries, its base seems to have weakened recently because of the development of non-governmental actors and new vectors like cyber power (Nye, *The Future of Power*). The private sector now outreaches French elites, but the country has not managed to rethink and modernize its own cultural story. French identity remains based on the concept of excellence (Fregonese). This is both its greatest strength and its greatest weakness: excellence is close to elitism, and elitism could be a hard position to hold against a powerful mainstream culture, more approachable and cheaper.

Rather than a new French revolution or a real modernization, the shift operated under Laurent Fabius consisted more in coming back to the roots of cultural story and diplomacy. It has become further evidence that France is finding it extremely difficult to fully rethink the content and the vectors of its

cultural influence. According to Laurent Fabius, promoting France through luxury and gastronomy was a concerted strategy in recent years, even if it looked more like a follow-up rather than a genuinely original shift. Private companies have become more powerful than ever in history, especially in the luxury industry, one of the flagships of French cultural influence. Meanwhile, in the last decade, the French government has cut funding to the traditional means of promoting the French language and culture abroad. There is an imbalance to resolve. Currently, foreign citizens - for instance in East Asia - recognize France not only through its thousand-year-old culture but also – and mainly, through luxury brands such as LVMH and Kering that control Saint Laurent, Dior and Vuitton as well as many Champagnes and spirits. Dior has become as prominent as Victor Hugo.

Even with recent public initiatives, such as “gastrono-diplomatie” - the diplomacy of French gastronomy - launched by Laurent Fabius, the diplomacy of influence remains an “old-new diplomacy” (Chapple-Sokol). The French gastrodiploacy or culinary diplomacy (Chapple-Sokol) is best illustrated by the operation “Good France.” Laurent Fabius used Michelin-starred chef Alain Ducasse, both his name and worldwide reputation, to launch an annual global French food event in 2015. Despite its relative success, there is a gap between the reality of gastronomic influence today and the French position, since there is, more than ever in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a focus on individuals. The nationality of chefs is more important than the origin of the dish: individuals are modern-day cultural ambassadors, making up the “Star System diplomacy” (Argounès). France has to promote such individuals to strengthen its influence, regardless of whether they cook French cuisine or not. For example, star chef Ludo Lefebvre, who lives in California, is almost unknown in France but is one of the most valued chefs in Los Angeles. Furthermore, several of the most recognized chefs in France are from Japan, like Ryuji Teshima or Taku Sekine. They do not offer Japanese cuisine, but get inspiration from Japanese dishes and foster a typical Japanese aura and charisma. Their creations are more French than Japanese. They are, however, assets for both French cuisine and Japanese soft power. The recent interest for cooking shows on TV – such as *chef's table* – underlines this fact (Spies).

In order to succeed, French cultural network could work more closely with the main French private actors, especially cultural and creative industries, but also individuals. So called “cross-cultural transmitters” historically played a key role in the propagation of influential ideas. A government and its public agents cannot act alone, especially in the field of culture. Few parliamentary reports published over the last decade have considered the issue, highlighting the need for a deeper cooperation between public institutions, the private sector and civil society to enhance a modern soft power. In other words, cultural influence goes far beyond public institutions and museums. While French cultural diplomacy remains powerful today, it is very classical in its approach, despite the so-called shift in 2012.

## TOWARDS A ROUND AND OBLIQUE CULTURAL INFLUENCE

Conventional soft power tools and vectors are evolving, and cultural diplomacy should arrange more space for private initiatives as a creative addition to official strategies. In post-modern societies, governments and embassies are only one out of many actors of cultural strategy. The roles of new actors, individuals and companies, are increasing. An alliance between public and private vectors, institutions and companies as well as individuals appears to be the best way to proceed. How could France modernize its cultural strategy?

### *Pop culture as a bridge*



First, the country has to accept the growing commercialization of culture as an inevitable fact instead of ignoring the phenomenon and considering that only high culture should be recognized and spread. The country also needs to consider mainstream culture and not just concentrate on the culture of elites, whose rules and codes remain tedious to understand. All these elements could be combined together to maximize French influence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

France can improve its position by promoting its pop culture. Pop culture could be seen as the contemporary version of popular culture, at the crossroads of English-speaking culture – notably American, and modern Japanese cultures – enhanced with creative industries and new technologies. French critic Rafik Djoumi calls such a subculture geek or nerd culture. Geek culture could be defined as the aggregation and hybridization of American, European and Japanese popular cultures enhanced by digital technologies in the background of the economy of attention and the age of access, best exemplified by modern TV shows (HBO, Netflix), comics / manga / manhwa, animation art, and video games.

This pop culture or geek culture could be a bridge between a low and a high culture, a kind of hybrid culture more valued than popular culture and easier to access and to understand than high culture. Moreover, it could give an opportunity to reinforce the culture of elites and its reception in a country, like a springboard for high culture. The best example of such specific cultural strategy based on pop culture as a bridge could be the Japanese influence in France from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### *Japanese cultures in France*

The relations between France and Japan have been characterized by many cultural exchanges and transfers. However, if the influence of French culture in Japan remains very classical in its content and vectors, the main influence of Japanese culture in France could be divided into three moments with plural contents and vectors: *japonisme*, *néo-japonisme* and a come back to a *néo-japonisme-enhanced japonisme*.

The French term *japonisme* refers to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a period when European (Chiba) and notably French artists fell literally in love with silks, porcelains, woodblock prints, puppet theatre, haiku, and many other Japanese cultural elements. Nowadays, many of these cultural productions could be considered as high culture. The influence of *japonisme* on creators is particularly noticeable among French painters or foreign painters who lived in France, through Japanese style, composition, color, and imagery. Landscapes, flowers, or sacred items were an obvious source of inspiration. This influence was clear on the works of Vincent Van Gogh and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. For example, the *Flowering Plum Tree* (1887) by the Dutch artist was inspired by Utagawa Hiroshige's painting *The Plum Garden in Kameido* (1857). Utagawa Hiroshige's *ukiyo-e* – translated as “picture[s] of the floating world” – was a cultural reference. Even though it was despised by the Japanese elites and highbrow painters at that time, *ukiyo-e* strengthened *japonisme* in France, where it is still considered as high culture. Contemporary renowned Japanese artists such as Tabaïmo are directly inspired by *ukiyo-e* iconography (Stojkovic). In his speech for the students of Nikkō in July 1923, called “Regards sur l’âme japonaise”, Paul Claudel, French Ambassador in Japan (1921-1927), underlined the common aesthetic and sensibility between both countries (Claudel). Thus, this first Japanese wave had a remarkable impact on the development of French visual culture, an impact that will help the introduction of anime and manga in France a century later.

The second wave of Japanese influence in France, in the second half of the last century, is called *néo-japonisme* (Rafoni). The new wave includes productions such as anime, manga, or video games. Animation was the first pillar of *néo-japonisme*. Japan started producing animation early in the 20<sup>th</sup>

century, cheaper than Western ones. Those animated works were not intended for a foreign audience, but several French TV producers took advantage of these inexpensive cartoons. Despite the lack of will from the Japanese government to develop such a soft power, cartoons paved the way for the rise of Cool Japan. Two highly influential anime symbolized the beginning of this wave in France, both released in 1978: *Goldorak* (*UFO Robot Grendizer* in Japanese) and *Candy*. Both were broadcast on the French public channel, Antenne 2 in a children's program called *Récré A2*. *Goldorak* was so popular that it landed on the cover of the French news magazine *Paris Match* under the heading "La Folie Goldorak" on January 5, 1979 and the generation who grew up in the late 1970s and early 1980s is sometimes called the "Goldorak generation." These two TV shows' have paved the way for the others, notably those produced by Toei Animation (*Dragon Ball*, *Sailor Moon*, *First of the North Star*, to name just a few).

Apart from those two animated series, a third work was very influent in the western hemisphere ten years later: *Akira* by Katsuhiro Ôtomo (1988). This masterpiece, released in France<sup>2</sup> in 1991, was a little different from *Goldorak* and *Candy* because it was the first great bridge between popular culture and the culture of elites. It structured the aesthetic movement of cyberpunk and its legacy is impressive. Many works were inspired directly or indirectly by *Akira*, such as *Ghost in the Shell* in the eighties, or *Cowboy Bebop* in the nineties. Even today, *Akira* remains an inspiration for moviemakers. For example, in *Ready Player One* (2018), an adaptation of *Player One* written by Ernest Cline in 2011, Steven Spielberg introduced the character of Art3mis riding a red bike, inspired by Kaneda's bike in *Akira*. This motorbike has become one of the most iconic ones in comic book history. Through all these productions, to varying extents, French youngsters literally grew up with Japanese animation and affiliated toys. However, some politicians rejected it, like former French minister Ségolène Royal who called it "Japoniaiserie" (a portemanteau of 'Japanese' and 'silly'), criticizing its violence and explicit sexual content.

Nevertheless, the anime fan base has continued to grow in France and each successive movie created by Studio Ghibli gave a new legitimacy to Japanese animation in France. Thanks to the success of animation art, it was easy for manga and video games, notably J-RPG, to find an audience. Some events, such as the Japan Expo created in 2000, show the incredible achievement of Japanese soft power through *néo-japonisme*, with hundreds of thousands of French visitors every year.<sup>3</sup> The Japan Expo is a private successful event promoting Japanese culture that takes place every year in July - by setting up a booth to promote cultural activities and Japanese classes. In that respect, the Japan Expo is fulfilling the combination of Japanese culture in all its forms.

### *Riding the wave: the role of the Japan Foundation*

According to Béatrice Rafoni (543), Japanese influence in France could be linked to the theory of "cultural transfer," formulated by historians Michel Espagne and Michael Werner in the mid-1980s. To put it in a nutshell, fascination and rejection of Japanese pop culture both explain the success of Japan in France and its development. Works dealing with the reception of American values and cultures in France (Kuisel) develop a similar idea. When a foreign popular culture affects a large number of people – even the elites<sup>4</sup> – national tensions and resistances emerge. However, even if the success of Japanese culture in France could be interpreted as partly the result of internal debates about its reception, Japan has skillfully

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<sup>2</sup> Very few copies of the movie were available at that time in France, only three according to Amel Lacombe. Godin, Marc. "Akira, retour à Néo-Tokyo en version 4K." *lepoint.fr/pop-culture*, August 18, 2020, [www.lepoint.fr/pop-culture/akira-retour-a-neo-tokyo-en-version-4k-18-08-2020-2388061\\_2920.php#](http://www.lepoint.fr/pop-culture/akira-retour-a-neo-tokyo-en-version-4k-18-08-2020-2388061_2920.php#)

<sup>3</sup> Almost 240,000 visitors in 2018 according to the organizers.

<sup>4</sup> The soap *Dallas* (1978-1991) was loved by François Mitterand, president of the French Republic.

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continued deploying its culture through several public actions, choosing to ride the wave of influence with the creation of the Cool Japan concept in 2002. On the front line of this movement lies the Japan Foundation, an institution established in October 1972 as a special legal entity supervised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. When the Japan Foundation was created, there was a discussion about modeling it after the British Council, especially with regards to its independence from the government, and in October 2003 the entity was reorganized as an Independent Administrative Institution. The British Council is also an inspiration for the current French institute. Funded by a governmental endowment of 78 billion yen, the activities of the Japan Foundation are financed by annual government subsidies, investment revenue, and donations from the private sector.

According to The Independent Administrative Institution Japan Foundation Law, Article 3, the purpose of the Japan Foundation Independent Administrative Institution is to contribute to the improvement of a good international environment and to the maintenance and development of harmonious foreign relationships with Japan, by efficient and comprehensive implementation of international cultural exchange activities, which will deepen other nations' understanding of Japan, promote better mutual understanding among nations – a key role of cultural diplomacy – and contribute to culture and other fields in global affairs. The Minister of Foreign Affairs sets medium-term objectives and in order to achieve them, the direction of the Japan Foundation formulates a plan every 5 years and an annual plan for each fiscal year. There are few foreign employees; most permanent workers are Japanese citizens, even though job offers are open to all residents who are fluent in Japanese and have a work permit in Japan. This could be considered a weakness for a more effective knowledge of foreign countries and nations in the long term, because conditions of employment are quite strict, especially in terms of language requirement. Outside Japan, the Japan Foundation deploys its projects through an international network composed of 25 overseas offices spread over 24 countries. These overseas offices employ expatriate staff, but also people recruited locally who are responsible for important tasks.

Cool Japan, the government's economic strategy and Japan Foundation are articulated together in the Intellectual Property Strategic Program 2018. First, the full control of content appears vital for Japan regarding the economic weight of its cultural and creative industries – the major drivers of contemporary influence. According to this program:

To effectively create and communicate the attractions of Japan, such as content, food, clothing, and housing, the Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters has put in place a system for promoting the Cool Japan Strategy, provided funding and support for overseas expansion of Japanese content and the like, strengthened infrastructure for the Cool Japan Strategy by developing hubs and undertaking human resource development, and steadily implemented countermeasures against piracy. (Intellectual Property Strategic Program 3)

Secondly, the repeated use of the expression 'soft power' is fully assumed by the Japanese government and national institutions. Cool Japan's soft power can be defined as the harmonious combination of elitist culture and pop culture in its contemporary form: geek culture. Several Japanese productions of this kind – movies, animation, manga, video games – enjoy an international reputation: *Akira* (1988), *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995-1996), *Millenium Actress* (2002), *Nier Automata* (2017), etc. Pop culture is a part of Japanese culture and it is fully regarded as such by public institutions. If there is demand, the Japan Foundation can organize or co-organize concerts of a J-pop collective like AKB48, or of a virtual singer like Hatsune Miku, animation film screenings and also drawing workshops to promote manga. The Japan Foundation also has an educational website named "Japanese in Anime & Manga" that allows visitors to learn Japanese or deepen their knowledge of Japanese culture through a content based on the universe of

anime and manga. In other words, pop culture is seen as a preferential access to deepen the knowledge and understanding of the country: soft power remains a seduction process, an open door.

Thus, Japan is fully aware of its pop culture's influence and takes advantage of it. Besides, it is not a negation of the culture of elites at all. Japan proves that a country can promote both cultures at the same time. In France, the House of Culture of Japan in Paris (MCJP) represents the Japan Foundation, and MCJP has taken part several times in the Japan Expo. Among these, Japonisme 2018, an extensive cultural event, promoted the beauty of traditional Japanese culture in Paris and other cities in France. For instance, Paris mayor Anne Hidalgo inaugurated a giant *furoshiki* imagined by Tsuyoshi Tane and located just in front of the Paris City Hall in the fall of 2018. The *furoshiki*, a traditional Japanese wrapping cloth used since the 8<sup>th</sup> century, was a pavilion that welcomed original creations from Japanese designers but also French creative artists.

Japanese cultural strategy is therefore built around a very efficient scheme: the propagation of high culture,<sup>5</sup> pop culture then high culture again. A powerful cultural strategy is based on combination rather than alternation. But one question remains: could France share the same vectors of influence? More precisely, could France mimic Japanese vectors? The answer is positive. In a way, the country does not have to create its own vectors. Efficiency is much higher when the cultural initiative comes from foreigners rather than natives: influence and soft power have to be oblique, not direct. According to the Intellectual Property Strategic Program 2018, it is also crucial to

further increase interest in Japan among foreign nationals who support the demand side as influencers and loyal customers of Cool Japan, and to swell their ranks. Accordingly, it will be vital to consider measures aimed at increasing the number of foreign nationals with high spending power who spend extended periods living in Japan for a variety of reasons, along with initiatives aimed at increasing the number of Japan fans, such as building mechanisms that enable foreign nationals with an interest in Japan to obtain certain benefits through registration or the like. (16)

Foreign nationals are the most effective vectors of cultural influence, and this trend tends to increase with digital revolutions and globalization. Influence takes some time to be effective and often begins with an access to high culture through pop culture. Because of attention becoming a scarce resource, there is the growing temptation to choose reachable cultural products that can be easily understood. To complete this approach, the last part of this paper will tackle the importance of spheres of influence to maximize soft power: how Cool Japan could enhance a “Soft France.”

## MASTERING THE SPHERES OF INFLUENCE: THE FUTURE OF SOFT POWER

A sphere of influence could be defined as a round influence shared by several countries and concerning one main work of high culture that inspired several works of pop culture. The particularity of a sphere of influence is to simultaneously enhance the soft power of several countries. Each link in the chain can benefit from it, not only economically through copyrights but also in terms of influence. The spheres form an unofficial and oblique cultural diplomacy. They can be simple or complex, depending on the links in the chain. Along with the United States, East Asia is undoubtedly a fertile place to develop a sphere of influence thanks to South Korea and Japan, two powerful countries in terms of soft power. France has the

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<sup>5</sup> Even if *ukiyo-e* was considered as low culture by Japanese elites at that time.

opportunity to make the most of East Asian spheres of influence. There is already a complex sphere of influence linking France and Japan: Studio Ghibli's origins.

### *Studio Ghibli's path*

A complex sphere of influence is formed around one of the world's most famous production companies outside of Hollywood: Studio Ghibli. Founded in June 1985 in Tokyo, Studio Ghibli was created by Hayao Miyazaki, Isao Takahata and Toshio Suzuki. If *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* is widely considered to be Studio Ghibli's first production, it was actually released a year prior to the formation of Studio Ghibli. Their first production was *Laputa: Castle in the Sky*, released in 1986.

Studio Ghibli has had a tremendous impact on the French market and has prepared French people for a style of animation art without violence or sex, which explains the recent success of movies like *Your Name* or *Silent Voice*. These works feature many references to Japanese habits and customs. They are, thus, perfect vectors to familiarize the audience with Japanese traditions. If Japonisme 2018 has proven successful, it is for the most part thanks to Studio Ghibli and its movies. Furthermore, Studio Ghibli embodies the cultural ties that connect France and Japan. The studio has never hidden its main source of inspiration: the French movie *The Shepherdess and the Chimneysweep* (1952), the forerunner to *The King and The Mockingbird* (1980). *The King and the Mockingbird* is the result of a collaboration between French director Paul Grimault and French poet and scriptwriter Jacques Prévert. However, *The Shepherdess and the Chimneysweep*, then to become *The King and the Mockingbird*, is itself a remake of an old fairy tale, not a French fairy tale but a Danish one: *The Shepherdess and Chimney Sweep*, written by Hans Christian Andersen in 1845.

### *A French asset: The Shepherdess and the Chimneysweep*

If this first release was strongly rejected by its own creators because the movie was unfinished, *The Shepherdess and the Chimneysweep* has been cited by both Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata as having had a deep influence on their work and early movies, such as *The Castle of Cagliostro* and the *Castle in the sky*. The movie shows a tyrannical King ruling over the kingdom of Takicardia, who is in love with a shepherdess painted on a wall of his palace. The movie's animation is beautiful and there are several cultural references to European architecture, principally Parisian and Venetian, surrealist artists such as di Chirico and Magritte... The result is a perfect mix between narrative and imagery. And this perfection explains its influence on Studio Ghibli. Isao Takahata's comment about *The Shepherdess and the Chimneysweep* tells a lot about the movie's significance:

If I had not seen this film, I would have never imagined entering the world of animation. I was obsessed not only because its expressions were superb but also because I realized that these unexpected ideas and images were not just fantasies or jokes but instead were concealing the difficult and harsh reality of modern history. This was not just an old revolutionary fantasy that illustrates liberation from dictatorship and oppression. It is the seemingly contradictory and nonsensical details that hide the tragic truth of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's 'history' and 'people'. The creator tells the next generation to be aware of this and be careful of the 'trap' of this world. (Takahata)

The French movie was not just an aesthetic inspiration but also an ideological one. It deals with isolated and selfish people in the modern world like the king, but also shows a city destroyed by robots. Both elements show the danger of the "verticality of the governance structure" (Takahata) but also the collapse of the environment and the question of ecology, very important for Japanese as well as French people. Many ecological disasters occurred in Japan and the country has tried to become a leader of planetary protection, despite the recent issues with Fukushima in 2011, and France created a Ministry for the



Environment – renamed Ministry for the Ecological and Inclusive Transition – in 1971. Long-established traditional Japanese arts, such as *furoshiki*, offer a solution against plastic waste, one of the challenges of the century. Isao Takahata, for example, explained: “I see the burnt field that I escaped through after an American air raid during the war and the tragedy of 9/11 and ask what it means.”

Of course, over a long period, the sphere of influence will continue to grow, and vectors will change. For example, John Lasseter, the Director of Pixar Studio, paid tribute to Miyazaki and his “unbelievable hand-drawn animation” (“John Lasseter (III)”). Studio Ghibli’s *Spirited away* has inspired Pixar’s *Inside Out*. Here again influences are both aesthetic and ideological: two epics coming-of-age narratives with the imagery of a strong young female character who grows up through dangers and hardships.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, the first question which matters when speaking about soft power is fairly straightforward: how can a country improve its influence using contents and vectors of its time? The ultimate goal of cultural diplomacy is to create a positive environment in foreign countries in order to broadcast its culture. Cultural action abroad must be seen as an investment for the future, not only as an expenditure, with benefits to be expected in a one or two-year term. Rankings, such as *TheSoftPower30*, focus on international political communication more than real cultural influence. Only time will tell if cultural actions undertaken were efficient. A country can create a positive environment not only with public institutions but also through individuals and private actors. More than ever, public and private must work hand in hand in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in order to strengthen soft power.

Besides, high and low cultures have to be valued by cultural policies and diplomacy, considering how both are linked to a common sphere of influence. Original artwork could make room for another in this kind of sphere. No one recalls the fairytale of Andersen and maybe no one will remember both movies, *The Shepherdess and the Chimneysweep* and *The King and The Mockingbird*. After a while, the original inspiration is forgotten, but its message and aesthetic remain in recent works, so that the influence of the original work is not lost but diluted. When this happens, or to prevent it from happening, cultural diplomacy with public institutions showing exhibitions or giving lectures have an important role to play.

Cultural diplomacy works not only by teaching the language and spreading the values of a country, but also by promoting the memory of great works (pop / high culture) that inspired foreign artists and writers. Exhibitions, celebrations and lectures have to be skillfully composed and organized depending on the country where they take place. Speaking about Japan, France could organize its cultural influence around such famous writers as Victor Hugo, Maurice Leblanc or Jacques Prévert and make it accessible to young people. Bertrand Fort, former Director of the French Institute of Japan, confirmed this analysis when he explained in 2014 that “we put priority on the young generation and their preferences. That’s why we work notably in fields that appeal to them, like the gaming industry, digital arts, music, cinema, and French manga” (Haraoka and Johansson).

Lastly, soft power should not necessarily be seen as unilateral in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with a one-way communication strategy or a two-way dialogue without mutual benefits. The opposition between cooperation – mutual understanding through cultural diplomacy – and cultural swamping through aggressive economy has been an intellectual framework for a long time. However, the development of active and passive spheres of influences and long-haul cultural alliances (for example, the one between France and Japan analyzed in this paper), shows that soft power should be considered as a “coopetition”, which is a kind of collaboration between competing governments in the hope of mutually beneficial



results. In other words, cultural influence could be shared among countries to be further strengthened. The French season in Japan, from October 2021 to March 2022, will be a new opportunity for French diplomacy and the Japanese government to reinforce their shared influence.

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