

JAPAN'S SOFT POWER AND "GRAND FICTIONS" IN GLOBAL VENUES

Japanese Pop Culture Franchises and Fictionality-based Tactics

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Abstract

This article discusses the notion of soft power and how Japan's government has recently made use of imaginary characters from "manga" and "anime" to promote the country's appeal. I focus on the official video clip for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, first released in 2016. This montage features not only Japan's Prime Minister as well as Japanese athletes and show-business celebrities, but also fictional characters. On the one hand, this cast assists in creating a display of "official Japaneseness" as a presentation strategy for the 2020 Olympics host country, deploying Shinzō Abe as a testimonial. On the other hand, while fiction and reality are playfully displayed as a blurred continuum both through and on the figure of Abe, an association can be found between the transnational circulation of those franchises and related commodities, the presence of fictional characters meant to advertise the Olympics and its host country, and the current exploitation of Japanese animation. In fact, today Japanese animation is at a threshold between the status of an independent entrepreneurial domain and that of an industrial sector increasingly used by the Japanese government in the deployment of soft power-related initiatives.

Keywords

anime/manga/video games; *genius loci*; Grand Fictions; Japan; soft power; Tokyo Olympics

About the Author

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INTRODUCTION

Japan is among the countries that, recently, have been increasingly associated with the notion of soft power and, more generally, with cultural diplomacy. It was designated as a "cultural superpower" in the early 2000s, in the wake of the growing consensus around certain creative industries that developed in the country whose products had been fruitfully exported and consumed overseas in Asia, Europe, and the Americas. Three of those industries, in particular, have been surprisingly successful, stimulating the attention of the international press mainly because they address children and youth, but also because they were typically assessed as an alternative culture: comics, animated cartoons, and video games. The former two are ubiquitously referred to as "manga" and "anime."

The notion of "soft power" has been discussed in numerous venues in the fields of political science, cultural diplomacy, and international relations since its first introduction at the end of the 1980s. Nonetheless, its many criticalities—both at large and in connection to Japan—still call for continuous update, perfection, and reworking. That is why one of the core critical aims of this article is to present a quick but useful review of the concept and a framework to support the article's main argument.

In this essay, I argue that Japan's government has recently made use of popular intellectual properties (IPs) from the sectors of manga, anime, and computer games to promote the country's appeal internationally. This strategy of cultural diplomacy is being carried out both within and outside the heterogeneous set of initiatives that fall under the "Cool Japan" rubric. As a striking example, I call attention to the official video clip that the Japanese government and the Tokyo authorities commissioned for the 2020 Olympic Games. The video clip was first presented in July 2016 at the Rio de Janeiro Olympics closing ceremony. This dynamic montage features not only Japan's Prime Minister, Japanese athletes, and show-business celebrities, but also a selection of beloved manga, anime, and video game IPs. Through the fast-paced sequences, on the one hand, we observe a lively display of "official Japaneseness" as a strategic presentation for the 2020 Olympics host country to the world using the image of the globally popular Shinzō Abe, here framed as the demiurge of Japan's global and globalizing politics. On the other hand, some popular franchises appear in the promotional video clip, each of which is well-known in one or more world regions.

The role of Shinzō Abe as a political, cultural, and visual testimony of Japan in the occasion of the Tokyo Olympics is, from a broader perspective, the main reason for political and cultural interest in this promotional clip. But another reason is that these anime/manga/video game franchises appear to be instrumental in inferring

that one of the goals of the video—and therefore of the Japanese government—is to suggest that the country can be seen as a friendly nation-state also because it is the origin of specific forms of widely appreciated entertainment for youths. An association, moreover, can be found between the transnational circulation of these IPs and related commodities, the presence of animated characters in this video meant to promote and advertise the Olympics and its host country, and the current strategies in the industry of Japanese animation. Finally, I argue that today the Japanese industries of anime and manga are at a difficult threshold between the status of independent entrepreneurial domains and that of industrial sectors increasingly taken into account by the Japanese government.

SOFT POWER AND JAPANESE POPULAR CULTURE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There is no consensus on the notion of soft power at large or its applications to Japan's cultural diplomacy and the various sectors of the country's popular entertainment. That is why I address the notion critically here, bearing in mind as the main reference the case of Japan's (allegedly or blatant) soft power-related initiatives connected to pop culture and the franchises based on media commodities from the industries of manga, anime, and video games.

1. A quick definition of soft power

The term soft power was first introduced in the fields of political science and international relations by US politologist Joseph E. Nye in his book *Bound to Lead* and, in more detail, in a now famous article titled "Soft Power." Nye later perfected his discussion in further publications. Positing a distinction between a "hard" or "command" power and an "indirect" or "soft" power in international politics ("Soft Power" 181), Nye defined the former as military force or deterrence, a concrete means by which the government of a nation-state subjects other nation-states to its will. The latter was defined as a "co-optive power behavior" or "an indirect way to exercise power" ("Soft Power" 181), which results in obtaining a degree of consent not through military action or threats but by generating a desire for proximity and imitation among foreign countries' governmental institutions, media, and populace. In Nye's words, the basic essence of soft power is not "getting others to *do* what you want" but rather "getting others to *want* what you want" ("Soft Power" 181, my emphasis). Nye coined the concept to describe the current and strategically desirable foreign policy and role of the United States in a global scenario in which,

after the deployment of military strength in the World Wars and in a variety of conflicts, the United States' influence should be put into different practice through non-coercive forms: culture, lifestyles, industrial products, and exportation.

For Nye, a nation's soft power fundamentally resides in three elements: its culture, where and when it is appealing overseas; its political values, if and when they are shared abroad; and its foreign policy, when it is widely considered legitimate and based on moral values (*Soft Power*). We can already observe that while hard power is a set of actions oriented towards the short-term and with specific objectives in mind, soft power appears to be a strategy oriented toward—or as a phenomenon framed within—the mid- or long-term, and it is not always clear about its specific goals or outcomes.

2. Soft power vis-à-vis Japanese pop culture: criticalities

Referring to the literature on the topic and to the ways the expression has been widely used and contextualized in the media, in official press releases, and by members of institutions, I will here posit that the notion of soft power can be mainly addressed in three ways.

First, as *agency*: the set of strategies put in play by a national government via its international actions to promote its culture, value system, and national interests. For example, we might argue that, by organizing initiatives such as the yearly *International Manga Award*, Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) is deploying strategies of soft power centered on the country's popular culture. The historical unfolding of this process is accounted by Nissim K. Otmazgin (77-87, 175-80).

Second, as the advantageous *outcome* of such aforementioned agency. For example, hypothetically positing that an initiative like the "cute ambassadors" (White) has or might have provided Japan with a certain soft power-based leverage on a country's policies concerning the bilateral agreements on an issue, such as facilitations for tourist visas or an increase of international students in Japanese universities. It has to be specified that this outcome can be framed as either an objective or an expected outcome. For example, a parallel question one could explore might be: do "cute ambassadors" actually provide a measurable advantage in terms of image-building for Japan?

Third, as a *transnational process* that may precede, transcend, or be unrelated to a government's agenda (Nye, *Soft Power*). The soft power of a nation-state

would in this sense have to be framed as what I propose calling an *immanent reserve*, "stored" in the public opinion of a given foreign national context and in the potential governmental policies of that country. For example, we can argue that the popularity that Japanese gastronomy, comics, animation, video games, technology, and other forms of culture or resources hold in a given national context might produce a long-term effect on the public opinion and the official policies of that country.

A few main criticalities can be noticed in these three ways of conceiving soft power. Proceeding through the three ways according to which I addressed the notion, we should consider whether soft power as a set of strategies is always "soft" power or a kind of a reframed hard power; whether culture-centered initiatives of soft power do actually "hit" the desired targets (policymakers) or instead the marginal, but at times numerous, groups of fans that constitute an audience rather than a group of interlocutors; and whether and how soft power can be measured as a quality and a quantity, or as a leverage. Additionally, we may also reflect on whether soft power might be a new locution defining older phenomena that were previously referred to by a different term. It has to be noted that in addressing these issues in relation to Japan I shall not offer exhaustive answers, given the fact that the issues themselves go far beyond the scope of this contribution.

As mentioned before, many discussions on soft power—whether from the standpoint of political studies or cultural and media studies—are based on an apparent bias. Scholars who discuss soft power often seem to take the notion for granted (e.g. Kondō; Matsui, "The 'Cool Japan' Craze" and "The Diffusion of Foreign Cultural Products"), and the most advanced arguments they present concern whether a country or a country's popular culture "have" or "yields" soft power.

For instance, in classic studies on the theories of war, a famous quote is "war is the continuation of politics by other means" (von Clausewitz 1, 1, 24). *Mutatis mutandis*, we can then argue that, in a way—if we posit that soft power consists of the deployment of certain policies by national governments—soft power can be framed up to a point as the continuation of hard power by other means. In effect, government policies can be, and often are, very active in promoting the nation's culture, values, industrial production, and overall friendliness (Haddad). Moreover, government institutions deploy coordinated actions to encourage diplomatic proximity and industrial and political cooperation with other countries. In fact, a look at the history of Japan's international relations indicates that strategies of aid falling within overseas development assistance (ODA) are sets of actions meant to carry out what, in these contexts, have been called soft power (Akaha; Furuoka), heuristically assuming that soft power is manageable.

Expanding on the hard power/soft power ambiguity implied above, let me add that in the studies on soft power as a theory, many critics' remarks have been pointed out (for a revealing selection of authors and their discourses raising critical points on Japan's soft power in Asia and in other world regions, see Watanabe and McConnell; Otmazgin and Ben-Ari). Nye's distinction between hard and soft power itself has been criticized for seeming to imply that it is simply a matter of rewording the traditional notion of diplomacy (Melissen) or conveying misleading ideas about military and political power (Mattern). As an overall result, much scholarship does not take notice "of the difference between coercive and cooperative actions that Nye made; economic actions (sanctions), diplomatic actions (implied threats) and information spreading activities (propaganda) can all be examples of hard power" (Vyas). Other authors have noted how Nye's formulations have often been wrongly reported in academia and in the mainstream journalistic press, where the status of "soft" power is conferred to any non-military, political/diplomatic initiative, both in general discourses and, here in particular, concerning Japan's tactics of cultural diplomacy (Ogoura). In this dynamic, we should certainly take into account the specific agendas or limitations of reporters and scholars, some of whom may have misunderstood the notion. But, again focusing on the Japanese case, we should also consider those approaches of soft power that might have well exploited a convenient, self-laudatory narrative about the effectiveness of Japan's policies of cultural diplomacy. In effect, a desired outcome for Japanese government offices is when the international press puts an emphasis on the alleged abundance of Japan's soft power (as referred to in Miller; or Leheny, "The Other Rashomon Story").

Moreover, within the two frames of soft power as process and agency, there is a double ambiguity. First, it is not always clear whether soft power is the former, the latter, or both to different degrees. Second, the relationship between soft power can be seen as an immanent process and/or as a process put into play by agents. In the former case, soft power can be framed as a web of cultural dynamics that are not controlled by any government institution of a nation-state but create, "spontaneously" and with no design, the premises or conditions for politically exploitable leverage. In the latter case, such an agent (for instance, an institution involved in cultural diplomacy initiatives) can be seen as one which, through its actions, *generates* soft power (Iwabuchi, "Soft' Nationalism and Narcissism").

Now, we have seen that in the majority of the literature from cultural studies and media studies on Japanese pop culture vis-à-vis the consensus overseas, the most advanced questioning about soft power and Japan has often examined whether Japanese pop culture does have soft power and, if so, "how much" of it—as I mentioned above. Framing soft power as a *quantity*—rather than a *strategy*, an *outcome*, or a *process*—and, as such, a *dimension* of the success of a country's influence abroad, might have problematic empirical validity; but the doubt about

empirical validity rarely arises. Moreover, if one of the underlying questions is how much soft power is stocked in the success of Japanese pop-cultural forms in given national contexts, it is surprising that media scholars rarely express skepticism about how and whether it is possible to measure this soft power.

In the social sciences, measuring concepts requires that those concepts be broken up into dimensions, and dimensions into indicators. In the discourse of soft power, this has happened more often in the field of political science and global affairs than in media and cultural studies focusing on popular cultures. A good example is a thorough study by Christopher D. Whitney and David Shambaugh, a multinational survey of public opinion on the mutual soft power of the United States and five Asian nations. While Nye defined soft power as "attraction" (Nye, *Soft Power* 8), the survey's authors call it "interaction" (Whitney and Shambaugh 7). As a survey on public opinion for the assessment of soft power regionally, it "questions how these nations view each other's popular culture, commercial prowess and brands, intellectual influence and appeal, universities, diplomatic reputations and political systems," establishing five dimensions of soft power: economic, cultural, human capital, political, and diplomatic, meant to build a "Soft Power Index" (Whitney and Shambaugh). Although this article does not focus on the figures of such an index or the technical details of the survey (Japan was discovered to have an only mild cultural soft power in the Asian region), suffice it to say that Whitney and Shambaugh provide a strict and consistent methodology, demonstrating that, *when* theoretically defined, strictly circumscribed, and carefully operationalized, soft power can be surveyed and measured.

Finally, I will conclude this subsection by underscoring that when a country's government attempts to exploit the commodified culture produced within the nation for international promotion (Otmazgin, "A Tail that Wags the Dog"), claiming that such culture has soft power, we could then argue that soft power is a process which, perhaps transcending the will of the actors involved, uses commodified culture in a way that *tries to commodify power*. More about this on pp. 468-469.

3. Soft power and Japan's tactics of use of pop culture

When Nye introduced soft power, he addressed the US government, which at that time (*Bound to Lead*) was worried that the economic rise of Japan would prove detrimental for the US economy and the international geopolitical balance. Nye assured that the United States still held, and would firmly and for a long time hold, a type of power that no other country could ever match: the ability to make this

nation's image and life system desirable through the influence of popular culture and the promises that the American way of life entailed (*Bound to Lead*). Adding remarks on the rise of other nations' appeal in the international flows of mass culture, Nye would later state: "Japan's popular culture was still producing potential soft power resources even after its economy slowed down" (*Soft Power* 86). Tarō Asō, a former Prime Minister and Minister of Cultural Affairs of Japan, claimed in a speech that not to use the emerging charm of Japanese culture, in this historical moment, "would be a pity."

The rise in popularity of Japanese pop-cultural expressions abroad has thus ignited the tendency among Japanese and foreign scholars alike, as well as commentators in the press (e.g. Hoskin), to refer to it as "a national resource of what Nye had labeled 'soft power'" (Daliot-Bul 2), which in turn has pushed the government to introduce a national policy—implemented in 2004—focusing on intangible intellectual property, with the goal "to create and reinforce a new and attractive 'Japan Brand'—one that resonates with the emerging global image of Cool Japan [...]—in order to increase global demand for Japanese products overseas and to use as a resource of symbolic power for inducing pro-Japanese sentiments especially in Asia" (Daliot-Bul). To this end, Michal Daliot-Bul argues that this policy "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" (11, my emphasis). In other words, according to this framework, soft power is an intangible resource that is *created* via strategic actions: Japanese policymakers act "under the assumption that soft power works" (Daliot-Bul).

Promotion passes through many channels. With regard to manga and anime, the aforementioned international award devoted to manga, a contest launched by the MOFA in 2007, was presented with a resonant proclamation that suggests how Japanese cultural diplomacy continues to push national comics and animation as a vanguard for an increasingly transnational, transcultural diffusion of Japanese pop culture, cloaked with a friendly aura.

Among the policies of the same Ministry, as hinted at earlier on there is a set of actions running within the ODA. Some involve Japanese pop culture, such as manga and anime, as part of the promotional programs to boost the country's image. For instance, in 2006 the Japanese forces in Iraq's Al-Muthanna province, which were sent there in a humanitarian capacity, used water supply vehicles that exhibited on the side large images of the manga and anime series character *Captain Tsubasa*, much loved in Iraq as *Captain Majed* (Okazaki; Asō). Through The Japan Foundation, Japan had also given complimentary airing rights to the third season of the aforementioned animated series, then dubbed in Arabic, for a total of 52 episodes, to Iraq's public broadcaster (Okasaki; Asō). Japan already had a

presence in Iraq in 2004, dispatching 600 personnel to Samâwa, for peacekeeping and humanitarian aid. This significant detail about the huge popularity of *Captain Tsubasa* in the Middle East is worth bearing in mind and will be revisited later in this article.

This strategy can, all in all, be interpreted as an attempt to generate soft power in a more or less explicit return to the Fukuda doctrine. Nevertheless, it seems that until now the official measures have not been as effective as the spontaneous expansion—that is, not willingly directed—of Japanese pop culture (see Pellitteri, "Reframing Japanese Animation's Success"). This raises the question of the usefulness of initiatives to intentionally exercise the alleged soft power of a nation in comparison with the market-regulated flows of pop culture originating from its internal content industry apparatuses (Shiraishi; Leheny, "A Narrow Place"). In fact, other scholars argue that the influence of pop culture can spread without structured promotion strategies put into action by a nation's government, as has often happened with several countries, including the US (Leonard 282 and *passim*). While a growing scholarship is finding evidence that government actions to boost a country's content industries into a transnational setting may be successful if thoroughly designed and coordinated, as in the case of South Korea (Jin and Otmazgin), there are still many complexities involved with effective implementations of top-down actions (Press-Barnathan).

The notion of soft power as a distinct feature of contemporary Japan was indirectly advertised in English-language scholarship and press by another article on *Foreign Policy* by Douglas McGray, according to which Japanese culture's growing success in a globalizing setting was contributing to a new, popularized depiction of Japan as a "cool" place. This perspective was widely agreed upon, despite being implicitly limited to the US context; in fact, several forms of Japanese pop-cultural entertainment, such as manga and anime, had been popular in other regions since the late 1970s. In other words, said forms of Japanese pop culture had been appreciated—and often recognized as Japanese—in a variety of national contexts long before they were introduced in the US (Tavassi).

A further element to address in the discourse on Japan's soft power is the problems with the nation's colonial and wartime ventures. The current actions of the government intend not only to facilitate the success of the domestic content industries, but also to increase admiration for the country. The final goal is to attenuate the evident resentment over Japan's colonial past, especially but not only in China and South Korea (Vyas; Otmazgin, *Regionalizing Culture*). This plays a heavy role in the perception of Japan's contemporary culture in several other countries within East as well as Southeast Asia. Sharp assessments on the shortcomings of Japan's alleged soft power's dependency on its condemnable political past are

quite common among scholars from those very countries where Japan's colonial or wartime presence caused death and pain: "Despite the attractiveness of Japanese pop culture and other more traditional forms of Tokyo's public diplomacy, Japan's pursuit of 'soft power' and a good international image is undermined by its failure to overcome its burden of history" (Lam 349).

Another last, important aspect of how Japanese government organs deal with soft power is its one-dimensionality, for two main reasons. Firstly, because they appear to be advertising only the most profitable outputs of the Japanese content industries, whereas the public corporate bodies devoted to the promotion of Japanese culture across the world, such as The Japan Foundation, have always done their best to support national cultural forms in all their diversity, from the more traditional to the more contemporary ones (Ogoura; Lam 355-356). Secondly, because the underlying narrative, not only of the MOFA but even of some Japanese art scholars, consists of a generalized flattening of Japanese cultural expressions to a homogeneous version (as discussed in Berndt, "Reflections" and "Traditions of Contemporary Manga"; White 103-104), so as to construct a fictitious, eschatological image of Japan's national culture as a harmonious parable starting from ancient times and continuing to the present day.

JAPAN'S SOFT POWER ON THE GLOBAL STAGE

The choice of a viable example that illustrates a recent demonstration or attempt of soft power by Japanese authorities depends on the definition of soft power that one adopts. In coherence with previous argumentations, here I establish that a useful framing of the notion is to consider it as a set of strategies/policies by a nation-state's government meant to enable international interactions with other countries, with the overall objective of yielding favorable policies from the foreign governments and congenial sentiments among their populace. To this end, a revealing case is the closing ceremony of the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on August 21, 2016 (Sone), during which a promotional video of the next Olympics (to be hosted by Tokyo in 2020) was also shown; both the video and the ceremony include the appearance of Japan's Prime Minister Shinzō Abe. This is neither the first nor the last discussion on this atypical "political" performance, but in this context it is framed in the specific perspective of soft power.

1. General commentary

The 2020 Olympics was awarded to Tokyo on September 7, 2013 by the International Olympic Committee. It was a highly symbolic decision, given the aftermath of the devastating tsunami in the Tōhoku region and the breakdown at Fukushima nuclear power plants in March 2011. Japan's reputation in terms of public safety was certainly not immaculate in the wake of those tragedies. The Olympics can then be seen as a means not only to rebuild Japan's international image but also, I would argue, as a way to assist the country in accomplishing that very task. It is therefore even more interesting to see that the visual content strategy that can be deduced from this promotional video only focuses on topics and symbols *other than* security, safety, and authoritativeness.

Shinzō Abe's appearance in the Olympics video has been, of course, widely reported (Rich; Sinnayah). To be thorough in terms of the display of symbols of the Japanese cultural soft power, the whole ceremony should be taken into account and not only the few seconds' appearance of the Prime Minister. The entire closing ceremony of the 2016 Olympics, staged at the famous Maracana Stadium in Rio de Janeiro, was divided into three phases: the parade of athletes, the presentation of the next Olympics venue, and, understandably given the Brazilian context, a Carnival-style finale. The show was designed and directed overall by Rosa Magalhães, one of the top Brazilian Carnival designers. The segment concerning Tokyo 2020, which was about eleven and a half minutes in duration, was conceived and designed by four Japanese professionals: a creative supervisor, a creative co-supervisor and music director, a choreographer and stage director, and a creative director (*AdverTimes*).

At the beginning of the Japan-related segment, the Olympics authorities, the mayor of Rio, and the governor of Tokyo are featured. After the passage of the Olympic flag from Brazil (Rio's mayor) to the Olympic Committee (its president) and then to Japan (Tokyo's governor), the national anthem of Japan is solemnly performed. Afterwards, a dynamically edited presentation of the next host country is shown, a video clip titled *Warming Up!*, in which Shinzō Abe appears (to watch the whole footage, see NHK). The clip features in action several top Japanese athletes and a few celebrities, in an organic, harmonious, and entertaining display of numerous key images all referring to Japan: its people, landmarks and cityscapes, arts, heritage, high technology, urban development, and popular symbols of its "national spirit" as currently advertised (organization, precision, symmetry, grace, kindness, and hospitality). The images of this "real" Japan are mixed with short sequences showing famous fictional characters: the soccer players from the manga/

anime *Captain Tsubasa*, kicking a soccer ball; the video game *Pac-Man*; a futuristic cityscape reminiscent of many science fiction anime known overseas, such as *Tetsuwan Atom* (which is also one of Tokyo 2020's mascots) and *Ghost in the Shell*; the beloved gadget-cat from the *Hello Kitty* franchise; and the blue robot-cat from the manga and animated TV series *Doraemon*. Meanwhile, the dynamic actions of the real-life athletes are connected by the passing of a red ball (a reference to Japan's flag) between one another, until the sphere reaches Abe himself.

Japan's top politician is portrayed in profile, grabbing the ball. He has a mission: to reach Rio de Janeiro for the closing ceremony. However, sitting in his Toyota car in Tokyo, he cannot make it on time. Thus, he dons the red cap from *SuperMario*, Nintendo's video game plumber, and—with the help of computer graphics—magically transforms into him. Running through the streets of Shibuya (a famous and populous Tokyo area), Mario/Abe teams up with *Doraemon*, who creates a hole through the planet connecting Shibuya to the Maracã Stadium using a "warp pipe," a typical feature in *SuperMario*'s computer adventures. Now Mario/Abe is ready to jump into the pipe and pop out the other end of it, in Rio. The magic is done: from the footage, the TV images move to the stadium's central stage, where the real Shinzō Abe, dressed as *SuperMario*, emerges with his red cap and ball. It is an extremely brief moment; Mario's costume is designed in such a way that Shinzō Abe only *looks* dressed in it for perhaps half a second. The costume is merely a cover and designedly falls at his feet, revealing an elegant suit and tie. It is, therefore, something like an optical illusion, which attains a very frail balance of self-irony, political officialism, and farce. In total, Abe's appearance lasts for a few seconds, after which a spectacular show of holograms and Japanese dancers, artists, and musicians takes over the stage. At the very end, Abe appears at the center of the stadium again, surrounded by Japanese athletes and dancers, and delivers his final message to the world: "See you in Tokyo!"

This is a pure exercise of soft power in a very explicit fashion. The performance displays all its hallmark features. Japan's highest political authority—the Emperor allowing, of course—represents the nation he serves by embedding on his own body a universally recognized icon of Japan, in a symbolic scene in which, almost like a liturgy, one becomes triune: Japan's territory (Tokyo and its landmarks), Japan's people (its athletes, populace, and politicians), and Japan's current pop culture (Mario and the previously mentioned figures).

This symbolism provides the opportunity to observe the thin theoretical and empirical grounds of another concept, so popular in studies on Japan's content industries but rarely put under strict scrutiny: the alleged *mukokuseki* or "odorless" features of certain Japanese cultural forms and products such as anime, manga, and video games. There is not enough space here to dive into an argument about

this concept, but let it suffice to say that while it holds a solid validity in many fields of Japanese cultural products and industrial output, the notion creates a misunderstanding about the triad of visual forms formed by manga, anime, and video games, as regards their very forms of expression, the way they are conceived by their creators, and how they are distributed in the domestic and international markets (on the concept of odorless culture, see Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization; contra*, Pellitteri, *The Dragon and the Dazzle*). In fact, Mario, a fictional character who is an Italian plumber and thus not Japanese, is actually a famously Japanese franchise invented by Japanese creative artists and marketed by a Japanese company. He is a fictional hero in a game played on an all-Japanese computer game console. Everybody knows that and, if anyone did not before August 21, 2016, they now know too. The cultural odor and the influential vigor of Japan that stemmed that day from this astonishing performance likely set a new standard for displaying soft power through commodified cultural symbols and franchises.

To conclude this examination, I posit a comparison that may sound rather impertinent. In the framework of a soft power seen as performances displayed as a means to make Japan appear a "friendly" nation, we must note that Mr Abe, in his appearance "cosplaying" a fictional character, seems to reproduce the appeal of those cutely designed mascots that are labeled in Japan as *yuru kyara* and *gotochi kyara* (Occhi). They are PR agents or "ambassadors" of a city or a region, whose purpose is to enhance the appeal of that region's image through the filter of cuteness and an allegorical transformation into a fictional figure. The most famous example is Kumamon, the mascot of Kumamoto prefecture. Through *kyara*, "Japanese institutional communication demonstrates how fictional narratives are intermingled in complex genres and communication frames that were not expected to be fictional, but in which nevertheless seem to be consumed as entertainment" (Hernández-Pérez 182). This fictionality is the focus in the next section.

2. Fictionality and transmediality as rhetorical devices of Japan's soft power

The deployment of several fictional characters in the Olympics video speaks volumes of the visual and content-related strategy that the Japanese cultural diplomacy is pursuing on the global stage by pushing forward with soft power. To this end, I posit a definition of fictionality. Fictionality is a property of fiction as opposed to non-fiction, the latter consisting of factual accounts. As far as Japan is concerned, "a great deal of images that are received and consumed [. . .] about Japan are based on fictional narratives rather than factual accounts: novels, video games, manga, animation [. . .] in which there is no guarantee that what we read/watch is grounded in reality [. . .]. Therefore, what we encounter in these narratives,

in their being fictional, is to be framed as fantastic or fantasized representations" (Pellitteri and Fabbretti 2). Fictionality usually consists of a rhetorical set of linguistic features (Walsh), through which it is possible for the final consumer to be rationally aware of the line where a fictional representation ends and the "real" part of such representation begins (like in the case of Abe's performance), and still enjoy the fictional aura and representational simulation in full.

In every national media system, we can find broad trends: general features that characterize that system. In broader terms, a media system—be it national, international, or transnational—has been defined as a "media ecosystem" (Lopez; for a brief overview of Japan's media ecosystem, see Hernández-Pérez 176-83). However, in our specific context involving Japan's media system and its relationship with the previously introduced concept of fictionality, I will borrow the definition according to which an ecosystem, as a concept and as a system, "differs from the one of industry, market or sector, because it relies on the prevalence of external effects" (Bomsel). In relation to Japan and fictionality, this brings us back to the intellectual properties, the imaginary characters, and the dynamics of Japanese mass culture and creative industries. This complex mechanism was already in the 1990s labeled a "media mix" by Yoshio Irie, a top-level manager at one of the major publishers and IP owners in Japan, Kōdansha (Schodt 92-94).

"Media mix" is hence a label that originates from professionals in Japanese creative industries. While effective in its brevity, it is also quite a naive label. From a European perspective, it is surprising that so many scholars in Japan and beyond (such as Steinberg) prefer it not only to more cogent conceptualizations already in use in international media studies—such as transmediality and crossmediality, depending on the process being analyzed—but also to a label introduced by scholar Saya S. Shiraishi, which captures the features of the process more comprehensively: "image alliance." Nevertheless, this trans- and crossmediality that deeply informs Japan's creative industries and in particular those based on visual/fictional characters has been noticed by Japan's government agencies and offices, which, since the mid-2000s, have attempted to exploit the perceived "cultural power" of the characters and stories from successful manga and anime (Bouissou). Thus, the use of Japanese mass and pop culture franchises is no longer a purely domestic business where stories and heroes are addressed to an audience comprised solely or almost entirely of Japanese kids and adult *otaku*, or hardcore fans. It has become a global venture. A specific section of those media operations has even been labeled "brand nationalism" (Iwabuchi, "Undoing International Fandom"). We can argue that, from the standpoint of Tokyo's government, this process could be seen as a consequence and a desirable outcome of that flattering expression, "Japan's gross national cool," proposed in 2002 by Douglas McGray in his influential article.

All this means that, since the early 2000s, many Japanese policymakers have come to believe that Japan's local creative industries—especially manga, anime, and video games—can be highly instrumental to the empowerment of the country in a global scenario (Asō; IPSP), so much so that the government, as noted in the Introduction, initiated the Cool Japan promotional initiatives in 2010 (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry). This applies to animation too, as a huge concentration of characters and stories that have demonstrated a universal appeal for children, teenagers, and young adults all around the world. Trust in anime franchises has been proven by the progressive re-internationalization of the business in recent years (Shichijo; Takayama), after a decade and a half of an inward tendency that followed an initial period of great expansion in Europe in the 1980s-1990s (Pellitteri, "The Italian Anime Boom" and "Reframing Japanese Animation's Success"). Today, the revenues from Japanese IPs related to or centered on animation are gradually growing again. This is especially true in the case of particularly famous franchises that are, overall, representative of Japanese visual storytelling: narrative universes—pertaining to anime as well as manga and, often, video games as well—such as *Captain Tsubasa*, *Doraemon*, *SuperMario*, *Hello Kitty*, *Dragon Ball*, *One Piece*, *Tetsuwan Atom* (*Astro Boy*), *Sailor Moon*, *Naruto*, *Crayon Shin-chan*, *Yōkai Watch*, and *Pretty Cure*, among hundreds more. The IPs just mentioned here are not random; they are the main franchises chosen to advertise and promote the Tokyo Olympics as "ambassadors" of Japan in this context.

3. The *genius loci* in the context of Japanese creative industries

Having established how these issues emerged, I revisit in this section what was hinted at earlier regarding the argument that soft power might at times be based on older phenomena that went by a different name. When we refer to the diplomatic and government use of commodified culture to produce soft power, we might frame soft power (if we consider it as a "resource" that nation-states want to exploit in their official policies) in the wake of a concept that was introduced during Ancient Rome through a famous comment by the literate Servius on Virgil's *The Aeneid*: "*nullus locus sine Genio*" or "no place [is] without [its] Genius" (Servius 5, 95).

Here "Genius" literally stands for a local god, but figuratively it refers, by extension, to the talent, the *ingenuity* hosted and put into practice by the people of that *locus*. The formula has more often been conveyed to us as *genius loci* ("the place's ingenuity"). While this concept was, in the modern age, canonically used first in the field of architecture, followed by tourism (Norberg-Schulz), it can be applied to soft power and culture. All the initiatives that government institutions engage in when promoting creative industries, cultural products, fictional characters, as well

as the "traditional" arts and crafts, gastronomy, landmarks, and natural attractions of a nation, fall into a strategy of exploitation of the plurality of that nation's *genius loci*. In other words, the place in which the potential resource of a nation-state's cultural soft power resides and is "yielded," to be exploited in a way or another, is the *genius loci*: the creators with a vision, the resourceful managing staff, and the daring companies that produce cultural forms within one or more creative industries.

A growing scholarship is focusing precisely on the active role of creative people's specific talents, collaborative work, and cooperative enthusiasm as key components in giving life to successfully marketed pop cultural forms (in reference to anime, manga and toys, see Steinberg; Condry; Gan; Morisawa; Nguyễn; Pellitteri, *Mazinga Nostalgia*). Japanese pop-cultural products put out by artistic crews and companies of various sizes are good examples of how soft power has been associated with the content industries and commodified culture stemming from this nation's creative system (McGray; Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization*; Faiola; Bouissou; Kelts; Abe et al.; Otmazgin, "Contesting Soft Power" and *Regionalizing Culture*).

4. Successes and shortcomings: two opposite examples

As a further application of the previous discussion, here I will cover the frequent divergence between the potential popularity of a nation's pop-cultural output in a foreign country and the effectiveness of bilateral policies in terms of soft power initiatives or dynamics. I call attention to two examples related to Japan, one dealing with the Asian region and one with Europe. These two examples provide good corollaries to the case of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics video clip.

In Asia, Japanese pop-cultural forms are successful among Chinese youths, but such desire for consumer products does not necessarily correspond to sentiments of proximity in terms of political and cultural attitudes toward the country (Vyas; Whitney and Shambaugh). A report published by the Association of Japanese Animations shows that the presence of anime in China accounted for over half of the increase in the Japanese animation industry's overseas revenue from 2014 to 2015 (AJA 3). In that period, online anime distribution rights to China increased by 78.7%. Therefore, in the Chinese media system as well as among young audiences there is high demand for Japanese franchises and shows. However, at the level of general policies, as many commentators in China observed, the emerging and consolidating popularity of Japanese pop cultures is framed as a form of ideological aggression through an imperialistic foreign culture, especially when it is not carrier of socialist values (Yang and Cong); moreover, the marked protectionism in China is in certain

fields—like the industry of animated cartoons—overtly directed against Japanese animation (“China Extends”). In other words, despite the overall collaborative and friendly relations between the two super powers, Japanese popular culture and, namely, anime, is “increasingly viewed as a threatening presence” (Saito, §5); in fact, “[c]oncerned by Japan’s decision to support its popular culture, Chinese authorities responded by heavily investing in China’s own animation industry. In combination with the restrictions placed on television, Japanese anime became harder to access through official channels” (Saito, §6).

In Europe, Italy has had the greatest presence of Japanese anime (based on the number of TV series aired in nationwide broadcastings and theatrical films released) and manga (based on the number of titles published and copies sold, in proportion to the general population) in the entire European region since the late 1970s (Pellitteri, “The Italian Anime Boom”). However, the popularity of these products among Italian youths, which have been widely recognized and advertised *as Japanese* in Italian mainstream media since the late 1970s, did not correspond at all with detectable changes in the official policies of the Italian government(s) toward Japan or in the often stereotypical notions of Japan in Italian public opinion (Pellitteri, “Furansu to Itaria,” *Soft Power of J-culture*). Nonetheless, the tight diplomatic and cultural dialogue between the two countries continues on different tracks and by other logics. This can be seen in the contrast between the lack of significant changes in the diplomatic, political, and industrial relations between the two countries, and the ever-growing presence of citations of Japanese pop culture in the Italian mainstream culture—especially anime, as the outcome of the overexposure I mentioned earlier (Pellitteri, *Mazinga Nostalgia* 1242-67). A very recent example among many is the video clip that the Italian public television company RAI launched in September 2018 to advertise the participation of the national women’s volleyball team to the Women’s World Championship, held from September 29 to October 21 in Japan. The 39 minute long video mixes live-action scenes starring the Italian players with their animated versions, depicted in clear anime style. The reader must at this point be informed that sports anime have a long history of success in Italy, and all the most famous volleyball-centered animated series from Japan have been broadcast nationwide with high ratings since the early 1980s. In many occasions, the Italian volleyball champions—especially the women’s teams—have released interviews in which they declared to have been strongly inspired to pursue this sport by watching, as little kids, those very Japanese anime on volleyball. This video simultaneously presents a glorification of volleyball, an encouragement for the Italian National team, and a sincere homage to the hosting country at large, evident even in the music choice, the original opening song of the Japanese anime series *Attacker Yū!* (Knack, 58 eps, 1984). This series is very famous and regularly rebroadcast in Italy since the 1980s as *Mila e Shiro*. Even putting aside the irony of the cultural short-circuit in the Italian team defeating

the Japanese team in the semi-finals in an exciting match, the mentioned video clip (RAI – FIPAV) is evidence of the theses expressed in these pages, including the notion of *genius loci*, which in this case refers to the cultural graft of the visual and narrative codes of anime into Italian mainstream culture and creative industries.

CONCLUSIONS: AFTER THE GRAND NARRATIVES, THE GRAND FICTIONS

In this conclusion, besides presenting final reflections on the theme of the article and supporting such reflections more thoroughly, the conceptual coordinates established must be reinforced and expanded upon by adding some last elements of theory.

While the representational and promotional strategy of displaying fictional characters and making Abe himself a video game cartoon could be ironically labeled as pertaining more to a "Geek Japan" (Condry) rather than to a "Cool Japan," the main notion that I stress here is that this ensemble of fictional and pseudo-fictional characters may produce a flattening of Japan's public image in a playful and fictionalized dimension. In other words: one deprived of a deeper meaning and narrational base which are supposed to "tell" the rest of the world about the deep dimensions of the nation's character and populace. I shall call this flattening an unwanted shift from Grand Narratives to Grand Fictions. This shift, furthermore, pertains not only to "Japan" as a stereotypical representation of the country, but also to the ways fictional stories produced by the anime medium "behave." The grand narratives—delving into mythology, war and trauma, salvation, death and rebirth, sacrifice and responsibility, coming of age, and suffering for the greater good—of the series produced in the 1960-1980s have been gradually disappearing since the 1990s-2000s in favor of smaller narratives with narrower themes that attract smaller groups of committed fans instead of wider audiences of children and teenagers, as in the previous decades (Azuma; Pellitteri, *Mazinga Nostalgia*).

The insistence on using two-dimensional, illustrated characters to promote the nation's cultural environment—even and especially in the context of a global event such as the Olympics—is understandable if we consider the Cool Japan strategy. Its intent is, within the framework of the "image alliance" of anime and manga, among others, that of increasing the overall revenue of domestic creative industries by exploiting those sectors that garner the highest enthusiasm among youths all around the world. The counter-effect of this strategy, however, may result in a reduction of Japan's public image (as far as the general audience overseas is concerned) as a place where juvenile entertainment is more important than anything else, an infantilization of that *genius loci* that is wider and deeper.

The enormous creativity possessed by those who work in the Japanese creative industries—fashion, music, cinema, and so on—may be mortified at the insistence in using cartoonish franchises to advertise a solemn moment of global rallying such as the Olympic Games. Moreover, the stress on the purely visual features of these characters erases their deeper narrative dimension. That is why I speak of Grand Fictions covering up the narratives of anime franchises. This prevalence of fictionality also consumes Abe himself in his performance as SuperMario, turning him, as media scholar Manuel Hernández-Pérez posits, into a “transfiction,” that is, one of the many examples in Japanese creative industries and public representations that “combine nested fictions into nonfictional structures” (189).

Let us return to the anime franchises listed in §2 of the previous section and to the popularity of *Captain Tsubasa* in certain regions of the Middle East. This point addresses the role of the anime medium and content platform in the public image of Japan. The history of anime abroad is long and rich and varies from country to country. In some nations, anime gained and continue to hold favor among certain fan niches (such as the United States and Australia); in others, they were met with a longstanding success across multiple generations of children and teenagers since the late 1970s, thanks to their massive distribution through mainstream media carriers such as nationwide broadcastings (such as in Italy, France, Spain, francophone Canada, Mexico and other Latin-American countries, South Korea, and the Philippines). We have to consider the popularity of anime in different regions of the world in order to fully understand the way *Captain Tsubasa* and *Doraemon*, among others, were chosen as ambassadors of the Olympics. The Japanese government's choice of these franchises, in effect, makes perfect sense if we consider the world regions where each of those character-centered franchises is particularly renowned: Doraemon in East and Southeast Asia; Pac-Man and SuperMario in America and Europe; Tsubasa in Europe, the Middle East, and Latin America; and Hello Kitty practically everywhere.

A more content-driven logic would have implied that, in order to advertise the Olympic Games through anime, only sport-centered franchises should have been used. However, here only *Captain Tsubasa*, indeed only coincidentally, represents an Olympic sport: soccer. Of the many sports anime series famous in Japan that are to some extent renowned overseas and that might have been included in the Tokyo 2020 video clip, such as *Slam Dunk* or *Kuroko no basket* (basketball), *Haikyū!!* or *Attack No. 1* (volleyball), *Ashita no Jō* or *Hajime no Ippo* (boxing), *Tennis no ōjisama* or *Ace wo nerae!* (tennis), *Free!* (swimming), *Yowamushi Pedal* (cycling), *Kyōjin no hoshi* or *Diamond no Ace* (baseball), or *All Out!* (rugby), only the *Tsubasa* franchise was selected. On the other hand, SuperMario is a plumber on a mission to rescue a damsel in distress in the famous computer game, Hello Kitty is a commodified icon that lacks any narrational value, and Doraemon is a robot-cat from the future

in an educational but very repetitive manga, picture books, and a semi-animated weekly TV strip for children. It should at this point be clear that the promotional video of the Tokyo Olympics is not deploying the narrative values and the variety of contents of manga and anime or the universality of *sports*: it is putting forward "Japan" as a nation-brand by exploiting celebrated fictional icons from its mass, pop, and media culture.

However, a franchise of fictional characters can be defined as "pop" insofar it is "unofficial;" that is, if it "excludes anything written, commissioned, funded, or screened by local or national governments. [...] Sometimes governments utilize genres commonly associated with pop culture to disseminate their message, such as an anime publicity film. These are easily confused with pop(ular) culture, but they are not 'of the people' and therefore not popular culture" (Seaton 233). Using anime, video games, and manga to boost the image of Japan *might* be a good strategy. However, international observers have been arguing for years that Japanese government policymakers' alleged preference for using fictional franchises will have the reverse outcome of "killing the cool" in Japanese pop culture's alleged coolness (Otmazgin and Ben-Ari 19).

For decades, in fact, anime, followed by manga, then video games made in Japan, have crossed borders either legally or through fan piracy despite often being stigmatized as a minor, "ugly," "dangerous" form of entertainment in Europe, Asia, and the United States (Daliot-Bul and Otmazgin; Pellitteri and Wong). Nonetheless, they have been widely acclaimed by growing fan communities and are warmly remembered by former kids who are now in their thirties and forties. This long term result was achieved spontaneously on the basis of standard commercial dynamics in the transnational ecosystems involving the brokering, broadcasting/publishing/distribution, and release of these character-based franchises as well as, in many instances, of the constellation of associated licensed commodities. The process of exploitation of these imaginary heroes and narrative environments by the Japanese government could produce a backlash in popularity, by depriving them of their relative independence from institutional officialism. This looks even more markedly like a risk insofar as the usage of these characters by the government may emphasize their fictional appeal, but, as I mentioned above, impoverishes them from the perspective of their original, existing, and often deep narratives and contents (which are anything but relatable to politics and official policies). This is, as I argued earlier on, a risky business in which the Grand Narratives embedded in successful and beloved franchises—*Captain Tsubasa*, *One Piece*, *Naruto*, and *DragonBall* among others—are flattened into merely Grand Fictions, deprived of depth by brand nationalism's policies.

The information, discussion, and materials provided in this essay suggest that when successful Japanese pop-cultural forms "hit" targets that do not influence the policies of a foreign nation, they hardly produce relevant soft power leverage. However, if a set of preexisting conditions are satisfied, the result can at times be positive, as the Italian case shows, the massive and unmatched exposure of Italy to anime and manga having occurred through an unsegmented mainstream distribution and consumption, and not through minor channels to niche groups. This, in turn, demonstrates another, final ambiguity in the association between soft power and the degree of Japanese fictional characters and narratives' influence and popularity overseas. In other words, to be effective, Japan's soft power initiatives involving anime and similar cultural products should primarily or, at least, *also* target policymaking interlocutors, rather than subcultural audiences.

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