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Pop-culture diplomacy in Japan: soft power, nation branding and the question of 'international cultural exchange'

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This paper critically examines the development of what is known as 'pop-culture diplomacy' in Japan. In the postwar era, the country's cultural diplomacy was propelled by the necessity to soften anti-Japan perceptions, notably in Southeast Asia. In the late 1980s, the popularity of Japanese media culture in Asia began to attract the attention of policy makers, while subsequent globalized practices of soft power and nation branding gave greater emphasis to the use of media culture to internationally enhance the image of the nation, which has meant the promotion of 'pop-culture diplomacy' and, more broadly, 'Cool Japan'. It is argued that pop-culture diplomacy goes no further than a one-way projection and does not seriously engage with cross-border dialogue. The Japanese case also shows that pop-culture diplomacy hinders meaningful engagement with internal cultural diversity and suggests the necessity of taking domestic implications of cultural diplomacy seriously.

Keywords: pop-culture diplomacy; soft power; nation branding; Cool Japan; international cultural exchange; cultural diversity

Introduction

As argued in the introductory chapter of this special issue, cultural diplomacy *stricto sensu* should refer principally to governmental strategies for the attainment of 'soft power' through cultural means. While the scope of cultural diplomacy has been expanded, influenced by certain recent trends in 'public diplomacy', to place greater emphasis on the fostering of mutuality and cultural exchange (Holden 2013), strategies that focus upon projecting a selected national image by exporting appealing cultural products such as animation, TV programs, popular music, films and fashion, still occupy a central place in the efforts of Japan as well as other East Asian countries. The webpage of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), for example, states that MOFA engages in the development of cultural diplomacy in relation to the increasing significance of two diplomatic strategies, which are public diplomacy and soft power. Public diplomacy is defined as a diplomatic strategy to enhance international understanding of Japan's position on various issues by acting directly on the people of foreign countries via effective publicity. The purpose of soft power, following the argument of Nye (2004), is to make people in other countries more receptive to Japan's positions through the dissemination of the

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country's cultures and values. Traditional culture, language education, intellectual exchange and people-to-people exchange programs have been the key tools employed. However, the use of media culture has attracted even more attention among Japanese foreign policy makers since the late 1980s. In 2006, MOFA officially launched 'pop-culture diplomacy', declaring that it, in 'aiming to further the understanding and trust of Japan, is using pop-culture, in addition to traditional culture and art, as its primary tools for cultural diplomacy'.[1]

This paper critically interrogates the progress of this more recent strand of Japanese cultural diplomacy by situating it in a wider context of the rise of policy concern with the uses of media culture that has been driven by the globalized exercise of soft power and nation branding. It will be argued that despite its emphasis on the promotion of international cultural exchange and dialogue, Japan's pop-culture diplomacy goes no further than a one-way projection of Japanese culture. While the introduction of Japanese media culture facilitates some understanding of Japan and intercultural exchange, pop-culture diplomacy does not seriously engage with the promotion of cross-border dialogue over historically constituted issues in East Asia. It also highlights crucial problems for the advancement of international projections of a unitary national image at the expense of engagement with cultural diversity within national borders. This also reminds us how important it is to take seriously the *domestic* implications of cultural diplomacy, particularly if the goal is to promote cultural exchange in a more cosmopolitan way and beyond the uncritical reinforcement of a homogenized and exclusive understanding of national culture.

The rise of pop-culture diplomacy

Although the notion of soft power has gained currency only in the last two decades, serious discussion regarding the uses of culture and media communication to enhance Japan's image in the international arena began as early as in the 1920s and 1930s, when Japan aspired to become an imperial and colonial power equivalent to Euro-American counterparts (Sato 2012). The country's defeat during the Second World War and the subsequent American occupation interrupted this discussion. In the 1960s, Japan's economic development brought these questions back dramatically to the international stage. A renewed cultural diplomacy policy began to be implemented in the 1970s when Japanese economic clout induced friction with the US and aroused anti-Japanese sentiments and movements in Southeast Asia. The Japanese government was urged to take action to soften the anti-Japan mood and emphasized the significance of promoting the international understanding of Japan through cultural exchange. As part of the so-called Fukuda Doctrine, the Japan Foundation was established in 1972 as an extra-departmental organization of MOFA and the improvement of the international image of Japan was pursued through the presentation of Japanese culture overseas.

While traditional cultural forms such as the tea ceremony and Kabuki as well as language education and human exchange programs such as The Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme (JET), which started in 1987, were the main staples of cultural exchange, the potential of media culture for cultural diplomacy began to draw attention in the late 1980s. The growing popularity of Japanese TV programs in Asian countries demonstrated that Japan's colonial past did not prevent Japanese TV programs and pop idols from being accepted in East and Southeast Asia. Accordingly, a strong interest emerged in the capability of Japanese media culture

to improve Japan's reputation. In 1988, the Takeshita government for the first time established a discussion panel on international cultural exchange with a focus on the promotion of exporting TV programs to Asian countries. In 1991, the then MOFA and the then Ministry of Post and Telecommunications jointly established the Japan Media Communication Center (JAMCO) to provide subsidies to developing countries import Japanese TV programs.

An especially influential factor in this development was the far-reaching popularity of *Oshin*, the Japanese soap opera about the eventful life of Japanese women in the early twentieth-century, which was broadcast from April 1983 to March 1984 in Japan. The drama was distributed free of charge to many Asian countries as well as the Middle East and South America under the cultural exchange program of the Japan Foundation. Shown first in Singapore in 1984, *Oshin* was subsequently well-received in forty-six countries throughout the world.[2] The international popularity of *Oshin* prompted the distributor of the program, NHK International, to organize an international conference on *Oshin* and subsequently publish its proceedings in 1991. The Japan Foundation's monthly journal, *Kokusai Kôryû* (International Exchange) (volume 64, 1994), also explored the possibility of Japan's cultural interchange with Asia through media culture. It was argued that the popularity of *Oshin* in other Asian countries needed to be taken seriously, because those people who had so far known Japan only through 'culturally odorless' products (Iwabuchi 2002) such as cars, consumer technologies and animation had come to see the 'actual' faces and lives of Japanese people through TV drama (NHK International 1991). Apart from the questions of what is the 'real' Japan and how images of Japan are (in contradictory ways) consumed and received by audiences, the drama was praised as it testified to the capacity of media culture to enhance the international understanding of Japan in ways that were thought to overcome negative historical memories of Japanese colonialism as well as hostility regarding the country's economic exploitation of the region. Particularly significant in this respect was that *Oshin* cultivated among Asian viewers a sense of commonality between Japan and other Asian nations through the representation of common values such as perseverance, diligence, attachment to family and the common harsh experience of non-Western modernization. These factors were held responsible for the popularity of *Oshin* in other Asian countries and were seen to have engendered a positive change in the image of Japan in Asian countries.[3]

With rapid economic growth and the accompanied expansion of a middle-class youth culture in other Asian countries in the 1990s, increasing attention began to be paid to the great potential of Japanese TV programs and popular music in representing the contemporary urban life style of young people, and in enhancing Japan's image in Asia, particularly among younger people who had not experienced earlier Japanese imperialism. *Gaiko Forum*, a monthly journal of MOFA, featured articles that discussed the possibilities for advancement of international cultural exchange with the spread of Japanese media culture among young people in Thailand, Singapore and Hong Kong (September 1994, November 1994). Honda (1994) stressed the cosmopolitan appeal embodied in Japanese media culture beyond hitherto prevailing traditional and oppressive images of Japan. With the rise of middle classes across Asia, Honda (1994, p. 77) argued that, '[t]he link that Japanese media culture now provides for ordinary young people from Tokyo to Singapore could foster dialogue on a scale and closeness never before achieved'.

The 1990s was the high point of the reception of Japanese TV dramas, popular music, animation and comic books, particularly in East and Southeast Asian countries. The favourable reception of Japanese media culture in Asia was something unexpected, as the local media industries and audiences in the different countries, not the Japanese media industries, had taken the initiative (Iwabuchi 2002). The locally driven spread of Japanese media culture further heightened the expectations among Japanese policy makers that hitherto unfavorable images of Japan would be improved and that unresolved historical issues would be smoothed over.

Soft power, nation branding and Cool Japan

Around the beginning of the present century, Japan's pop-culture diplomacy was firmly institutionalized with the 'Cool Japan' policy discourse, which sought to capitalize on the popularity of Japanese media culture in global markets (notably Euro-American markets). Among the coverage by Euro-American journalists of the increasing popularity of Japanese media culture, the most influential report coined the term 'Gross National Cool' or GNC and portrayed the rise of Japan as a global cultural superpower (McGray 2002). The article was swiftly translated into Japanese and prompted considerable excitement about Japan's strong cultural presence in the world in the context of the long Japanese economic slump since the mid-1990s. This had been accompanied by active policy discussion and increased export promotion of Japanese media culture in a more institutionally organized manner than before, leading to the adoption of pop-culture diplomacy by MOFA.

It should be noted that the development of pop-culture diplomacy, and more broadly 'Cool Japan', was propelled by the increasingly ubiquitous discourses of soft power and nation branding in the exercise of cultural policy. While first coined by Joseph Nye (1990) in the early 1990s post-cold-war context, the term 'soft power' became much more widely discussed in the new millennium in the wake of the Bush Administration's hardline policies especially after 9/11. Soft power was revisited in search for a more diplomatic approach to world security within the US (e.g. Nye 2004). More importantly, however, its revival coincided with the growing concern with nation branding, which has made the notion of soft power internationally appealing, albeit with some significant modifications. In Nye's argument (2004), media culture is simply one of three resources for heightening the soft power of the nation-state: the other two resources, namely respectful foreign policy and attractive democratic values, are considered even more crucial. However, the international appeal of media cultures has become the focal point for the notion of soft power in many cultural policy discussions. Many governments including Japan are interested in more expedient ways to use media culture to establish appealing images of the nation, smooth international political negotiations and boost the economy: in effect the soft power paradigm has actually been superseded by the imperatives of nation branding (Fan 2008). As international relations scholar van Ham (2001, pp. 3–4) argues, regarding the state's role in branding the nation in support of international political and economic objectives: 'Smart states are building their brands around reputations and attitudes in the same way smart companies do'. It is argued that since the late 1990s the management of the nation's image in the world has been developing to 'a strategically planned, holistic and coherent activity' by incorporating marketing techniques (Szondi 2008, p. 4). Following Fan (2010, p. 101), nation branding can be defined as 'a process by which a nation's images

can be created or altered, monitored, evaluated and proactively managed in order to enhance the country's reputation among a target international audience'. Emphasized here is a more pragmatic kind of manoeuver for the administration of culture than Nye's soft power, which relies on and legitimizes the marketization of culture and sponsors the production and international projection of attractive media culture for the purpose of enhancing national reputation and economic profits. The globalization of the soft power discourse, combined with the techniques of nation branding, displaces a differentiation between public/cultural diplomacy and creative/content industries and puts the focus further on the projection of appealing images of a nation.

It is in this context that many Asian countries also became keen to promote their own cultural products and industries to internationally enhance the image of the nation. For instance, the South Korean government has sought to build on the sweeping popularity of South Korean media cultures known as the 'Korean Wave'. The Korean success stirred neighbouring countries including Japan to extend their cultural diplomacy activities, thereby contributing to the soft power competition that has been intensifying across the whole of East Asia in the twenty-first century (Chua 2012).

It was under the Koizumi government (2001–2006) that policy concern with the uses of media culture for enhancing national interests was firmly instituted. Koizumi was the first prime minister to refer to the advancement of cultural policy that aimed to promote media culture export and nation branding, stating in an address to the Diet that the government would strengthen the international projection of Japan's attractive brand images by advancing the content industries such as film, animation and fashion.[4] Many committees focusing on the promotion of Japanese media culture were established, such as the Head Office for Intellectual Property Strategy (2002), the Committee for Tourism Nation (2003), the Committee for Info-communication Software (2003), the Research Committee for Content Business (2005), the J-Brand Initiative (2003), and the Council for the Promotion of International Exchange (2006). In the course of these developments, influenced by Euro-American rhetoric and practice, the expression 'Cool Japan' gained currency as an umbrella policy term to cover various areas of interest.[5] The potential of media culture to generate an appealing international image was widely discussed by various ministries and government departments, leading to the implementation of policy. While there is still no single ministry that plans and implements a coherent cultural policy, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) took the lead in this domain by establishing the Cool Japan promotion office in June 2010. The Cabinet Secretariat set up 'the Council for the Promotion of Cool Japan' in 2013 and 50 billion yen was allocated in the national budget for infrastructure promoting Japanese content overseas to spread the charm of Japanese culture internationally (not only media contents but also aspects such as food, fashion, traditional craft and Japanese ways of life). This development suggests that a policy concern with the economic benefit of exporting media culture under the name of creative industries is growing. METI adopted the term 'creative industries' for the English translation of the Cool Japan promotion office.

While METI has been increasingly taking up the policy initiative of Cool Japan, MOFA has also been actively incorporating the idea into its public diplomacy program. Under the Koizumi government, MOFA integrated two distinct ministry sections devoted respectively to cultural diplomacy and international cultural

exchange and international publicity into a single Public Diplomacy Department in 2004. Public diplomacy was also for the first time officially adopted in the 2004 *Diplomatic Bluebook* and in 2006, MOFA officially adopted a policy of pop-culture diplomacy, which puts a clear emphasis on nation branding through the dissemination of Japanese media culture.

In 2006, the then Foreign Minister Aso (who became prime minister in 2008) gave a speech entitled 'A New Look at Cultural Diplomacy', addressing would-be creators learning creative skills related to the production of digital cultures at a creator training school, Digital Hollywood, near Akihabara. In this speech the Foreign Minister stressed the mounting significance of establishing the image of Cool Japan by disseminating media culture for the policy of cultural diplomacy: 'I think we can safely say that any kind of cultural diplomacy that fails to take advantage of pop culture is not really worthy of being called cultural diplomacy'.[6] As Aso continued:

> We want pop culture, which is so effective in penetrating throughout the general public, to be our ally in diplomacy … one part of diplomacy lies in having a competitive brand image, so to speak. Now more than ever, it is impossible for this to stay entirely within the realm of the work of diplomats … what we need to do now is to build on this foundation [the fact that Japan already has achieved a good image] and attract people of the world to Japanese culture, whether modern or that handed down from antiquity.[7]

2006 was also the year when the BBC World Service Poll included Japan for the first time in an international survey of countries' positive and negative influence in the world. Referring to that poll as well as to other UK surveys, Aso then boasted that Japan was among the most favourably perceived nations in the world,[8] and went on to propose promote Japan's brand image further by exporting attractive Japanese media forms (especially manga and anime). Towards this goal, MOFA appointed the popular animation character, *Doraemon* as Anime Ambassador in 2008 and three young female fashion leaders as 'Ambassadors of Cute' to travel the world promoting Japanese culture. MOFA also began sponsoring the World Cosplay Summit in 2006, which is annually held in Japan. MOFA distinguishes itself from METI in its engagement with Cool Japan by emphasizing that the purpose of the promotion of Japanese media culture should not be reduced to market promotion only and that the enhancement of Japan's cultural standing in the world should take precedence. However, its pop-culture diplomacy is not fundamentally different from METI's economy-driven policies in that they both share the aspiration of boosting the nation's brand image though the promotion of Japanese media culture.

Cross-border dialogue: beyond one-way projection?

Soft power strategies have been critically examined through case studies of their actual operation (see Watanabe and McConnell 2008 for their examination of the Japan–US relationship). Whether and how nations can be successfully branded is open to question: judgments about how successfully nation brands are conveyed by internationally disseminating media culture are very difficult to make (Fan 2010, Anholt 2013). Also, officials in diverse state ministries, public relations advisory organizations, and media and cultural industries involved in branding programs

bring diverse intentions and approaches to it, with all the resultant potential for incoherent and contradictory policy actions (Aronczyk 2013). The effectiveness of pop-culture diplomacy and the Cool Japan policy in selling more Japanese cultural products and enhancing certain national images, as policy-makers contend, is even more dubious. Japan's pop-culture diplomacy policy has been criticized for the fact that it does not clearly articulate specific goals (e.g. Watanabe 2011, p. 191).

This line of critique is concerned with the ambiguity of the objective of pop-culture diplomacy to enhance the nation's brand images as well as its lack of effectiveness. Even more significant is the question of whether it can achieve a crucial objective of cultural diplomacy, that is, the promotion of genuine international cultural exchange. As Fan points, 'The world is increasingly like a gigantic stage on which nations are competing against each other for attention and affection. Nation branding holds the key to win this global "beauty contest"' (2008, p. 16). Japan's pop-culture diplomacy is not free from this trend. Driven by the globalization of soft power policy in tandem with the exercise of nation branding, a one-way projection of appealing Japanese culture has become the main operation of pop-culture diplomacy. This is not to underestimate the potential of media culture to enhance mutual understanding and cross-border dialogue. The spread of Japanese media culture in East and Southeast Asia, and multilateral intra-Asian media culture flows in the last two decades have engendered unprecedented cross-border connections among people in the region. Many studies show how increased media connection in Asia has encouraged people to critically and self-reflexively reconsider their own life, society and culture as well as socio-historically constituted relations and perceptions with others (e.g. Iwabuchi 2002, 2004). Exposure to the media culture of Japan can enhance the understanding of culture and society in Japan, even if in a one-way manner. However, there is no guarantee that this understanding will evolve beyond the individualized pleasure of media consumption. Indifference, othering and antagonism might also be generated by the spread of Japanese media culture. Extra efforts and tactics are needed to direct cross-border connections into pathways of mutuality and exchange, as recent discussions of cultural diplomacy underscore (Holden 2013).

It is claimed in a Japanese policy statement assessing cultural diplomacy that the advancement of international cultural exchange, rather than the uses of hard military power, will be key to the creation of a peaceful world where cultural diversity is mutually respected, and celebrated and multilateral understanding and dialogue promoted.[9] While international exchange and dialogue is emphasized, pop-culture diplomacy does not necessarily entail a sincere commitment to these values. A case in point is the stance toward the unresolved historical issues of Japanese colonialism and imperialism in other East Asian countries, especially China and South Korea. In the above-mentioned speech hailing Japan's status as the second most favorably perceived country in the 2006 BBC survey, Aso did not mention the fact that the survey also reported that two countries – China and South Korea – showed very negative perceptions of Japan. This reaction was driven by the contradictory practices of the Koizumi government: while on the one hand emphasizing the importance of widely disseminating Japanese media cultures for the purpose of establishing harmonious relations with other countries, Prime Minister Koizumi's relentless official visits to the Yasukuni Shrine added fuel to the flames of anti-Japanese sentiment in China and South Korea over issues such as history textbooks and long-standing territorial disputes. Even Nye (2005) criticized Koizumi's repeated visits to the Yasukuni Shrine

for their damaging effect on Japan's soft power. The Japanese government has thus dealt with historical and territorial issues in East Asia in a manner that is at odds with the advancement of international dialogue, diminishing the possibilities for warmer relations with neighboring countries.

As pointed out, the standard Japanese idea of pop-culture diplomacy tends to rely on naïve assumptions about media culture's capacity to improve Japan's reputation abroad, and to transcend the problematic and historically constituted relations between Japan and other Asian countries. With the intensification of anti-Japanese demonstrations in China and South Korea, the spread of Japanese media culture has been expected to efface lingering antagonistic sentiments. When Aso was appointed Foreign Minister in 2005, he said to reporters that Japan's relationship with China should be unproblematic inasmuch as Japanese pop culture such as animation was advancing cultural exchange between the two countries.[10] The 2005 White Paper produced by Japan's Economic and Trade Ministry clearly stated that 'without the spread of Japanese pop culture, anti-Japanese sentiment would have been stronger in South Korea'. The assumption is that South Korean young people who like to consume Japanese media culture will feel more tolerant towards the history of Japan's colonial rule, and thus increased exports of media culture to Asian markets automatically facilitate Japan's public diplomacy outcomes. However, the reality is far more complex than such reasoning suggests. In South Korea and China, many of those who are happy to consume Japanese media culture actually consider historical issues separately and critically. In field research conducted in Beijing in October 2005, I observed that young people in China could simultaneously maintain that 'I really like Japanese animation, it is my favourite', and 'I am very concerned with what happened between Japan and my country in the past'. A sympathetic reception of Japanese media cultures might positively change images of contemporary Japan, but it neither erases the past nor people's memories of it. Historical issues need to be tackled sensibly, continuously and on their own terms. Let me reiterate that this is not to deny a widely observed fact that transnational circulation of media culture in East Asia has facilitated mutual understandings and mediated exchange in an unmatched manner (Iwabuchi 2002). If we take this potential seriously, however, cultural policy should aim to further facilitate already occurring cross-border connections including citizens' possibly conflict-laden dialogues, without opportunistically assuming that media culture has the dreamlike capacity to transcend historical issues. Such a cultural diplomacy strategy would seek to advance international cultural exchange through a sincere engagement with what Morris-Suzuki (2005) calls 'historical truthfulness', cultivated by encouraging people to self-reflexively revisit their views of the past and to exchange them with others.

The historically constituted antagonisms with the two countries over territorial disputes and 'comfort women' have actually been worsening in recent years. We have observed the growing vicious circle of (cyber) nationalism and jingoism in East Asia (see e.g. Sakamoto 2011, Kim 2014). However there is no prospect of policy interventions to promote cross-border dialogue with China and South Korea and to effectively tackle the inter-Asian jingoism. Instead, there has been more increased public diplomacy activity with the aim of publicizing Japan's positions on matters such as territorial disputes, and more strongly asserting Japan's international presence.[11] With the growing currency of METI-driven Cool Japan policy, MOFA has also officially announced support for the Cool Japan policy, emphasizing its diplomatic significance beyond economic interests. While

pop-culture diplomacy is still one of the main policy actions of cultural exchange, however, MOFA puts more emphasis on public diplomacy, having established a Public Diplomacy Strategy Division in 2012, which integrates three sections dedicated to press responses, publicity and cultural exchange. Japan's changing relationship with China and South Korea reflects its concern with the substantial rise of their political, economic and cultural powers. Their rising soft power profile in terms of media culture circulation, overseas language education and tourism has accompanied the relative decline of Japan's presence in the international arena. China and South Korea are now not so much the main targets of pop-culture diplomacy as they are tough rivals in the soft power and public diplomacy competition.

International cultural exchange and cultural diversity within Japan

In addition to the absence of sincere commitment to the advancement of cross-border dialogue over historical issues in East Asia, we also need to critically consider the domestic implications of pop-culture diplomacy. The policy initiative of projecting the nation's brand images in the world has a drawback in terms of the engagement with cultural diversity within national borders. Mutual respect for cultural diversity and international cultural exchange is claimed as an objective of cultural diplomacy in Japan. However, what it promotes is a nation-based cultural exchange and projection of cultural diversity in a totalizing form. It makes the question of who is excluded and whose voices are suppressed in society irrelevant and further hinders paying due attention to marginalized voices and multicultural questions within Japan.

A notable case in point is NHK World, recognized as one of the most important international platforms to publicize the perspectives of the Japanese government, as well as to introduce the attractions of Japanese culture. In early 2006, the expansion of international broadcasting services had begun to be discussed in Japan, and the services commenced in February 2009 with the purpose of enhancing Japan's national image in the world for the promotion of political and economic interests as a key strategy of public diplomacy. However, discussion of the service first started when foreign nationals residing in Japan requested then Prime Minister Koizumi to diversify the Japanese broadcasting service to include people of various ethnic and linguistic backgrounds who were residing in Japan. But, in a Cabinet meeting a few days later, the question of the broadcasting system's public responsibility to provide due service to citizens of diverse backgrounds was shifted towards the development of an English-language international broadcasting service for the purpose of the enhancing national images and conveying the opinions of the Japanese government to the world. This case clearly shows how the growing concern with cultural diplomacy and nation branding suppressed a vital cultural policy engagement with cultural diversity within Japan.

It should also be noted that cultural diplomacy maneuvered in conjunction with nation branding is not only directed externally, but also internally, as a tool for inculcating a narrative of the nation and a sense of national belonging. Nation branding domestically mobilizes citizens, who are encouraged to join in it as 'representatives, stakeholders and customers' of the brand: 'Citizens are called upon to "live the brand" and hence to act and think in ways that are well suited to the general contours of the national brand' (Varga 2014, p. 836). People are thus invited to perform as ambassadors for the nation branding campaign. This was apparent with

the appointment of the 'Ambassador of Cute', and with Aso's call for the help of 'would-be-creators' and for active participants in further enhancing the 'Japan brand' to successfully push forward cultural diplomacy. Whether such an invitation is really embraced is questionable, but the internal projection of nation's brand images is very much related to the exclusionary reconstruction of national identity. The growing interest in nation branding pushes the re-articulation of selective narratives, symbolic meanings and widely recognized stereotypical images of the nation in search of the distinctive cultural assets of the nation and the re-demarcation of 'core' national culture to be appealingly projected. And these representations of the nation are also internally projected towards domestic public (Kaneva 2011, Volcic and Andrejevic 2011, Aronczyk 2013, Varga 2014). As Jansen (2008, p. 122) argued, 'Branding not only explains nations to the world but also reinterprets national identity in market terms and provides new narratives for domestic consumption'.

The Japan country report of the EU's recent *Preparatory Action 'Culture in the EU's external relations* points out that Japan's public/cultural diplomacy and the Cool Japan policy aims to 'enhance awareness of the "uniqueness" of Japan' (Fisher 2014, p. 3) by taking 'an approach which is based on Japan's portrayal of itself as ethnically and linguistically homogeneous and culturally unique' (p. 4). In explicating the global popularity of animation and otaku culture of Japan, it is often claimed that the Japanese inherited a certain national cultural essence from premodern Japan and the necessity of re-evaluating Japanese traditional cultural sensitivities and aesthetics is proposed in order to further promote Cool Japan and enhance Japan's soft power (e.g. Okuno 2007). A growing interest in promoting Japanese products in the world also instigates racialized discourses of national culture and its ownership that confirm the nation's distinctive cultural aesthetics, styles and tastes, using the metaphor of 'cultural gene' or 'cultural DNA'.[12] One policy-maker of the 'Japan Brand project' states that it is necessary to revisit 'Japan' and consider how to properly discern Japanese cultural DNA and strategically standardize it so as to successfully input it into Japanese products and services.[13] It can be argued that such a representation of the nation is superficial and ahistorical, lacking substantial depth and coherence. And there is no guarantee that it succeeds in people's identification with that particular national narrative. Nevertheless, its role in the dissemination of an exclusive conception of the nation as cultural entity should not be discounted, particularly when it occludes socio-cultural differences and disavows their existence as constitutive of the nation (Kaneva 2011, Aronczyk 2013). Indigenous groups' traditional culture or promotion of tokenized multicultural commodities might be occasionally included insofar as it is considered useful for the international projection of the nation's image, but there is not much space for non-useful kinds of socially and culturally marginalized voices within the nation.

This exclusionary re-demarcation of 'Japan' is also driven by the promotion of a particular kind of international cultural exchange and an accompanying conception of cultural diversity. The globalization of soft power and nation branding has given rise to the institutionalization of international arenas in which a one-way projection of national cultures and brand images is *mutually* exhibited, consumed, evaluated and competed, with the substantial expansion of international mediated spectacles and cultural events (see Roche 2000, Urry 2003). The growth of the pervasive 'global beauty contest' of nations works to confirm that the nation is the

most meaningful form of collective identification and the primary unit of international cultural exchange. (Aronczyk, 2013, p. 176) argues that 'the mundane practices of nation branding do serve to perpetuate the nation form … Because they perpetuate a conversation about what the nation is *for* in a global context'. This development has not just propagated the idea among the populace that the promotion of nation branding should be taken seriously as it is of grave importance for the national interest,[14] but has also reinforced a national outlook, which prompts people take for granted the idea of 'the global as the maximum intensification of the national' (Beck 2006, p. 29), whereby cultural diversity is understood and promoted as a value that applies only among nation-states, or between the Japanese and others.

This kind of conception of international cultural exchange and cultural diversity that is embraced in pop-culture diplomacy overshadows the engagement with the growing multicultural situation in Japan. Japanese policy makers belatedly began discussing this topic in 2005 when the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications established the Committee for the Promotion of Multicultural Co-living (*tabunka kyousei*). Yet multiculturalism policy is still seriously underdeveloped, in sharp contrast to the rapid development of pop-culture diplomacy and Cool Japan. A primary problem is that the Multicultural Co-living policy discussion aims to principally deal with foreign nationals living in Japan (most of whom are recent immigrants) by keeping intact the rigid boundary between 'Japanese' and 'foreigners' and disregarding long-time citizens with diverse cultural backgrounds (such as those of Korean descent). Through a bi-polarized conception of 'Japanese' and 'foreigners', the engagement with cultural diversity within Japan tends to be sidestepped by the advancement of international cultural exchange between 'Japanese' and 'foreigners'.[15] In this regard, the challenge of living together is co-opted by pop-culture diplomacy aspirations. The dissemination of attractive Japanese cultures is supposed to promote international cultural exchange, but it generally extends only to the one-way encouragement of foreigners to deepen their appreciation of Japan. It is also expected that the introduction of Japan's cool culture will incite their interest in visiting, travelling and staying in Japan. And this is occasionally regarded as a type of international cultural exchange to be facilitated by multicultural co-living programs promoted by local governments and universities.[16] This conception of international cultural exchange and cultural diversity that the pop-culture diplomacy and the Cool Japan policy underscore works to discount the attention given to existing cultural diversity within Japan. It calls to mind Said's seminal argument (1978) about how the dichotomized construction of culturally coherent entities exerts symbolic violence on the dynamic and culturally diverse reality of human society.

Conclusion

I have argued that the rise of Japanese pop-culture diplomacy does not fulfill its stated objective to bring about the deepening of cultural exchange. There have been promising signs that trans-Asian media and culture flows facilitate mutual understanding and mediated interaction at the grassroots level. Yet, if their full potential is to be exploited, pop-culture diplomacy should broaden its aspirations. It should develop, for example, a pedagogical design that makes better use of media culture towards the advancement of transnational connections in ways that promote

self-reflexive international conversation on the growing antagonism over historical issues and enhance intercultural understanding of cultural diversity within each society. The issue is not limited to Japan of course, given that the international projection of appealing media culture has become prevalent elsewhere, with the intensification of soft power rivalry driven by the globalized exercise of nation branding. Recent trends at the forefront of cultural diplomacy place more emphasis on the fostering of reciprocal and collaborative engagement (Holden 2013), highlighting the need to interact with internal publics as well as external audiences. To advance cross-border dialogue, cultural diplomacy should not just engage with the promotion of people-to-people exchange and mutual understanding but also the development of 'domestic cultural diplomacy' that encourages the national populace to learn about and listen to others rather than merely project an idea of itself (Holden 2013, p. 11). Learning about others, however, should not be based on the dichotomized conception of 'us' and 'them'. It should go beyond a pre-defined framework of knowing about 'us' and 'them' to reflexively rethink why and how 'us' has been perceived in a particular way that does not embrace 'them' as being with and part of 'us'. Cross-border dialogue elucidates what remains unknown about 'us' as well as about 'them' in terms of historical narratives and the diverse composition of the nation. Paying critical attention to domestic cultural diplomacy problematizes exclusive constructions of the nation. This is not to reject the relevance of cultural diplomacy in serving the national interest. But the the scope of the national interest needs to be expanded, however, beyond the pursuit of narrowly focused economic and political goals, advancing cultural exchange in a more open, dialogic and cosmopolitan way to tackle various issues of a globalized world such as complex cultural flows and connections, historically constituted international relations, and the growing cultural diversity within national borders.

Disclosure statement

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Notes

1. MOFA's official webpage: http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/culture/exchange/pop/.
2. Its ratings in many non-Western countries were much better than those of American TV dramas such as *Dallas* or *Dynasty* (Lull 1991, Singhal and Udornpim 1997).
3. *Oshin* narrates modern Japanese history from a woman's perspective. Japan's past is represented mostly in terms of a pacifist woman's experience of overcoming suffering caused by the war (Morris-Suzuki 1998, pp. 134–135). The representation of Japan's gendered past proves to be useful for the purpose of rendering the more troublesome aspects of Japanese modern history irrelevant.
4. Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi's Policy Address at the National Diet, 20 January 2005.
5. A TV program titled 'Cool Japan' (NHK BS2) also started in 2006.
6. http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/fm/aso/speech0604–2.html.
7. Aso Taro, 'A New Look at Cultural Diplomacy: A Call to Japan's Cultural Practitioners'. Speech made at Digital Hollywood University, Tokyo, 28 April, 2006.
8. Country Rating Poll 2006: http://www.globescan.com/news_archives/bbc06–3/index.html.
9. *Bunka gaiko no suishin ni kasuru kondankai houkokusho* (A report by the Discussion Group on the Promotion of Cultural Diplomacy), July 2005.

10. http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/kaiken/gaisho/g_0510.html#13-B.
11. http://www.kokusai-senryaku.ynu.ac.jp/sympo/pdf/20130125/09_saiki.pdf.
12. For the South Korean case, Cho (2011); for the Japanese case, see, for example, www.kanto.meti.go.jp/seisaku/uec … /lec01_kouen_22fy.pdf.
13. E.g., http://blogs.yahoo.co.jp/hiromi_ito2002jp/57705983.html; *www.kanto.meti.go.jp/seisaku/uec.../lec01_kouen_22fy.pdf.*
14. A 2010 survey on what aspects of Japan people are proud of showed that 90% of respondents in their 20s and 80% of those in their 30s stated that they were proud of Japanese animation and computer games. See 'Poll: 95% Fear for Japan's Future' (12 June 2010, http://www.asahi.com/english/TKY201006110455.html). This result suggests a widely infused perception that they are key Japanese culture for the enhancement of soft power.
15. This point is closely related to the fact that multicultural co-living has been developed as an extension of 'local internationalization' policy in the 1990s, by which the national government aimed to support local governments in accommodating the increasing number of foreigners staying and living in their constituency with a stated aim of smoothing international cultural exchange within Japan (see Iwabuchi 2015).
16. For example, see Kanazawa municipal government's project of revitalization of the city: http://www4.city.kanazawa.lg.jp/11001/shiminkikou/shiminnkikou9/bosyuu.html. As for a university curriculum: http://info.bgu.ac.jp/faculty/foreign/english-education/.

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