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An Analysis of Japan's Popular Cultural Tourism: Constructing Japan's Self-Image as a Provider of "Unique" Culture

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Abstract - Japan's national identity tends to emphasize cultural values which often describe what Japan and its people are, and in some case, it suggests how they should behave accordingly. This paper analyzes the relations of identity, culture and tourism development in Japan. I argue that the promotion of Japan's tourism is closely linked to the establishment of particular images of itself or how the Japanese see themselves, i.e., self-image. The Japanese government has paid attention to tourism development for the last few years amidst its declining economy. Japanese tourist developers and entrepreneurs have collectively been interested in constructing a Japanese brand, namely "Cool Japan" with emphasis on popular culture. I will examine Japan's soft power through its growing interest in the development of pop cultural tourism. To build tourism all over Japan without delay, the popularity of modern Japanese culture becomes an effective marketing tool for local events, festivals, restaurants and other types of businesses. However, this is also to suggest that Japan's overemphasis on popular culture could lead to the devaluation of the country's tradition and history instead of economic prosperity.

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An Analysis of Japan's Popular Cultural Tourism: Constructing Japan's Self-Image as a Provider of "Unique" Culture

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I. Introduction

This paper will examine the relations of identity, culture and tourism in Japan, and I aim to provide an overview of the recent development of Japanese tourism. This paper pays attention to how Japanese tourism developers and entrepreneurs tend to rely on the attractiveness of Japan's popular (pop) culture in order to develop a different type of tourism, i.e., Japanese popular cultural tourism.

There are good prospects for high growth in tourism development as it creates new infrastructure, investments, services, and employment, while there are likelihoods of social costs and risks to be paid by local individuals and communities in the process (Vanhove, 1997, p. 60-61). Looking at the trend of Japan's tourism development, although there are different types of domestic tourist spots from onsen hot springs in Kyushu to luxurious hotels in Tokyo, many Japanese families and individuals would rather spend their holidays abroad because of the high value of Japanese Yen (Shimakawa et al., 2006, p. 112-114 and 124-125). In 2002, however, the Japanese Prime Minister Jun'ichiro Koizumi at the time explored ways of improving Japanese tourism, arguing that it could play a vital part of the new economic growth strategy (Suzuki, 2008, p. 12 and 15-16z; Shimakawa et al., 2006, p. 116-120). Thus, it was considered as the best time to review Japan's tourism industry, and the Japanese government set a state-led tourist campaign, Yōkoso Japan (Welcome Japan). The plan was interested in attracting both domestic and international tourists.

For this paper, I had the chance to visit Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto, and Shiga where many popular tourist spots were concentrated. I have found that some tourist attractions in these prefectures are aimed at developing regional economy, and among these tourist spots, I would particularly like to discuss about Hikone Castle in Shiga. By surveying news reports, travel brochures, and magazine/newspaper articles in both Japanese and English, I have paid attention to how each popular tourist attraction is constructed as well as promoted. I have found that many tourist attractions have been attributed to Japanese pop culture. This analysis of Japanese pop cultural tourism has enhanced my understanding of Japan's soft power, recognizing the underlying relationship between contemporary tourist behavior and tourist development.

From my perspective, the recent promotion of Japan's pop cultural tourism is closely related to the (re)establishment of Japanese self-image or how the Japanese see themselves. For a long time, Japan has presented itself as a "homogeneous" society, even though Japan is home to various minority groups (e.g. Sugimoto 2010, Oguma, 1995). The long lasting popularity of this image of Japan and its people has become a form of symbol for many Japanese leaders, and they often stress it as Japan's "essential" cultural characteristic.

My concern is that the excessive usage of pop culture in tourism development is not necessarily towards a positive direction. The incorporations of pop culture themes are often nothing but cosmetic effects, and they are to maximize entertainment aspects. The Japanese decorate themselves with pop culture such as anime, manga, kawaii (cute) fashion and video games as Japanese "unique" themes to seek additional publicity. Thus, I argue that this type of business practice tends to be overly evaluated. The pop culture themes also overshadow Japan's history for economic

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prosperity. Tourism should look for long-term sustainable development as opposed to a short-term booming.

a) Japan's Self-Image and Nihonjinron, and Tourism Development

This paper seeks an underlying framework for Japanese-style tourism development or pop cultural tourism. I have particularly paid attention to two key phrases: Japan's self-image and nihonjinron (theories of the Japanese). I argue that the role of the construction of a self-image is to create a way for the Japanese to see themselves, and the function of nihonjinron is to explain why Japan is different from other nations (e.g. Dale, 1986; Yoshino, 1992; 1998; Oguma, 1995; Befu, 1984; 1987; 2001; Sugimoto, 2010). The uniqueness of Japanese society has been described through nihonjinron, a popular literacy genre since the 1970s, although the popularity of the nihonjinron declined some time in the late 1980s. In nihonjinron literature, Japan is often stereotypically described as a "unique" society. Here, I review nihonjinron, discussed by various scholars.

Peter Dale (1986, introduction and p. 21-22) argues that most nihonjinron literature has attempted to "define the specificity of Japanese identity, and range over the whole complex of Japanese historical culture, choosing illustrative materials from classical records, folklore materials, historical chronicles, contemporary news, dictionaries of Japanese usage etc" (1986, Introduction). Thus, Dale suggests that nihonjinron literature, in many ways, is a self-fulfilling prophecy, functioning as a cultural filter with particular and peculiar themes to screen all the mass media before they reach any groups or individuals. Japanese nihonjinron audiences would only see what they expect to see, and the particular and peculiar sides of Japanese society were often highlighted as the reality. Dale (1986, p. 6-7, 9-10, 14-15, 21-22) also acknowledges that nihonjinron consists of trivia, illogical explanations, and misinterpretation, but it has sunk deeply into Japanese society and often imposed a particular way that most Japanese are forced to follow.

Roger Goodman (2005, p. 69-70) also argues that nihonjinron literature aims to build a particular image of the Japanese. There is no difference from what most Western nations did in the past as they constructed an image of themselves in opposition to the East or "Orient" portrayed negatively, as discussed in Edward Said's Orientalism (1979). Japan, in the same way, opposed itself to a negatively stereotyped West in the 1980s. Japanese values were re-evaluated, in a kind of "reverse Orientalism" (e.g. Moeran, 1989). Goodman suggests that the aim of creating a "majority culture" in Japan is to downplay the existence of "minority cultures". In nihonjinron literature, the existence of Japan's minority groups such as the Ainu, Burakumin, Koreans and Okinawans, has been both undermined and marginalized. The aim is to construct Japanese culture as a symbol around in which a shared sense of Japanese-ness could be nurtured.

From my perspective, despite the fact that nihonjinron has eventually lost its popularity, many Japanese, particularly the older ones, are still used to seeing Japan as a nation with unique cultural characteristics as they have experienced Japan's economic expansion. Here, one should note that Japan becomes a popular country after its expanding economic influence around the world in the 1960s. Since then, Japan's global companies such as Toyota, Mitsubishi, or Sony, are not just popular, but they are also considered as alternatives to Western or American counterparts. They have become the icons of postwar Japan, and I suggest that they hold a meaning of post-modernity. Culture in terms of post-modernity is defined as the reconstruction of cultural identity, based on growing respect for individualism over traditionalism (Abercrombie et al, 1994, p. 326-327). The development of modern culture, particularly pop culture within the promotion of Japanese tourism is an important part of rebuilding its postwar national identity. Then, Japanese self-image influences the promotion of Japan as it compels Japanese tourism developers to view, construct and promote Japan as a "unique" country: not only Japanese but also overseas tourists must visit this wonderful country.

In addition, I review the self-image of postwar Japan. Gluck (1993, p. 64-66) argues that the reconstruction of postwar Japan occurred along with the recreation of its national history. When Japan was defeated by the United States and its allies in August 1945, liberal politicians, historians, intellectuals and other popular figures quickly demanded Japan's transformation and supported anti-war movements. They collectively presented different views and thoughts, which eventually became a public memory (Gluck, 1993, p. 70-79). Through this process, the history of Japan was reconstructed in present times. Japan's wartime aggressions were condemned, but they were often diminished as not essentially relevant to postwar Japan. For Japan, its dark war-related past ended in 1945, but for other Asian countries, their bitter war memories and their struggles against Japan remained fresh and relevant (Gluck, 1993, p. 92-94). Many people's view of history was that the Japanese, too, were victims of the war. Thus, the reconstructed history of postwar Japan has tended to work as an ideology, supporting and confirming the rise of a new Japan.

This suggests that many Japanese leaders and other influential figures have emphasized the importance of the building of Japan's self-image, to draw the line between Japan and other countries, especially Western countries. Stereotypical cultural differences between the two sides have often been exaggerated or manipulated

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for the sake of postwar Japan. Many outside observers, mostly from Western countries, have, too, portrayed Japan as a society that is known to respect cultural values and to possess a strong sense of identity, as a single island state speaking a single language, and with distinctive shared cultural characteristics and social customs (cf. Johnson, 1982, p. 4-8). Japan's economic growth, backed by the effectiveness of the Japanese state, in the 1960s through the 1970s was considered as an Asian "miracle" by their economic standards. Japan may have lost its economic dominance over the world due to the rise of China, but Japan is often recognized by this particular image. Many may not know where Japan is, but they are familiar with Japanese-style unique and efficient products.

Japanese culture could be largely divided into two main types: elite culture and common (popular) culture. The elite culture is traditional Japanese culture that a small number of elites practice such as flower ikebana arrangements, noh and kyōgen plays and koto music (Sugimoto, 2010, p. 249-250). The common culture is what ordinary individuals play. The common culture could be subdivided into three types: mass culture, folk culture (local dances and festivals) and alternative culture (non-mainstream culture including youth culture) (Sugimoto, 2010, p. 250-257, 262-267 and 271-272).

This paper is concerned with mass culture that includes television and radio entertainment, popular press and printed magazines and local-based networks. Manga/anime is a part of the mass culture, which started off as alternative culture, but it has become mass culture by attracting mainstream audiences. Manga/anime has been able to attract all generations, supported by the entertainment media. Sugimoto Yoshio (2010, p. 106-109) suggests that Japan's mass culture is mainly to develop "cultural capitalism" in which many developers focus on creating symbols, providing knowledge and introducing information when they support and sell goods and products.

I also acknowledge that Japanese films and television series have attracted an audience with a hint of Japanese philosophy. The stories of sports superstars, superheroes, samurai warriors and even yakuza gangsters tell the audience how "real" Japanese are supposed to act. With the narrative of Japanese philosophy, the Japanese are supposed to take care of youngsters and elders while sacrificing themselves for the group. Japanese philosophy teaches noble ideals while entertaining in the films. Group harmony and self-sacrifice are also important as the essential characteristics of Japanese culture.

Moreover, I see that journalists, magazine columnists, novelists, and even manga/anime writers could be considered as "spokespersons" for different generations through all types of the mass media. In some case, they could tell what important things are in life as well as "what's in or out" for commercial goods and products. Manga/anime writers could influence an audience through their manga/anime series in both films and television series. In this sense, some popular manga/anime could provide a significant influence around the patterns of their cultural consumer behavior.

Thus, I suggest that Japan's self-image is a significant part of Japan's identity that seeks to unite Japanese individuals for common goals, and in this process, they view themselves as the members of a shared society. This is the primary structure of Japan in which Japanese politicians, business leaders and other powerful figures historically influence others in the nation's development, especially economic growth. In Japan's tourism development, political and business leaders have supported the building of popular self-image, "Cool Japan", with Japanese pop culture such as manga and anime. For commercial expansion, Japanese pop culture has become a marketable tool, attracting the general masses of consumers not only in Japan but also other countries (e.g. Shiraishi, 1997, p. 234-236). I argue that it has become a business model in which the popularity of modern Japanese culture in tourism development works as a type of joint action or social and economic cooperation, engineered by tourism developers, and tourists are "cultural" consumers to embrace it as their shared goal.

Many Japanese tourism developers believe and support the idea of Japan's unique culture and see it as a competitive advantage. Japanese culture, then, stands out above all cultures in the world, becoming a pillar of tourism development; anything seemingly "Japanese" is considered as a potential marketing tool (cf. "Chiikikasseika no tsuyoi mikata," 2009; Aoki, 2010; CrIsKANSAI, 2010; Shimakawa et al., 2006, p. 13-17 and 151-157, 165-175). From my perspective, many tourism developers seek out the development of Japan's unique characteristics and give an impression to the world that Japan is worth a visit.

b) Japanese-Style Tourism: Popular Cultural Tourism

Culture is often considered as the strength of Japan, while being seen as if it can solve economic problems. Many Japanese tourism developers tend to construct tourist attractions around Japanese culture (cf. "Kimono promenade," 2010; "Manga on main street," 2010; "In search of industrial heritage," 2010; Shimakawa et al., 2006).

My observations have come across the establishment of popular cultural tourism in Japan. In recent years, Japanese tourism developers have introduced "yuruchara", pronounced as "yurukyara" (gentle looking mascots or cartoon characters) for local events and festivals as PR characters ("Yurukyara matsuri in hikone," 2010; "Chiikikasseika no tsuyoi mikata," 2009). A cartoon character has been used as a sale representative, symbol, or ambassador for

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Japanese companies, political organizations, and social groups before, but yuruchara holds an integral role in tourism development as many Japanese families and individuals look forward to seeing different types of cute and cuddly yuruchara during their holidays ("Miura jun interview," 2009).

For example, Hikone city, Shiga in Japan, owns a yuruchara, called "Hiko-nyan" (a big cat like figure wearing a samurai helmet with a sword in his hand) ("Hiko-nyan kōshiki saito," 2010). Hiko-nyan is a special ambassador for Hikone city promoting tourism by appearing on local events and festivals. Hikone city is a small city in Shiga prefecture located far from populated areas such as Osaka and Kyoto prefectures; thus, most young people have moved out from Hikone city to seek better employment opportunities. Hikone city is also known for tourism business in which Hikone city owns Hikone Castle as one of the oldest castles. It is recognized as a national treasure. The construction of Hikone Castle began in 1604 by the order of Ii Naotsugu, a son of Ii Naomasa who was the member of the Tokugawa clan which ruled Japan during the Edo period (1603-1867). The construction of Hikone Castle was completed in 1622, and since then, the castle has stood still "without major changes" for more than 400 years ("Chikujyō 400 nen sai ni tsuite," 2010). In contrast to the impressive history of Hikone Castle, Hikone city had a hard time attracting a large number of tourists before the introduction of Hiko-nyan in 2007. Hiko-nyan was not only loved by locals, but it became the best PR character in Japan ("Hiko-nyan kōshiki saito," 2010; "Gotōchi yurukyara no motarasu keizai kōka," 2009).

Hiko-nyan appeared on the 400th anniversary in 2007 (Kokuō, Hikone-jyō chikujyō 400 nen sai). Hikone city tourism developers aimed to bring younger adults and families. A human-size Hiko-nyan presented the anniversary of Hikone Castle walking around shopping arcades and museums. It also appeared on the top floor of Hikone Castle and entertained all the visitors. Many children and young adults would wait for an hour to see Hiko-nyan ("Hiko-nyan kōshiki saito," 2010). Throughout the year-long event in 2007, the city estimated that the age groups of 20s and 30s were the two largest groups to visit Hikone city, younger than the other age groups in the previous years ("Gotōchi yurukyara no motarasu keizai kōka," 2009;"Hikone-jyō chikujyō 400 nen sai keizai kōka," 2008). Besides the castle, many visitors looked forward to seeing Hiko-nyan. Hiko-nyan merchandises items such as T-shirts, stuffed animals, key chains, and stationeries, became more popular souvenirs than traditional ones ("Hikone-jyō chikujyō 400 nen sai keizai kōka," 2008). According to Hikone city, approximately 33.8 billion Yen were generated through the year, and 2,872 employments were created for this event. It was equivalent to 5% of Hikone city's GDP. This event was certainly considered as successful, and it was far better than the city had initially expected. Hikone city gave Hiko-nyan all credits for its effort.

The creation of Hiko-nyan has been credited for the economic success of Hikone city by many tourism developers, cultural critics, and news reporters on television, newspapers, and magazines. Hiko-nyan has become a household name in Japan, while the success of Hikone city became a type of business model. Many cities, organizations, companies and community groups have climbed aboard yuruchara's bandwagon (e.g. "Min'na no yurukyara," 2009; "Gotōchi yurukyara no motarasu keizai kōka," 2009; "Chiikikasseika no tsuyoi mikata," 2009). They have created their own yuruchara, and now, Japan has full of mascots. Yuruchara is a PR symbol to differentiate a company from its business competition, and it distinguishes a city from its neighboring city. It has become a type of race to make the cutest and most original yuruchara for business development.

There has also been an attempt to "modernize" Kyoto with pop cultural tourism (Johnston, 2010). Kyoto still holds a historical significance as the capital of Japan and was home to the Japanese Imperial Household from 794 to 1867. This ancient city gives an impression of a historical Japan. But Kyoto is now also home for manga readers. Kyoto International Manga Museum was built in 2006, exhibiting approximately 300,000 manga comic books (as of 2009) and manga related items (Kyoto International Manga Museum, 2010). Visitors might see popular manga authors having an autograph session, and they can also attend a manga writing class to create their original manga (Kyoto Art Festival, 2010). Some visitors even dress like manga characters by "cosplay" (literally, costume play) at the museum (Lee, 2010). A team of tourism developers, Comicon, organizes comic/anime conventions in Osaka and Kyoto to capture the hype of Japanese pop culture. The fans of Japanese pop culture can participate to costume shows while finding rare manga comic books in various cosplay events (Comicon, 2010).

II. Discussion

This paper has reviewed the popular tourist spots as well as tourism-related events. Japan has found a way to revitalize tourism by the incorporation of pop culture. It has been successful as popular cultural tourism and has not only attracted the fans of popular culture but also the mainstream Japanese people. Under this Japanese-style tourism, some Japanese young adults and teenagers go out of their hometown to see yuruchara and anime/manga-related festivals and events. It holds a taste of a theme park like Disneyland as all the visitors feel as if they step away from their daily social routines. Japanese cosplay goes even further as all the visitors dress like they are a part of their favorite

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anime/manga series. It is a type of comic convention and an effort in generating a surreal experience to all the visitors.

Japanese pop cultural tourism is also supported by Japan's growing industries despite its declining economy; anime/manga entertainment industry, digital industry, video game makers, and fashion retailers are strong parts of pop cultural tourism. Japan's top politicians have also acknowledged the significance of Japanese pop culture such as former Prime Ministers, Koizumi Jun'ichi and Aso Tarō (Aso, 2007, p. 32-34).

However, one of my concerns is that pop cultural tourism is seen as a "quick & easy" solution for poor business planning. It only creates an instant sensation that some Japanese visitors are going to meet cartoon characters or yuruchara with their children. It is difficult to really understand what the relations between the role of yuruchara and its tourist spot are except that the creation of a new yuruchara leads to additional publicity that helps to attract people who are not sure where to go for the next trip. The people of Hikone city seemed happy about their success, and gave all the credits to their yuruchara, but according to the recent data, collected by the officials of Hikone city ("Hiko-nyan kōkamo…," 2012), the number of visitors have declined in the past years. Some Japanese may be tired of seeing similar and childish PR mascots.

The other concern is that pop cultural tourism may cause misunderstandings in famed historical sites. Tourists only wonder as to why Kyoto has to host the International Manga Museum. It may be convenient for them as they can see the traditional and popular culture of Japan, but manga at one of the historical cities seems out of place. Japan's pop-cultural tourism may desensitize historical values there. I have the same feeling for Hiko-nyan at Hikone Castle. Why do adult tourists have to see a life-size stuffed animal at a historical Hikone Castle? The pop cultural tourism may be a dangerous game if not careful as it tarnishes Japanese history and tradition.

III. Conclusion

This paper has examined Japan's popular culture with the development of Japanese cultural tourism. Looking at the complementary relations of culture and national identity, Japanese culture has been the core of the country, determining who the Japanese are and distinguishing Japan from the rest of the world. Japanese pop culture provides a variety of business incentives and attractions in different industries. Japan's tourism has been attributed to pop culture such as cartoon and videogame characters for commercial expansion in both the domestic and global markets. Popular cultural tourism could be considered as a model for a new business style and development.

However, I have found that both the development and the practice of pop cultural tourism tend to be overly evaluated. Tourism should look for long-term sustainable development as opposed to a short-term booming. I feel that the usage of pop culture themes often cross the line as being rather distasteful. Some pop culture themes at historical sites look as if they devalue the dignity of Japan's tradition as opposed to preserving it. The pop culture themes often overshadow Japan's history for economic prosperity. There are always chances that the true value of Japanese culture may be tarnished.

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