Mohammed Alshammari

Instructor Name

Course Number

27 January 2019

Title: Japanese Soft Power

Since the Second World War ended, Japan adopted a pacifist and democratic approach in identifying itself to the global world. Consequently, ‘soft power' became a prime tool for Japan to exert global influence. In the decades to follow, Japanese culture amassed a global appeal through its multi-layered strategies to reinforce, revitalize and export its culture which not only exposed the world to the alternative and imaginary world of anime and manga but began teaching them alternate lifestyles, philosophies, and ways of living. These cultural exports help generate curiosity, driven by the need for innovation, about the host environment in which such ideas were developed. In effect, it not only helps exert soft power and resultantly global influence, but also creates opportunities for commercialization and private entrepreneurship from businesses promoting Japanese lifestyle and culture, ultimately contributing to the Japanese economy, for which Marie Kondo serves as a prime example.

In a popular Netflix show, Marie Kondo is seen showing new ways to people to organize and tidy their homes by treating them to be sacred spaces. It is driven by her personal philosophy that every object serves as a means of carrying consciousness. Marie Kondo’s innovative approach to better living was marketed in the U.S. through her book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up it: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing* in which she offers way to Americans to declutter their homes, not thinking of it as chores, but as a spiritual and cultural activity (Harding, 2019). Marie Kondo is another successful example of a larger trend in which often universal lifestyle advises are marketed as inspirational and soulful Japanese way of doing things, that those in the West would do well to learn from.

Similarly, there are other examples such as ‘forest bathing’ or ‘ikigai’, in which nature’s soothing power is emphasized while the latter emphasizes having purpose and value to life. Although important and beneficial these concepts are neither new nor specific; however, they are marketed as Japanese cultural artifacts that serve as a moderating force to the Western way of life. These Japanese cultural exports trace their history to the 19th century in which the Japanese were seeking ways to modernize without becoming westernized. The quest for Japanese cultural identity and its defining characteristics led them to develop and spread the notion that western technological superiority traded the soul with progress, and that Japan would help the world succeed in the area where the West had failed. They would thus create a modern life in which spiritual progress is integrated with technological achievements, emotion and intuition are integrated with rationality, and a deeper sense of community is integrated with individualism.

An example of successful Japanese branding in this regard is the popularity of the Buddhist sect of ‘Zen’ which was promoted as a way to refresh the West’s spiritual connection with Christianity, by bringing a contemplative dimension to it. Zen embodied the simple life that would help free Westerners from the complexity of their existence, essentially decluttering their lives. The paper and wood partitions of Japanese homes were seen as a reflecting of the Japanese individual being more accustomed to the natural and true state of humanity, putting relationships and others before themselves. These cultural exports continued at times when the west was busy ‘civilizing’ other nations through ‘hard power’. It was marketed to the Chinese and the Koreans and served a way to counter the materialistic and corrupt influence of the modern West in everyday life. Even the Second World war did not impact the export of ‘Japaneseness’. Moreover, the consumer culture encouraged within Japan created the environment needed for cultural exporters, such as Marie Kondo, to expand.

Thus, driven by the West's obsession with exotic and innovative ways to improve their lifestyle, Harding (2019) argues that Japan continues to use its alliance with the U.S. flourish through its ‘soft power', i.e., cultural projection. It offers them a more serene and organized life, as well as pop culture and fiction that is more ‘fun'. While, many of the insights marketed as the Japanese lifestyle are neither genius nor unique, however, revitalizing some of these oft-forgotten valuable ideas can be quite useful for us regardless of where they come from.

The idea of ‘soft power' was defined by Nye (2004) as the ability to achieve the desired outcome by means of shaping the preferences of others. It induces the other to act, without force, making use of an ‘attractive power'. Soft power projection thus becomes increasingly important in a world wherein each nation battles for legitimacy, attraction, and credibility. Moreover, it largely arises from the expression of a nation's cultural values and internal practices. The resources for this soft power are the country's culture, which comes to be seen as attractive, and the political values it holds that are consistent with its global and domestic practices (Nye, 2004).

In the case of the Japanese, an almost natural affinity exists to embrace soft power as a national policy objective. This interest arises from a certain confidence in their own abilities to achieve economic progress as well as their avoidance of engaging in foreign conflicts after the World Wars (Akaha, 2008). Their cultural relations are often intertwined with a cultural diplomacy in which different aspects, carrying cultural appeal, are blended together, such as consumer electronics, broadcasting, cuisine, anime and mange, arts and crafts that not only form Japan’s consumer exports but also project its image to the world (Nisi, 2017). Consequently, these cultural exports help expose other cultures to the alternate lifestyles, popular culture and imaginary worlds offered to them by the Japanese, which not only help them conceive of life in a different way, but also makes them curious about the host environment that produced these interesting and appealing cultural artifacts.

Therefore, it led the cultural industries of the world to look towards Japan for entertainment, fashion, cuisine, trends, and lifestyle besides cars and consumer electronics. In turn, this led many to start emulating Japanese culture, which speaks of the adept branding techniques that the Japanese utilized. Marie Kondo is one such example of the way capturing overseas demand for Japanese lifestyle, entertainment and culture can help commercialization and private entrepreneurship. It created platforms, especially for private organizations, to have continuous business development that helped them expand overseas to ultimately help broaden the overall appeal of the Japanese way of life. As a result, Japan not only enjoys a huge market share in its entertainment and cultural exports, but uses it as soft power to project global influence.

# References

Akaha, T. (2008). Soft Power” in Japan's Security Policy: Implications for Alliance with the United States. *Pacific Focus, 20*(1), 59-91.

Harding, C. (2019, January 18). *Marie Kondo and the Life-Changing Magic of Japanese Soft Power*. Retrieved January 28, 2019, from The New York Times: https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/18/opinion/marie-kondo-japan.html

Nisi, R. (2017). *The Soft Power of Cool: Japanese Foreign Policy in the 21st century.* Johns Hopkins University - SAIS Europe.

Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft power: the means to success in world politics* (1st ed.). New York, NY: Public Affairs.

Response: