

Japan: The Super Nation Brand

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ABSTRACT *This study explores Japan's national brand evolution, analyzing the shift from its historical isolation to its current global recognition, particularly under the influence of Shinzo Abe's policies. It examines the impact of the 2011 disasters on Japan's international image and the strategic measures taken to address internal challenges such as gender inequality and educational reform. Through a critical lens, this study delves into the juxtaposition of Japan's soft power success against its domestic issues. Furthermore, it contributes to the understanding of nation branding in the context of global dynamics and internal policy shifts, offering a comprehensive view of Japan's strategy in maintaining its cultural identity while navigating global perceptions.*

Keywords: Japan, Nation Branding, Shinzo Abe, Soft Power

Insight Turkey 2024
Vol. 26 / No. 1 / pp. 51-63

Received Date: 15/2/2024 • Accepted Date: 16/3/2024 • DOI: 10.25253/99.2024261.5

Introduction

Oscar Wilde famously said in 1889: “The whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such place. There are no such people.” Wilde made this observation 30 years after Japan ended its centuries-long isolation known as the Edo period (1603-1858) and reopened its borders. The *sakoku* policy, enforced by the Tokugawa Shogunate from 1641 to 1853, effectively isolated Japan from foreign influences for 212 years. It prohibited Christianity and banned travel into and out of the country under penalty of death.

The Edo period did wonders for Japan’s development in presenting itself to the modern world. By its reemergence, *Japonisme* was all the rage in Europe. This 19th century infatuation with everything Japanese influenced how to arrange flowers, what fabric to choose, and how to paint and draw like “the Oriental other.”¹ Oscar Wilde’s point was that Japanese society had banks, department stores, factories, universities, and a parliament, not unlike many others.² It wasn’t perhaps as unique or mysterious as people in the West thought. But still, to this day, Japan’s past informs its present. It is seen as one of the most unique cultures in the world,³ with ongoing *Nihonjinron* discourse about national identity and cultural specificity. This uniqueness is perpetuated as much by the Japanese as by any non-Japanese.⁴

As an eight-year foreign resident of Japan, I know the place. I know the

people. I know it as an outside observer, a non-Japanese, not an intimate. This retrospective essay⁵ aims to elucidate the evolution of Japan’s national brand over the past decade, highlighting pivotal moments in its growth as a globally recognized nation of creativity and goodwill that has consistently ranked among the top national brands.⁶ Ultimately, the narrative culminates in 2023, when the Condé Nast Readers’ Choice category⁷ selected Japan as the world’s top country, and the Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index⁸ selected Japan as the top nation brand among 60 countries.⁹

Shinzo Abe’s Vital Influence

The first pivotal moment in terms of national branding occurred on September 7, 2013, when Japan successfully secured its hosting rights for the 2020 Summer Olympics. The decision, announced during the 125th International Olympic Committee (IOC) Session in Buenos Aires, Argentina, designated Tokyo as the chosen city over the finalist, İstanbul, Türkiye, and third runner-up, Madrid, Spain. The Tokyo selection raised concerns among environmental groups and the global press because just 911 days prior, Japan had experienced one of its most tragic natural events in recent history. The 9.0 magnitude earthquake triggered a 40-meter tsunami, resulting in the loss of about 20,000 lives,¹⁰ with an additional 2,500 officially missing, as well as significant damage to the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant.¹¹ This triple

disaster –earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown– is commonly referred to as 3/11, as it occurred on March 11, 2011.

To reassure IOC members, the Tokyo bid team sent a letter stressing Japan's dedication to societal safety and security, playing into the country's peaceful reputation¹² and ability to manage events well despite its frequent exposure to natural disasters.¹³ In a 45-minute address to the IOC presented before the final host city decision, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe stated about Fukushima specifically, "Let me assure you, the situation is under control."¹⁴ The final IOC vote was 60-36 for Tokyo. Nevertheless, the potential to label Tokyo 2020 as the "Fukushima Olympics" or the "COVID-19 Olympics" over the "Recovery Olympics" preferred by the Abe Administration would overshadow the Summer Olympics through Abe's resignation from office in 2020 and the one-year delay of the Games in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁵ As Lee and Inuma noted in *The Washington Post*, the recovery and reconstruction themes often rang hollow, "To many Fukushima residents, whose lives were upended by the natural disasters, the Olympics messaging feels tone deaf: a public relations slogan that ignores the realities of their daily lives."¹⁶ Despite the internal disagreements and the emergence of fresh corruption allegations¹⁷ linked to the initial bid, Japan's overall positive image and reputation endure.

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with Abe's impactful presence on the global platform through proactive diplomacy. As the longest-serving prime minister, Abe Administration, during his second term from 2012 to 2020, significantly fortified the country's image. Prioritizing global strategic communications, the Abe Administration strengthened the Japan-U.S. alliance as the principal U.S. alliance in Asia. It was even maintained through Democratic and Republican presidential administrations, counterbalancing China's expanding socioeconomic and military influence in the region.

Abe is credited with introducing two major policy agendas: domestic and global. *Abenomics*, a portmanteau of "Abe" and "economics," captured much global media attention with its focus on fiscal, monetary, and structural reforms. It included weakening the yen and attracting more international students to Japan by initiating degree programs in English, but overall government and corporate restructuring and labor flexibility have remained stagnant. The yen reached a new low in November 2023 at 151 yen to \$1 to stimulate wage growth

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and inflation. It has led to a flood of international tourists whose selfie stick behaviors and vocal presence are upsetting cultural norms.¹⁸ One might call this the paradox of nation branding. When a country garners too much acclaim, it may not be able to sustain the rush to experience it firsthand.

On the global side, Abe expanded the Japan-U.S. alliance's vision and strategy for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) in a 2016 keynote address at the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD VI) in Nairobi, Kenya.¹⁹ The FOIP strategy advocates the rule of law, open markets, and the protection of individual rights. The concept aims to enhance connectivity, economic development, and security cooperation among nations in the Indo-Pacific region. Critical elements of the FOIP include infrastructure development, maritime security, freedom of navigation, and the peaceful resolution of disputes. The concept is seen as a direct response to the evolving geopolitical dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region, including concerns about

China's growing influence and assertiveness in Southeast Asia. India and Australia joined as new players, and their roles were highlighted in the Quad Leaders' Tokyo Summit 2022.²⁰

In a 2018 policy address during the 196th session opening of the Diet, Abe elucidated the FOIP concept in geopolitical terms, emphasizing the significance of the vast sea extending from the Pacific Ocean to the Indian Ocean. He underscored the historical prosperity of the people in this region, attributing it to the principles of freedom of navigation and the rule of law. Abe advocated for ensuring these waters become a shared public good, fostering peace and prosperity for all, without discrimination.²¹ During the speech, Abe reflected on his five-year tenure as prime minister, highlighting his extensive diplomatic engagements with 76 countries and regions, including 600 summit meetings. Pledging to continue proactive diplomacy with a comprehensive global outlook, he expressed his commitment to engaging more extensively on the world stage.

Abe's unexpected death in July 2022, resulting from an attack by a disturbed domestic assailant, prompted a global outpouring of sympathy that took many in Japan by surprise. Former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said in tribute, "Shinzo Abe is the most consequential Japanese leader since the Second World War. But that wasn't because of sheer luck. Abe moved the dial through sheer force of personality, political will, and policy creativity."²² Critical coverage

of Abe's legacy did occur.²³ A political scandal arose in Japan over the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and its monetary support from the Unification Church that divided the country over Abe's state funeral honors. This scandal garnered international headlines but did not "grow legs" overseas enough to demonize the political leader's global image.

To be sure, Abe's policies, particularly those related to "normalizing" Japan's Peace Constitution (officially the Constitution of Japan), sparked division among the Japanese people. I, too, wondered aloud in presentations and before my Japanese students if Japan's peace brand was precious enough to give up being more like other countries. The Allied Occupation Forces wrote the constitution under the leadership of General Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP). Adopted on May 3, 1947, it includes Article 9, which renounces the use of war to settle international disputes and prohibits Japan from maintaining military forces for aggressive warfare. This document set forth Japan's soft power principles of democracy, human rights, and pacifism as fundamental elements of Japan's post-war governance. Abe expressed the desire to reinterpret Article 9 to allow for a more assertive defense policy and the potential for the country to engage in collective self-defense with its allies. Again, this is seen in the context of responding to regional security concerns, including the North Korean nuclear missile threat and China's increasing mili-

tary activities. However, we will have to see over time if the world wants a more assertive "Hard Power Japan" as part of its nation branding.

There is no denying that throughout the 2010s, Abe's persona became synonymous with Japan's nation branding in the eyes of the world. His ability to make fun of himself, as he did when he dressed up as Nintendo's classic 1980s Super Mario video game character at the closing ceremony of the Rio Olympics, was almost universally well-received.²⁴ After his death, no individual or group, political or famous, has duplicated his ability to elevate the image of Japan in the world, with perhaps one exception: Haruki Murakami, the most known Japanese novelist and journalist. If one knows no other Japanese writer, one will know Murakami's works, from the 1987 *Norwegian Wood* (adapted into a film by Tran Anh Hung in 2010) to the Academy Award winner for best international feature film, "Drive My Car," based on a Murakami short story.

It matters in a nation-state's international reputation that artists and writers elevate the imagination of a place. In part, Murakami's work has global appeal because the Japanese language is translated into relatively simple and accessible English, yet the setting remains Japan. But it is also popular because it is writing that allows a reader to escape reality. His magical realism has "transformed the image of Japan's literature, prompting a strong demand for Japanese novels in translation."²⁵ And is so often the



Harajuku Street, known internationally as a center of Japanese youth culture and fashion, embodies the nation's branding through its eclectic mix of fashion, art, and tradition.

AHMET FURKAN
MERCAN / AA

case, his renown transcends Japan. He is Japanese but has a global reputation as a writer.

Nation Branding Symmetry, Government Inertia

It is crucial to emphasize that when contributing to enhancing a country's external image, the brand's internal and external aspects require attention. The diaspora, expatriates, overseas business leaders, and media representatives collectively serve as the frontline representatives of a country's image worldwide, assuming the role of personal ambassadors in interactions with individuals from host countries. When this frontline conveys excessive negativity, it generates cognitive dissonance and detrimentally impacts the nation's brand. According to a 2019 study conducted

by *U.S. News & World Report*, the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania, and Bav Consulting, Japan exhibited the most significant disparity globally between the opinions of its citizens and the global public: "On various measures, Japanese citizens perceive their own country as less productive, less stable, and even less culturally significant than the rest of the world perceives it to be. In contrast, citizens of almost every other country tend to view their nation more positively than the global public, rating their country more favorably than non-citizens do."²⁶

As Japan's inaugural professor of public diplomacy, I dedicated six years to educating Japanese undergraduates on the country's national brand image.²⁷ I observed that Japanese students who had experienced

studying abroad were more inclined to acknowledge the positive global perception of Japan. Conversely, those who had not ventured beyond Japan expressed less optimism about the future, perceiving more restricted career prospects than those with international study experience. This observational gauge informs my comprehension of the perception disparity in Japan's global image.

For those who may be interested in knowing the secrets of Japan's success in public diplomacy and national branding, I may disappoint you. There is no secret elixir or recipe for what works. It works well for Japan, but this may be despite, not because of, the government's actions. For instance, the Japanese government is quite conventional in engaging the global public digitally. For example, the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) explains its Japan Brand Program in a small paragraph²⁸ (with my headings added for emphasis): (i) Key Focus Area: Emphasize strengths and unique Japanese values rooted in traditions and culture; (ii) Outreach Initiative: Organize lectures, seminars, and workshops to engage with local audiences; (iii) Global Expert Involvement: Dispatch prominent experts from various fields to share knowledge and experiences internationally; (iv) Objectives: Nurture international interest and understanding of Japan and Act as a catalyst for international people exchanges; (v) Economic Impact: Facilitate cross-border economic exchanges and Strengthen international ties through collaborative efforts.

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The Public Diplomacy section of the MOFA's website is limited in user engagement, with no visuals on its launch page but rather a list of links, including to Japan's official public media organization, NHK, and The Japan Foundation, its official international exchange organization. The Public Diplomacy section introduces Japan House, a recent community outreach initiative that built three cultural outposts in Los Angeles, Sao Paulo, and London.²⁹ The Japan Creative Centre in Singapore, built in 2009, emerged from the Japan-Singapore Summit Meeting between Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Hsien Loong in March 2007. At that meeting, the two men spoke about the need for a cultural center to expand Japan's soft power presence in Southeast Asia.

Likewise, Japan's strategic communications concept is narrowcast, associated almost exclusively with the Japan Self-Defense Forces and the Ministry of Defense,³⁰ whereas the NATO definition of strategic communications (StratCom) covers a continuum of activities and capabilities: public diplomacy, public affairs, military pub-

lic affairs, information operations, and psychological operations.³¹ This also complicates explaining and engaging internal populations about the national brand.

Japan's Culture and Cuisine: Soft Power Super Powers

What Japan is particularly adept at is occupying the imagination of global minds, which doesn't require much investment on the part of the government. It is a country seemingly on every traveler's "must-see" bucket list for anyone who wants to experience the country's famous cuisine and culture firsthand. The yen has made visiting Japan reasonably affordable, at the risk of devolving into a backpackers' paradise, which is not the direction the country wants to go.³² To borrow a term from UNESCO, the country's reputation beyond politics (*Abenomics*, FOIP) is about its intangible cultural assets.³³ UNESCO defines it this way:

Intangible cultural heritage refers to the practices, expressions, knowledge, and skills that communities, groups, and sometimes individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage ... usually expressed in one of the following forms: oral traditions; performing arts; social practices, rituals, and festive events; knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; and traditional craftsmanship.³⁴

Japan is famous for its *washoku* 和食 (Japanese cuisine) where 和 means "Japan" or "harmony" and 食 means

"food" or "to eat." The heart of every *washoku* meal is rice and a balanced meal (one soup, three dishes typically) that represents seasonal dishes harmonized between sea and land.³⁵ In 2023, Japan celebrated the 10th anniversary of registration in UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list as a cultural asset handed down from generation to generation. Altogether, there are 22 elements that UNESCO lists in reference to Japan, including *Washi* (Japanese paper), float festivals, *Kabuki*,³⁶ as well as world-renowned emblems of Japan such as cherry blossoms and a safe environment with pleasant people who may not speak English perfectly or at all but who will be hospitable and provide excellence in service. Japan is noted for cleanliness and ease of domestic travel on reliable public transportation. The country may not be the economic power juggernaut it was in the last century, but it is still the third-largest economy (second-largest market democracy) and makes products with global appeal. The bullet train (*Shinkansen*) is something to marvel at; *anime* and *manga* have long tickled the imagination of old and young alike, along with Japanese hygiene technology, whose robotic maneuvers garner fascination worldwide³⁷ and have made a company like Toto as famous as that little dog in *The Wizard of Oz*.

Lingering Gender-Related Hurdles

Japan's internal challenges do not seem to have marred its global stand-

ing as a super nation brand; if these challenges persist, they may lead to a dip in ranking over time. At the 2022 Nomura Investment Forum Asia, I explained what was missing from Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's "new capitalism" model, the economic model that replaced *Abenomics* but with none of the global appeal of its predecessor. These missing parts have impacted Japan's national brand and remain hindrances to expanding productivity.

- i. The three G's of Japan's political economy are gender, generation, and global.
- ii. Japan's largest natural resource is the underutilized talent of Japanese women.
- iii. Japanese universities (including K-12) are not adequately preparing young people for international enterprise and a global work environment.

Gender refers to equal opportunity or lack thereof. The OECD reported in its 2024 economic survey of Japan that most female workers occupy non-traditional part-time jobs. They have limited advancement because they are not directed at the full-time executive level. "The high share of young and female workers in non-regular jobs, with lower wages and career prospects, can delay family formation, weaken female labor force participation, and contribute to the gender wage gap."³⁸ Gender mainstreaming refers to tapping into underutilized talent; this is untenable for such a rich economy like Japan. Japan has some of the best-educated

Japan has some of the best-educated men and women in the world, but women are not advancing at the rate of their male counterparts

men and women in the world,³⁹ but women are not advancing at the rate of their male counterparts. I have long argued that Japan's largest natural resource is the underutilized talent of the Japanese woman. Japanese women overwhelmingly participate in studying abroad more than their male counterparts at a ratio of approximately 60/40. That sojourn experience reshapes their outlooks, and many do not wish to return to a country that limits their career and lifestyle options. While the Shinzo Abe Administration's efforts to advance women garnered initial excitement, including establishing a World Assembly for Women, there has been little progress at the infrastructure level to make substantive gains. One such goal, of increasing the ratio of women in management roles to 30 percent by 2020, was pushed back by a decade to 2030.

Women in Japan do not have relatable role models and are hesitant to speak up and demand more gender-equal roles. As a result, some Japanese women are choosing to leave. Japan has a reputation for excellence and hard work, but its productivity

Japan is increasingly standing tall on the international stage. It is the world's second-largest, democratic, capitalist economy, and it reinvigorated its national brand image very effectively under Abe

in gender equity lags. Some women will never return and become human assets for foreign direct investment elsewhere. That's a brain drain Japan cannot afford.

A lack of economic participation and political empowerment for Japanese women is another missing link toward gender equality and advancement. Japanese women who elect to go overseas are gender diplomats because they represent the face of the global Japanese woman taking on gender biases and stereotypes.⁴⁰ More dialogue and research are needed to understand why women are exiting Japan. It isn't knee-jerk feminism. This is about the bottom line. It's good business for Japan's productivity to figure out how to advance men and women equally and take full advantage of its well-educated people who have much to contribute at home and abroad.

Deficits in Global Education

The role of Japanese universities and higher education is a national brand

Japan topic I've written about for years.⁴¹ It, too, also represents a missing link. The higher education sector is not doing enough to prepare young people for the global economy. The deficits Japanese universities and institutions of higher learning have at the global level stem from not including a curriculum of public relations and strategic communications, which is standard in many other parts of the world. That's why Japan sometimes struggles to communicate effectively at the international level. Japan is increasingly standing tall on the international stage. It is the world's second-largest, democratic, capitalist economy, and it reinvigorated its national brand image very effectively under Abe. Given its position on the global stage, effective communication is critical.

Bridging the Links across Generations

Finally, Japan is renowned for having many older adults, but not just old, the world's oldest. In 2023, only the Principality of Monaco, with its population of 36,000, had the highest percentage of people over 65 at 36 percent. Next in line is Japan at 29 percent. It is a constant refrain to talk about a shrinking and aging Japan, but why be so bleak? Linking the next generation with older generations through mentor-mentee relationships and wisdom coaching is vital. Part of this includes raising the mandatory retirement age of 65 so that younger people don't lose critical connection points with older people

who have wisdom to share. As one who is getting older, I cannot imagine being forced out of my job due to the date on a calendar.

Conclusion

Japan stands tall in its national brand image and reputation, for which it should be proud, but knowing Japan as I do, I know that humility will reign. There are higher hurdles awaiting it if it does not adjust to the global realities that mandate improved external communication, stronger ties to its diaspora, women's empowerment and leadership in business and research, and a global mindset that will preserve the heartbeat of Japan's culture while also allowing international talent to help sustain its importance in the world. ■

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