

Revisiting Japan's Cultural Diplomacy: A Critique of the Agent-Level Approach to Japan's Soft Power

Alexander Bukh

In this article I join the debate on Japan's soft power and cultural diplomacy. Most of the current scholarship focuses on Japan's agency and implies that through a skillfully crafted policy that utilizes its cultural resources, Japan can enhance its soft power. I question the utility of this agent-based approach. I suggest that cultural diplomacy is not simply a matter of diplomatic craftsmanship; it reflects discursively constructed national identities that, to a large degree, are shaped by international ideational structures. Applying this framework to modern Japan's cultural diplomacy, I argue that postwar Japan's incorporation into the Western camp, and the subsequent identity transformations, have precluded the emergence of a strategic definition of Japan's culture and hence constrained Japan's cultural diplomacy. KEYWORDS: Japan's soft power, cultural diplomacy, national identity, agency, structure.

IN RECENT YEARS, THE NOTION OF CULTURAL DIPLOMACY HAS RISEN IN importance, attracting interest from international relations (IR) scholars and policymakers alike. The significance of cultural diplomacy is located within a broader debate on soft power, which has been one of the most important shifts to occur in the understanding of power in IR since the end of the Cold War. Since the early 2000s the idea that a state's power should be measured not only in material terms but also in terms of its ability to attract and coopt others has become one of the most popular concepts in academic and policy debates on international affairs. Cultural diplomacy is generally seen as one of the main tools of governments to enhance their nation's attractiveness to others.

The concept of soft power was coined by Joseph Nye in the early 1990s. It gained worldwide popularity after the publication of his immensely influential *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (Nye 2004). *Soft power* refers to a state's ability to

shape other states' foreign policy choices through noncoercive measures. Culture, political values, and nonmilitary foreign policies are the main sources of a state's ability to attract and coopt others (Nye 2004). The argument that the nonmaterial assets of states can be important tools of influence in international relations is far from new: These assets have constituted an integral part of states' foreign policies for decades, if not centuries. Furthermore, the idea of soft power differs little from the well-known concept of *propaganda*, the latter being defined as a "deliberate attempt to shape perceptions to achieve a response that furthers desired action" (Jowett and O'Donnell 1986, in Kushner 2006, 4). However, it is probably Nye's scholarly and explicitly universalistic packaging of the idea, free of any negative connotations associated with the notion of propaganda, that accounts for soft power's recent worldwide popularity both in the academic and policymaking communities.

Japan became one of the most debated wielders of soft power across the 2000s; some scholars came to refer to Japan as a "soft power superpower" (Watanabe and McConnell 2008). Japan's ability to attract others through its cultural resources—that is, its cultural soft power—became the main focus of academics and Japanese policymakers alike. The debate has been rather diverse in terms of scope and focus of inquiry, ranging from praise for and critical discussion of Japanese culture (Kawakatsu 2006; Iwabuchi 2007) to studies of the reception of Japanese cultural products (Allison 2008; Nakano 2008; Ōishi and Yamamoto 2008; Otmazgin 2008) and broad analyses of Japan's cultural diplomacy (Lam 2007; Fukushima 2011; Otmazgin 2012). Among policymakers, Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs emphasized culture as a tool of Japan's diplomacy in its annual *Diplomatic Bluebook* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2005). This was followed by the creation of a public diplomacy department within the ministry whose purpose was to "create a system in which Japan's soft power is maximized" (Kondō 2008, 200).

One main theme that underlies and unites both the academic and policy debates on Japan's cultural soft power and cultural diplomacy has been the conception of Japan as a fully autonomous agent in the soft-power game (Lam 2007; Vyas 2011). Some com-

mentators do see certain limitations to Japan's ability to mobilize the popularity of its culture for political goals—for example, in its history-related disputes with Asian countries (Lam 2007; Lee Shin Wha 2011). Nevertheless, the presentation of these limitations as directly resulting from Tokyo's policies still implies that Japan's successful exercise of its soft power is simply a matter of its agency.¹

The importance of the introduction of the soft-power concept with its understanding of Japan as a fully autonomous agent, free from international structural pressures, is best understood within the broader debate on Japan's postwar foreign policy. Japan has long been seen as an economic giant and political dwarf whose foreign policy adheres to the prescriptions of US hegemony (Hellmann 1988; Blaker 1993). Conversely, the emergence of the soft-power debate has created an important caveat to this generally shared understanding of Japan's place in the international system, particularly in Asia, by suggesting that Japan has the potential to exercise fully independent influence in international political affairs through skillfully crafted cultural diplomacy. The debate on Japan's cultural soft power has also created an important caveat in the context of the ever-growing literature on China's rise and Japan's decline, by suggesting that like the United States, Japan's power and influence are not limited to its economy. As such, the literature on Japan's cultural soft power implies that through a proper execution of its agency, Japan can enhance its political influence, counter the rising influence of China, and generate a political power shift in Asia and beyond.

In this article I question the utility of an agent-focused approach to Japan's cultural soft power. I suggest that Japan's cultural diplomacy has always been intrinsically linked to the dominant discourses on Japan's national identity. Those discourses, I argue, have been shaped by international ideational structures—ideas, norms, and particular interpretations of reality that occupy a hegemonic (in the Gramscian sense) position in the international society at a certain point. Hence, international ideational structures play an important role in shaping Japan's cultural diplomacy, whose form and content cannot be seen as solely the result of policymaking.

Incidentally, the dominance of the agent-based approach is not limited to the Japan-related soft-power literature. It can also be seen in recent publications on China's soft power (Blanchard and Lu 2012; Zhang 2012). Thus, by questioning the utility of this approach, I seek also to contribute to a broader debate on soft power in Asia and beyond.

Cultural Soft Power, Identity, and Ideational Structures

Theoretical and empirical studies of soft power have both reflected broader debates on the notion of power in political science and have broken along the agency/structure line (Press-Barnathan 2011). The agency-focused approach construes power as relational, meaning that power should be understood as the capability of one agent to act over other agents. In contrast, a structural approach emphasizes relations of power that shape actors' understanding of the world around them and hence their interests and actions. Following this divide, attempts to theorize soft power have ranged from agent-based conceptions of soft power as "cooperative activities that occur between nations and affect their practices and norms" (Vyas 2011, 40) or as utilization of nonmaterial means by states to achieve a certain foreign policy goal (Kroenig, McAdam, and Weber 2010), to more abstract, structural, or Foucauldian accounts of soft power (Lock 2010; Lee Yong Wook 2011). Engaging in an extensive theoretical discussion of soft power is far beyond my purpose in this article. As noted above, the agency-focused approach has been dominant in scholarship on Japan's soft power. Thus, in the analytical framework here I build on one of the most persuasive agency-oriented attempts to theorize soft power (Mattern 2005) and outline the relationship between soft power, national identity, and international structures.

"Attraction" and Soft Power

Informed by Lyotard's theoretical insights into communicative strategy, Mattern focuses on the notion of attraction, which con-

stitutes the backbone of soft power as articulated by Nye. In her account, Mattern emphasizes the importance of the linguistic construction of communication between the wielder of soft power and the targeted population. Attraction here is construed as a strategically developed vision of a certain reality communicated by the wielder of soft power through representational force, a nonphysical but nevertheless coercive form of power that operates through narratives and forces the audience into accepting the speaker's viewpoint (Mattern 2005). This interpretation of reality targets the self-identity of the population in question and seeks to manipulate it into adopting certain policy measures that stem from a particular understanding of reality.

While Mattern focuses on sociolinguistic strategies, her conception of attraction can be easily expanded to include other, non-verbal strategies. The essence of Mattern's argument is that attractiveness is an act of intentional manipulation by the wielder of soft power that communicates a certain interpretation of reality to its "victims." As such, nonverbal strategies, such as deployment of certain cultural symbols that target another's identity—with the aim of communicating a certain interpretation of reality—could also be considered exercises in attraction.

Mattern's theoretical account suggests that soft-power attractiveness and cooptation are neither natural nor contingent but result from policies developed by the wielder of soft power. As such, culture can function as a resource for soft power. However, sociolinguistic and other strategies, such as cultural diplomacy developed by the agent, are needed to use this resource. At a first glance, this understanding of soft power seems to confirm the validity of the agency-oriented approach. Importantly, however, Mattern also emphasizes the role of the discursively constructed "self" of the potential wielder of soft power. She argues that the choice and form of communicative strategies, which are the main tools of exercising soft power, will depend on the socially constructed view of reality that the wielder of soft power holds (2005)—in other words, its identity. This point implies that national identity, which in the context of culture is a discursively constructed and shared understanding of a nation's culture, is of utmost importance when examining that nation's soft-power

potential. Put differently, an actor's ability to use representational force and develop strategies that target others' identities depends on that actor's identity: its understanding of its own culture, the norms associated with it, and its relationship with other cultures.

The importance of the national identity of the wielder of soft power suggests that, even in an agent-focused approach, international structures can have direct relevance for an agent's ability to exercise soft power. That is, national identities are not created solely through domestic processes. Theorists of identity as diverse as Bourdieu (1977), Foucault (1980), and Giddens (1991) have emphasized the importance of social structures or structural power in the formation of individual and collective identities. True, domestic processes are also important, given that structural pressures can be vague and provide for a wide range of possible interpretations (Suzuki 2005). Nevertheless, structures do establish the boundaries of conceivable choices and meanings. While the extent of these boundaries may vary from one case to another, their role in creating meanings from which identities are constituted cannot be dismissed but needs to be examined on a case-by-case basis. As such, even if soft power is construed as an agent's ability to develop certain strategies, analysts cannot disregard the importance of structural factors in shaping the identity of the wielder of soft power, and hence the agent's soft-power strategies themselves.

To summarize, soft power is construed here as an agent's intentional manipulation of a certain group of people by communicating a particular view of reality, favorable to the wielder of soft power. Cultural diplomacy refers to states' utilization of cultural symbols as means of communicating a particular view of reality. The choice of strategies and values that the wielder of soft power associates with its culture reflects its national identity, which is shaped, at least to some degree, by international structures.

I apply this framework to Japan's cultural diplomacy in the following section. I show that Japan's cultural diplomacy has always reflected the dominant discourses on its own national identity. I also trace the role of international structures in shaping these discourses. International structures, I argue, enabled but also constrained the emergence of certain cultural strategies designed

by Japanese policymakers, through their effect on Japan's national identity.

Japan's Cultural Strategies, National Identity, and International Ideational Structures Before 1945

Imperial Japan's Cultural Diplomacy

The understanding of culture as an important tool of diplomacy emerged in Japan almost simultaneously with its semiforceful incorporation into the modern international system in the mid-nineteenth century. It was Fukuzawa Yukichi, the father of the Japanese Enlightenment, who first drew the attention of policymakers and intellectuals to the importance of international exhibitions through his travelogues from Europe. Fukuzawa argued that Japan's participation in those exhibitions could not only provide Japan with modern technology and stimulate its economy but also improve its international status and serve as an important tool in shaping Western images of Japan (Kornicki 1994). As early as 1872 the Meiji government established a special bureau in charge of exhibitions within the Ministry of Home Affairs. As a result of this concentrated effort, Japan's pavilions at World's Fairs rivaled those of the United States and European countries in their scale and lavishness (Kornicki 1994).

Meiji-era cultural diplomacy was rather multidimensional and not limited to international exhibitions. For example, after gaining control over Taiwan, the Japanese government organized a number of tours that brought the leaders of Taiwan's indigenous peoples to Japan proper. On these tours, the Taiwanese were exposed to the achievements of Japan's modernization and to its traditional culture. The main purpose was to facilitate the internalization of Japan's greatness by the colonized (Ching 2000).

In 1920, as part of its China policy, the government established a "China cultural policy" division within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Asia Bureau. Its main purpose was to pacify the anti-Japanese feelings in China that surged during the May 4th Movement (Kumamoto 2013). In the 1930s, against the back-

ground of Japan's expansion in Manchuria and rising tensions with the Western powers, multiple governmental and semigovernmental public diplomacy organizations were established. These included the Society for Promotion of International Cultural Relations (Kokusai Bunka Shinkōkai, or KBS), which engaged in cultural diplomacy vis-à-vis the West, and the Great Asia Society (Dai Ajia Kyōkai), which focused on Asia.

Numerous academic books and articles have analyzed the activities of these agents of Japan's cultural diplomacy (Shibasaki 1999; High 2003; Lockyer 2009; Park 2009; Matsuura 2010). For my purposes, it suffices to note the ideas that formed the base of these activities. For the West, Japan was to be presented as different from the rest of "barbarian" Asia, as an equal of the West, and as possessing a unique culture that successfully amalgamated Western and Oriental elements. In stark contrast, cultural policy toward Asia, which started to take shape in the 1920s, aimed at presenting Japan as an integral part of Asia based on racial, cultural, and historical similarities. Emphasizing Japan's successful modernization, cultural policy also presented Japan as Asia's natural leader. During the same period, the same notion was also integrated into Japan's cultural policy vis-à-vis the Western powers.

As an integral part of Japan's foreign policy, these ideas and subsequent strategies reflected Japan's geopolitical goals (Otmazgin 2012). Importantly, however, they also reflected the dominant discourses on Japan's national identity. These discourses, as I show in the next section, were shaped by international ideational structures. Thus, indirectly, international structures have also shaped Japan's cultural diplomacy.

Modern Japan's Identity and International Ideational Structures

The formation process of modern Japan's identity occurred simultaneously with its semioforceful incorporation into the Western-centric "international society" in the second half of the nineteenth century. As numerous works (e.g., Tanaka 1993; Oguma 2002) have shown, this formation was characterized by a comprehensive internalization of dominant Western paradigms such as the nation,

modernity, civilization, progress, and race. Like any other structural signals, these ideational constructs were vague and at times contradictory (Suzuki 2005). This ambiguity was also reflected in the prevailing domestic discourse on Japan's identity. For example, the discourse included strictly racialized conceptions of the Japanese nation as a distinct community linked by common blood, language, and culture, but it also embraced conceptions of Japan as an integral part of the Asian racial and cultural realm (Saaler and Koschmann 2007).

To a great extent this indeterminacy can be attributed to structural ambiguity in the conception of race. In Europe, the main source of ideas in the contemporary international society, one of the dominant conceptions of the nation was grounded firmly in racial theory and construed the nation as a naturally occurring group (Weiner 1997). At the same time, however, the racialism embedded in the European colonial project also defined the boundaries of race as going beyond those of a certain ethnicity or nationality, and juxtaposed "white" Europe with "yellow" Asia and "black" Africa (Vincent 1982). Both threads of the racialist discourse associated certain value-laden cultural qualities with the different races.

Arguably, this structural ambiguity, combined with the conflation of race and culture, shaped the domestic discourse on Japan's identity. In terms of Japan's cultural diplomacy, it enabled the positioning of Japan as a distinct race whose culture was superior to other Asian peoples' and simultaneously as an integral part of the Asian racial and cultural realm, fighting for its collective liberation from "white" colonialism.

Japan's Cultural Diplomacy in the Postwar Era

The Japan Foundation's Ironic Approach to Japanese Culture

Efforts to reintroduce culture to Japan's foreign policy started in the 1970s, when memories of its defeat became more subdued and, prompted by its economic success, Japan gradually regained

its confidence. In the early 1970s, after much deliberation in the policymaking community, the main pre-1945 institution in charge of Japan's cultural diplomacy, the KBS, was given new life as the Japan Foundation. To a certain extent, the foundation was established in response to US demands to share the financial burden of bilateral cultural exchanges, which had so far been sponsored mainly by US money (Japan Foundation 2006). As such it was part of an attempt to restore the intimacy of US-Japan bilateral relations after the Nixon shocks, which in the eyes of Japanese policymakers raised questions about the US commitment to Japan. (In August 1971, President Nixon suddenly announced that the United States would end exchanges of dollars for gold and would impose a surcharge on imports.) Another reason for the establishment of the foundation was to counter the prevailing perception of Japan in Southeast Asia as an "economic animal," and the fear that Japan's economic prowess would lead to its remilitarization (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 1972).

While numerous similarities exist between the Japan Foundation and its predecessor, the biggest difference lies in their conception of Japan's culture and its strategic value. The KBS construed Japan's culture as an amalgamation of indigenous Japanese culture and Western values. Importantly, Japan's culture was construed as being an integral part of the broader Oriental culture, but because of its role in bringing about Japan's successful modernization, it was also narrated as occupying a special and superior place within the Orient. This conception of Japan's culture was utilized in Japan's cultural diplomacy aimed at convincing people in the West to accept Japan's exclusive right to represent Asia in international political affairs (Shibasaki 2013).

In contrast to the KBS, the Japan Foundation failed to define either the normative value or strategic utility of Japan's culture. The questions of what culture is in general and what exactly constitutes Japanese culture, as well as its contribution to the world, were at the center of the policymakers' debate from the early days of the foundation. It was agreed, however, that it would conceive "culture" as broadly as possible and leave the question of what Japan's culture *is* to the Japanese people (Japan Foundation 2006). To a certain extent, this reluctance to engage the question

of Japan's culture can be traced to the main mission of the foundation, which, as I argue below, reflected the dominant postwar discourse on Japan's identity. For the KBS, the "Orient/Occident" nexus was one of the key factors in determining the normative value of Japanese culture. On the contrary, the Japan Foundation's mission was to spread the belief that Japan was not an economic animal but a "normal country," that is, an integral part of the universal realm of liberal democracy. The notion of culture, however, implies by default certain unique qualities and as such is located in direct opposition to the universal. Thus, in a somewhat ironic fashion, the main governmental body in charge of cultural diplomacy, while actively promoting Japanese language and Japan's "indigenous culture" (flower arrangement, tea ceremony, and more recently anime and manga), all but ignored the broader meaning of culture and, more importantly, the values that can be associated with Japan's culture.

Policy Debates and Efforts to Construct a Cultural Strategy

Policy discourse on culture was not limited to the Japan Foundation. In his policy speech in January 1979, Prime Minister Ōhira Masayoshi declared the coming of the "age of culture" (Ōhira 1979). However, similar to the above-mentioned debate surrounding the creation of the Japan Foundation, the actual values ascribed to Japan's culture and its meaning for Japan's diplomacy were left undecided. Ōhira established a number of ad hoc think tanks with the overall aim of developing a new national agenda for Japan (Yahuda 1996). For our purposes, the Pacific Basin Cooperation Group (PBCG) and the Study Group on the Age of Culture (SGAC) are particularly relevant. The report produced by the former argued for an "open regionalism" and interdependence based on cooperation and respect for the diversity of cultures in the region (Study Group on Pacific Basin Cooperation 1980). One might expect the report produced by the latter group to complement this vision of the Pacific Basin as a region of diverse cultures, by articulating the characteristics of Japanese culture and its position and role within this diversity. The main body of the

SGAC report, however, provides no clues regarding the meaning and values of Japan's culture, nor the nature of its relationship with regional and other cultures (Study Group on the Age of Culture 1980).

The policy debate on Japan's culture and foreign policy flared up again in the early 2000s in the context of the growing prominence of the notion of Japan's soft power. One of the first policy-oriented reports was produced in 2003 by the Study Group on International Exchange, formed as an ad hoc think tank by the Japan Foundation. Its report, titled "New Age Diplomacy and the New Role of International Exchange" (Yamazaki et al. 2003), was one of the first of numerous soft-power policy proposals; it aimed at outlining the relationship between diplomacy and international exchange. The authors did identify certain unique cultural values in premodern Japan, such as its high literacy rate, craftsmanship, and business spirit. The meaning of these values, however, was seen solely in their role as facilitating Japan's modernization and embracing the universal values of democracy and the market economy. The authors suggested that Japan's cultural traits might be used to facilitate the solution of "global issues" such as the aging society, environmental protection, multiculturalism, and intercivilizational dialogue (Yamazaki et al. 2003). Yet these issues were located within a broader ideational framework—namely, the universal validity of the market economy and liberal democracy, which constitute the core of Japan's contemporary cultural values. Thus, the authors argued that Japan's culture and traditional values could be used as a tool to promote the universal values of freedom, human rights, and democracy. In other words, Japan's culture was seen as a lubricant in advancing and supporting the expansion of liberal democracy.

Efforts to design, at the policy level, a cultural strategy for Japan's diplomacy intensified in 2004 as part of Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's attempts to boost Japan's role in international affairs. During the following years, the government wholeheartedly embraced the notion of cultural soft power and again created a number of ad hoc think tanks. Their purpose was to explore possible ways to utilize Japan's cultural resources. One of those ad hoc study groups was named A Discussion Group on the Promo-

tion of Cultural Diplomacy, which aimed to “bring width and depth to Japan’s diplomacy by providing it with a firm cultural basis” (Cabinet Office 2004). Similar to the 2003 report discussed above, the report produced by this group emphasized Japan’s unique experience of modernization. Arguing that Japan managed to protect its own identity and therefore had a unique ability to understand the problems faced by other, non-Western countries, the report suggested that Japan had the potential to become a bridge between various cultures.

As identified in the 2004 report, the inherent Japanese cultural values that could serve as the basis for its diplomacy were a “spirit of *wa* and coexistence.” The latter was defined as Japan’s unique pursuit of coexistence with the natural environment. *Wa* was said to be a distinct Japanese concept meaning harmony, peace, fusion, and consideration of others. Japanese culture, the report argued, emerged as a unique fusion of Western and Eastern cultures, with *wa* its most essential element (Cabinet Office 2004, 14–16).

To a certain extent, this vision of Japan’s culture replicated the ideas that formed the basis for the activities of the KBS and other pre-1945 cultural diplomacy institutions. Importantly, however, the notion of Japan’s unity with Asia is not to be found in the 2004 report, which construes Japan’s culture as a locale where different values coexist, but the report does not assign Japan’s culture an independent potential strategic value of its own. A report produced in the same year by a different think tank, the Council on East Asian Community (CEAC)—established with the purpose of creating an ideational framework for East Asian integration—further underlined the inability of Japanese thinkers to conceive of any autonomous cultural underpinning that could connect Japan with the Asian region and establish a direction for Japan’s cultural diplomacy.

Two points from this lengthy report are worth mentioning for the purposes of this article. First, the CEAC report argues that the only unifying cultural elements of the region are the lifestyle of the urban middle class and its cultural hybridity (Council on East Asian Community 2005). The policy recommendations in part of the report, however, suggest that the region should be constructed

based on the values of freedom, democracy, and human rights. Thus, this report also confirms the universal and ultimate value of liberal democracy already expressed in the 2003 report by the Study Group on International Exchange and suggests that cultural hybridity does not have any political implications for the region.

The policy debate on Japan's soft power is ongoing but generally follows the direction described above. Japan's culture is construed as either essentially linked with liberal democracy, implying that Japan's culture is part of a broader Western culture, or as lacking any normative value at all. As the debate over cultural soft power has been conducted within the broader context of a quest for a more independent policy, it is not surprising that a report compiled by the Diet's Constitution Research Council in 2011 concluded that Japan still lacks a detailed "soft power" policy, and is unclear about how its "soft" resources can be mobilized to support its foreign policy objectives (Kurata 2011). Thus, the question posed by Douglas McGray in his influential article "Japan's Gross National Cool" (2002), as to what kinds of norms can be associated with Japanese culture, remains unanswered.

In the following section I argue that the current cultural diplomacy debate can be seen as a reflection of the dominant discourses on postwar Japan's cultural identity. I show that the international ideational structures have also played an important role in shaping these discourses.

Postwar Japan's Cultural Identity and International Ideational Structures

Japan as a Bridge Between East and West

In the immediate postwar years, the dominant domestic discourse characterized Japan's culture as fundamentally negative and largely responsible for pre-1945 ultranationalism. Normatively positive culture was associated solely with the West (Aoki 1999). From the late 1950s on, however, the swift economic recovery prompted Japanese politicians and thinkers to search for Japan's cultural autonomy. One of the first such attempts was the reemer-

gence of the notion of Japan as a bridge between different cultures. The first appearance of this key concept came in a speech given by Foreign Minister Shigemitsu Mamoru on the occasion of Japan's admission to the United Nations in 1956. He noted Japan's geographical as well as historical ties with Asia, but at the same time emphasized that contemporary Japan's political system, economics, and culture were products of a fusion between Western and Asian civilizations. This fusion, Shigemitsu stated, was the basis for Japan's unique position as the bridge between West and East (Shigemitsu 1956).

The conception of Japan as a bridge has become one of the dominant threads in postwar Japan's identity discourse. It was most eloquently presented in Katō Shū'ichi's collection of essays titled *The Hybrid Culture: Japan's Little Hope*, published in the same year as Shigemitsu's UN speech. From the mid-1950s until his death in 2008, Katō was one of Japan's prominent public intellectuals and literary critics. Upon its publication, *The Hybrid Culture* received nationwide attention, and it is still considered one of the key texts in postwar Japan's discourse on its cultural identity (Aoki 1999).

Katō's conception of Japan's identity as located between the East and West is similar to ideas voiced by numerous pre-1945 Japanese intellectuals, such as the onetime prime minister and founder of Waseda University, Ōkuma Shigenobu. Criticizing the postwar trend of ascribing all the misfortunes that befell Japan to its traditional culture and the tendency toward unconditional acceptance of Western culture, Katō argued for an equal place for the "hybrid" Japanese culture alongside the "pure" culture of the West (1989 [1974]). In this way, Katō sought to rescue Japan from the position of eternal cultural inferiority ascribed to it by the postwar tendency to equate any culture with that of the West.

Katō narrated the duplicity of Japan's position in the following way: On the one hand, he emphasized the Western aspect of Japan, manifested in the postwar semiforceful adoption of Western political values, its political support of the West (as opposed to the newly independent or colonized nations), and its industrial maturity. On the other hand, he distinguished Japan from the West

based on Japan's history, religion, and geographical location (Katō 1989 [1974]).

Importantly, however, Katō's attempt to create an autonomous space for Japan's cultural identity did not lead to a discovery of autonomous cultural values or any normative implications of Japan's belonging to Asia. Driven by the desire to upset the Western monopoly on such values as democracy and human rights, Katō located their origin in universal humanism and emphasized the special destiny of Japan in exploring the cultural manifestations of these values in a non-Christian society. Ironically, though, by adopting this position, Katō actually embraced the Western discourse, as he implied the universality of human rights and democracy. He depicted Japan as the West's representative in Asia, a test tube for universal/Western values in a non-Christian environment lacking its own cultural values.

Arguably, this thread of Japan's identity discourse functioned as the ideational basis for attempts, examined in the previous section, to design Japan's cultural diplomacy. While Japan was depicted as a bridge between different cultures, the normative values ascribed to its culture by the hybridity discourse were identified with those of the West. Thus, attempts to design an autonomous cultural policy for Japan, which in the postwar context meant one independent of the United States, resulted either in a failure to define Japan's cultural values or suggestions that the "harmony of different values" was the most important characteristic of Japan's culture and therefore devoid of any values of its own.

Japan's Cultural Uniqueness

The notion of Japan as a bridge between different cultures, or as a hybrid culture, was not the only thread in postwar Japan's identity discourse. In the 1970s, a radically different construction of Japan's identity rose to the fore of public discourse. Japan's accession to the status of number-two economic power in the Western camp, and the subsequent trade frictions with the United States, quickly evolved into a cultural discourse shared by pundits on both sides of the Pacific. The discourse focused on intrinsic

national characteristics that were perceived as the direct causes of Japan's economic prowess. During this time, a body of academic, quasi-academic, and popular literature known as *nihonjinron* (the theory of Japaneseness) emerged, arguing for Japan's sociocultural uniqueness.

While rather diverse in terms of methodology, ranging from linguistics to history and sociology, as well as varying in the focus of inquiry, the unifying thread of *nihonjinron* was its consistent commitment to the idea of Japanese cultural uniqueness, whether the source of this uniqueness is located in history, biology, climate, diet, or orthography.² Through explicit or implicit juxtaposition with the West, this strand of the discourse construed Japan's culture as radically different from that of the West. Among the arguments *nihonjinron* put forward was that Japan had consistently been a harmonious, communal, and peaceful society, unlike the conflict-prone, individualistic, and jingoistic West (Dale 1986). Explicitly racist, this discourse assumed the existence of distinct and immutable characteristics possessed by members of a group that share "Japanese blood" (Kosaku 1998, 200).

Importantly, this discourse on Japan's uniqueness differed from the pre-1945 one, as it completely omitted the notion of "Asia" and references to Japan's role as Asia's sole legitimate representative. To a certain extent this construct did manage to position Japan as culturally autonomous, but it established that autonomy by drawing a sharp distinction between Western universalism and Japan's particularism. As such, the inability of others to internalize Japanese values was an integral part of the construct, and it could provide Japan with neither agency nor a sense of direction regarding its cultural diplomacy. The inherent opposition to universalism embedded in the construct, as well as its racist nature, combined with the absence of horizontal identification with Asia, re-created Japan as culturally and racially unique—different and superior—but void of any specific values that could have some kind of an appeal or meaning beyond its borders. In other words, while creating a certain semblance of autonomy, *nihonjinron* did not provide Japan with any sense of direction in the international realm, nor could it function as an ideational basis for Japan's cultural diplomacy.

The futility of this thread of Japan's identity for its cultural diplomacy can be observed in a speech given by none other than a pioneer of postwar Japan's cultural diplomacy, Kon Hidemi, the first director of the Agency of Cultural Affairs and the first chairman of the Japan Foundation. In a speech titled "International Exchange and Myself," given at a Japan Foundation event in 1979, Kon explained that he was about to depart for China to discuss staging a Kabuki performance in Beijing. He then said that the Chinese probably would not be able to understand Kabuki and gave a lengthy explanation of the cultural differences between Japan and China (Kon 1979). By expressing one of the main aspects of *nihonjinron*, the inability of non-Japanese to understand Japanese culture, Kon's narrative rendered cultural exchange devoid of any meaning.

*International Structures, Japan's Postwar Identity,
and the Disappearance of Asia*

The role of international ideational structures in the reemergence of the bridge identity discourse in its postwar form seems to be self-evident. Their role in the appearance of the *nihonjinron* discourse, however, should not be ignored. To a great extent *nihonjinron* was a domestic revolt against postwar negative conceptions of Japan's culture, which, by drawing extensively on pre-1945 narratives of Japan's cultural uniqueness, aimed to provide cultural explanations for its economic success. At the same time, however, the role of modernization theory in enabling this narrative is also important. Modernization theory, which was the ideational backbone of US Cold War attempts to draw third world countries into the capitalist camp, was built on a linear view of history that explained how nations could achieve development by embracing Western political and economic institutions. Its application to Japan led to a "re-narrativization" (Harootunian 1993, 202) of Japan's historical development and a drastic reconceptualization of the role of culture in Japan's history. Unlike Marxist and other progressive conceptions of Japan's traditional culture, this narrative, internalized by the Japanese mainstream as a result of US hegemony, showed Japan's peaceful evolution from a feu-

dal order and emphasized the positive role of traditional values in mediating this development. As Harootunian has persuasively argued, incorporating modernization theory into Japan's mainstream view of its history "authorized the Japanese to appeal to an exceptionalist culture to explain their unique economic and technological achievements" (1993, 202). In that way, the international ideational structure has also played an important role in enabling the reemergence of the cultural uniqueness discourse.

As already noted, both the bridge and the cultural-uniqueness threads existed in one form or another in Japan's pre-1945 identity discourse. The most important difference between the pre-1945 and postwar identity discourses, however, is the complete lack of Japanese identification with Asia in the latter. True, the hybridity thread does locate Japan in Asia, but *that* Asia is nothing more than a geographical location, lacking any normative values of its own. Value-laden identification with Asia did not disappear completely from domestic discourse, I should note. In a somewhat ironic fashion, the political left continued the pre-1945 identification with Asia, arguing the need for Japan to join the Asian struggle for independence and stressing that Japan, like other Asian nations, was still occupied and subordinated (Stockwin 1968).

This counterdiscourse of the left can hardly be considered as part of the mainstream construction of Japan's identity, however. Furthermore, while quite influential in the 1950s and 1960s, the political left has all but disappeared from Japan's political spectrum. In the 1990s and early 2000s the Asianist literature in Japan has experienced an upsurge (Avenell 2014). Yet the impact of neo-Asianist ideas on mainstream discourse has been rather limited, and in recent years, these ideas have been muffled if not completely replaced by the "China threat" discourse.

The disappearance of the Asian thread from mainstream identity discourse can be traced to a number of factors. The role of agency should not be forgotten. To a certain extent, the elimination of Asia from Japan's identity was an act of revolt by Japanese intellectuals against the pan-Asianist ideology associated with pre-1945 militarism (Oguma 2002). The agency of the occupation authorities also played an important role. Their policies aimed not

only at reforming the political and economic system but also at changing the psychology of the Japanese people by “rooting out the sources” of Japan’s aggression and creating new norms to inform Japan’s collective behavior (Dower 1999, 77). When designing its policy to embed Japan in the Western camp, US policymakers decided to capitalize on Japanese feelings of superiority toward Asian nations. Treating the Japanese as equals created the illusion that racial identification with Asia was obsolete (Matsuda 2007).

At the same time, however, the structural- and ideational-level changes that occurred in the post-1945 international system contributed greatly to the disappearance of identification with Asia from Japan’s identity construct. As already noted, the value-laden racial taxonomy of the world constituted an integral part of international society in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The post-1945 wave of independence of former colonies, and the Cold War divide between two universalist ideologies, brought about a retreat of this taxonomy and an important change in its meaning in the context of the Cold War. In the West, the lessons of Nazi Germany, but even more importantly, the Cold War struggle over the hearts, minds, and natural resources of the newly independent former colonies—resulted in the elimination of this racial taxonomy and its replacement with the “free world/communist bloc” dichotomy. The urgent need to abandon the racist taxonomy was voiced in 1952 by George F. Kennan, one of the key ideologues of the Cold War, when he argued that race relations profoundly affected the feelings of other peoples toward the United States and their choices related to their physical and military resources (Von Eschen 2000). Hence, while probably still deep-seated in the minds of policymakers and parts of the general public, the racial taxonomy was eliminated from the Western discourse.

As the Bandung Conference of nonaligned nations in 1954 demonstrated, race continued as an important thread of the former colonies’ identities. As this racial identity was constructed mainly in opposition to the West, it meant that Japan, firmly located within the Western camp in the Cold War struggle, was unable to pursue its pre-1945 identification with Asia.

Conclusion

I have argued that international ideational structures have exercised a profound effect on Japan's cultural diplomacy through their role in shaping its national identity. This argument carries important implications for the academic and policymaking debate on Japan's soft power, as it suggests that policies aimed at its enhancement are not simply a matter of skillful diplomatic craftsmanship but derive directly from dominant identity discourses. As such, Japan's cultural diplomacy, like its foreign policy as a whole, is very much a reflection of international structures. While policy can be revised and modified with relative ease, changes in international structures and national identity are much more difficult to achieve. In other words, only a structural power shift may bring about a change in Japan's cultural diplomacy and enhance its political influence in the Asian region and beyond.

In terms of the broader literature on soft power, my arguments suggest the need to incorporate the notions of national identity and international ideational structure into other empirical case studies of cultural diplomacy. This approach will enable a better understanding of the processes that shape any country's cultural strategies.

My analysis of Japan's postwar cultural diplomacy also proposes that Japan's embrace of Western-style liberal democracy has constrained its ability to assign any normative values to its culture besides those associated with the West. This assessment casts doubt on the argument that nondemocratic states such as Russia and China can attain soft power only by embracing liberal democracy, as Nye recently implied (2013).

Notes

Alexander Bukh is senior lecturer in international relations at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. He has published widely on Japanese foreign policy, including most recently an article on Japan's quest for the Northern Territories (*International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*) and *Japan's Identity and Foreign Policy: Russia as Japan's Other* (2009), which was published in Russian in November 2012. He can be reached at abukh70@gmail.com.

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1. One notable exception is Iwabuchi's 2007 monograph that questions the notion of Japan's culture as autonomous and the state's ability to mobilize it as a tool in advancing its foreign policy goals.

2. For detailed analysis of *nihonjiron*, see Dale 1986 and Minami 1994.

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