

Study on the Impact of Japanese Popular Culture on Sino-Japanese Relations in the Last Decade

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Abstract: Since the late 20th century, Japan has sought to use cultural dissemination as a diplomatic tool to alleviate the tensions between Japan and countries in East and Southeast Asia caused by World War II. The nationalistic tensions stemming from WWII between China and Japan still impact bilateral relations today, both officially and unofficially. This paper primarily investigates the impact of the spread of Japanese popular culture in China on Sino-Japanese relations in the last decade, examining how this influence manifests at both the official and grassroots levels.

Keywords: Japan; Pop Culture; China.

1. Introduction

Japanese pop culture has been a hot topic among young Chinese groups. Its rise has made Japan a major exporter of pop culture. This could be traced back to the end of the last century when Japan sought to ease tensions in East Asia over World War II and its colonial past to salvage Japan's international image. The Japanese government has implemented a series of cultural policies to carry out "soft power" cultural diplomacy. China was one of the main exporting countries. Continuous cultural export has led to a gradual increase in Chinese consumption of Japanese pop culture which has grown rapidly over the past decade. Chinese youth are obsessed with Japanese pop culture. For example, anime, movies, etc. The huge consumer group of Japanese pop culture has also brought considerable profits to Japanese businesses. At the same time, it has become one of the main factors for Chinese tourists to visit Japan [1]. Although China still retains anti-Japanese sentiment due to historical reasons, it does not affect the penetration of Japanese pop elements into Chinese daily life. This has also led to a gradual improvement in the Chinese people's perception of Japan. This essay emphasises the complexity of Japanese pop culture history and politics. The distortion and glorification of political or historical aspects in some Japanese cultural products have raised concerns in China about "cultural imperialism". As a result, China has imposed a certain degree of censorship and restriction.

The growing influence of Japanese popular culture in China has significantly impacted both countries economically, culturally, and politically. Although there are some barriers to this, the most impactful manifestation of its cultural exchange is among the people. During the decades of cultural exchange between China and Japan, academic research on this topic flourished. Many scholars have deeply explored the evolution of Chinese consumption patterns of Japanese popular culture and analysed the significance and impact of summarising this cultural exchange. This essay reviews the relevant academic literature of many scholars to understand the perspectives of predecessors and summarise their views. At the same time, this essay analyses the relationship and mutual influence between Japanese pop culture and China by exploring the changes in Chinese consumption of Japanese pop culture. In order to understand the importance of cultural exchanges

between countries and the multifaceted nature of cultural exchanges between the two countries.

2. Literature Review

Wu (2021) investigates the influence of Japanese pop culture on China which is a country with a special history. It through interviews with 40 participants from Japan and China [1]. The author believes that although China is a big country, the cultural exchange between China and Japan is more one-way. China is a major importer of Japanese culture and media. Japan's "soft power" is shaped by the success of its pop culture exports. It casts Japan as a harmless character to improve and reverse its image in China. Pop culture can escape regulation and subtly influence people's values. Many countries realised this early on and developed themselves popular culture to build their national image. For example, Japan, South Korea and the United States. China needs to pay attention to and develop its own "cultural soft power". Recent literature identifies the intricate connection between the popularity among young Chinese people of Japanese anime and manga and the shift in how this generation has started to see themselves and who they are [2]. They claim that Chinese young people being related to international web streaming platforms have repositioned themselves as the part of global teenage world that may not stay constrained by tradition national boundaries. This is consistent with the papers mentioned which have explored how the proliferation of Japanese manga and animations that came into the hands of young Chinese have transformed the way locals define themselves.

Chinese government has reacted to this development in the same way by blocking or restricting the use of these social networks among young people, feeling the need to censor the contents and keep the dominating ideology in the society, the reason behind this anxiety is unknown yet [2]. The authorities worry that the anti-nationalistic sentiment exhibited in the Japanese cultural products will challenge its present mission of strengthening a unique and stable national identity [2]. Further restriction laws were made to supervise the import and distribution of foreign products, which were mainly products that came from Japan.

Furthermore, the Chinese government has endeavored to control and assimilate Japanese pop culture, whereby it is employed to promote while keeping spreading nationalistic

narratives [3]. The author gives information about Japanese authorities whose activities were selectively allowed in the country, including during the period when Communist values were prevailing in the country. The media that are perceived as concurring with such values were free to get in; while others that would stand against the ideals were blocked. Such a method of thinking manifests the ethical and political tensions and the complexity of the consumption of Japanese popular culture by Chinese people.

Other scholarly sources unravel that the direction consumption of Japanese originals as well as the formation of substitute items like dolls and publications have led to an amazing profit for Japanese companies [4]. With this revenue-generating market, Japanese companies are compelled to be more in line with Chinese preferences to win this competition, which makes their cultural products even better situated in the Chinese market. On the other hand, Chinese companies are also engaged in the commercial sector in Japan, and this prongs many economic links between the countries in the culture sector. The authors of this essay maintain that this political-economic interdependence boosted the Sino-Japanese relations in turn, but because of the political tension, it may need stabilization in the future as well.

3. Data Analysis and Impact Study of the Past Decade

The thematic impact of the popularity of Japanese pop culture on its Chinese counterpart is significant [5]. Their observation is that the attractive scenario, notably the natural landscape, cultural sites, and social factors of Japanese media have a substantial role in the Chinese tourists traveling to Japan. This has gone along the people-to-people exchange and it has led to better bilateral comprehension between the two countries. With Chinese tourism inbound to Japan that is exposed to its culture firsthand, a more sophisticated grasp of Japan is obtained and more positive impressions are maintained. This defeats the negative political rhetoric that otherwise would prevail.

Over the past decade, China's import of Japanese pop culture has generally shown an upward trend compared to before 2013. According to data from China's National Bureau of Statistics [6], by the end of 2022, the total import value of Japanese TV dramas in China increased from 2.90 million yuan in 2008 to 5.74 million yuan. Additionally, the total import value of Japanese animated TV series rose from 195,000 yuan in 2009 to 11.26 million yuan by 2022 (China National Bureau of Statistics, 2024). From 2013 to 2022, the total imports of TV programs, TV dramas, and animated TV from Japan gradually surpassed those from South Korea and Hong Kong, making Japan the leading source of imported TV-based pop culture in Asia for China [6]. This trend is not limited to television; imports in the fields of audiovisual and cultural creative derivatives have also been on the rise over the past decade.

Over the past decade, the overall rise in China's imports of Japanese pop culture products has been driven both by factors within Japan itself and by the demand of the Chinese market. At the beginning of the 20th century, as Japan sought to attain a level of power similar to that of European and American colonial nations, it proposed spreading Japanese culture overseas to enhance its international influence [7]. Although the notion of cultural soft power seems to have become popular only in the 21st century, Japan had already conceived

of a similar idea about a hundred years ago. During the 1970s and 1980s, in an effort to mitigate tensions with its neighbors, particularly in Southeast Asia, due to its colonial history, Japan began to export television programs overseas, achieving some success [8]. In the early 21st century, during Junichiro Koizumi's tenure as Prime Minister of Japan, he first made promoting media culture exports and national brand shaping a part of cultural policy, proposing that the government would strengthen Japan's attractive brand image internationally by developing content industries such as movies, animation, and fashion [9]. Since then, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan has targeted enhancing understanding and trust in Japan, using pop culture as a main tool for cultural diplomacy on the basis of traditional culture and arts [10]. From the perspective of market demand in China, the continuous development of the internet industry and technology in the past decade, especially the enrichment of mobile video platforms, has enabled Japanese anime, movies, music, and TV programs to easily cross borders and rapidly spread to the Chinese market. Additionally, many Japanese cultural products undergo a degree of localization before entering China to better adapt to the market [11]. For example, Japanese anime are translated into Chinese, and even certain plots are adjusted to suit the preferences of Chinese audiences. This localization strategy helps the acceptance of Japanese cultural products in the Chinese market, making their content more aligned with the cultural and emotional sensibilities of local audiences. In terms of pop culture content, taking the animation industry as an example, Japanese anime and movies often explore universal themes of youth and growth, which transcend cultures and boundaries, easily resonating with and gaining the identification of young people in China [1]. Thus, whether from Japan's own efforts or the opportunities provided by the development of the Chinese market, the spread of Japanese pop culture in China has seen significant growth over the past decade.

As Japanese pop culture has developed in China, it has had a significant impact on the relationship between China and Japan, reflected in economic, cultural, and political aspects. Economically, the direct imports of Japanese pop culture industry copyrights into China have yielded substantial profits for Japanese companies. Wu (2021) suggests that the success of Japanese cultural products like anime, movies, and music in the Chinese market, particularly the physical products derived from the digital domain such as toys, publications, and gaming consoles, not only provides substantial economic benefits to Japanese businesses but also generates revenue for China through tariffs and royalties on digital derivative products [1]. Furthermore, Japanese cultural products like anime, games, and fashion have a large consumer base in China. This not only boosts Japan's exports but also attracts Chinese investors and businesses to seek collaborative opportunities in Japan, thereby deepening the economic ties in the cultural sector between the two countries [11]. Additionally, the relationship between the two countries in the tourism sector has also become closer due to the massive import of Japanese pop culture into China. The natural landscapes, cultural sites, and societal aspects depicted in Japanese animations, TV programs, and publications are significant factors attracting Chinese tourists to Japan [1]. Over the past decade, Japanese pop culture has increasingly incorporated Chinese elements, and Japanese art experts and celebrities are frequently invited to China for visits or to produce shows, allowing the Japanese public to

gain a new perspective on Chinese society from a Japanese viewpoint and encouraging more travel to China, further tightening the ties between the two nations in the tourism sector.

Culturally, as a defeated nation in World War II with a history of colonialism in East Asia, Japan initially aimed its cultural dissemination to reacquaint itself with other East Asian countries to alleviate tensions with its neighbors [8]. Thus, the extensive entry of Japanese pop culture into the Chinese market inevitably carried with it the underlying goal of easing conflicts and promoting cultural exchange. Regarding the Japanese pop culture itself transmitted to China, Japanese anime often explores universal values such as loyalty, family, friendship, and courage. These themes, transcending cultures, foster resonance and understanding especially among the youth across different cultures [12]. According to survey data by Genron NPO (2019), by 2019, the perception of Japan among Chinese people continued to improve, with 45.9% expressing a 'favorable' view of Japan, the highest proportion since the survey began in 2005 [13]. For young people, in contrast to textbook education, Japanese pop culture presents a modern and fashionable state of Japanese society. Wu (2021) notes that Japanese anime and movies often explore universal themes of youth and growth, which transcend cultures and boundaries, easily resonating with and gaining the identification of young people in China [1]. Through this cultural resonance, the values and lifestyles conveyed by Japanese culture appeal to young Chinese, fostering a favorable view of Japan. This cultural communication, to a certain extent, also impacts economic sectors including tourism, creating a network of exchanges that improves Sino-Japanese relations among the general populace.

Although the Sino-Japanese relationship has improved in economic and cultural aspects due to the influx of Japanese pop culture into the Chinese market, there are some obstacles in political aspects, which might adversely affect the relationship between the two countries. On one hand, from Japan's perspective, Japanese pop culture, such as anime, is sometimes criticized for glorifying or distorting historical facts, especially concerning Japan's role in World War II. Such portrayals can provoke international disputes, particularly in countries like China and Korea, where historical memory is sensitive [12]. These disputes might cause a nationalist backlash in China against the consumption of foreign pop culture, or be used by fans and political groups to express dissatisfaction with perceived cultural imperialism or domestic policies.

On the other hand, Fairuzahra (2020) suggests that as Japanese pop culture widely spreads, there is a change in cultural identity among Chinese youth [11]. They increasingly see themselves as part of a global culture, an identification that transcends traditional national and cultural boundaries. However, this reshaping of self-identity among Chinese youth has raised concerns within the Chinese government. Due to historical and political sensitivities, the Chinese government often views some cultural and artistic products from Japan as having a negative influence, fearing they may adversely affect the values and behaviors of young people. Consequently, the Chinese government has implemented import restrictions and content censorship systems to block the influx of Japanese cultural products and promote domestic animations and comics that align with socialist core values [14]. Additionally, the surge of anti-

Japanese films and TV shows heavily promoted by the Chinese government has gradually become more extreme under the guise of patriotism, even causing doubts among Chinese youth about the authenticity of historical portrayals in these dramas [15]. Naftali (2018) found in a survey among high school students in Shanghai that over a third doubted the extreme and unrealistic portrayals of Japan in films and TV programs mandated by the Chinese government, believing that such portrayals did not make them more patriotic [15]. The issues of historical content in Japanese pop culture and a series of restrictions by the Chinese government mean that the progress in relations influenced by cultural exchanges may manifest more among the populace rather than between the governments, thereby creating obstacles to Sino-Japanese economic and cultural exchanges at this level.

4. Conclusion

Overall, the spread of Japanese popular culture in China has not only had a deep impact on the economy and culture but has also brought about complex changes at all levels of China-Japan relations. The wide dissemination of Japanese pop culture products in the Chinese market has brought about significant economic benefits. Japanese animation, TV dramas, and other cultural products have not only directly provided Japanese companies with considerable revenues, but also promoted economic exchanges between China and Japan through derivative products and cooperation projects. The growing demand for Japanese cultural products among Chinese consumers has promoted economic cooperation between the two countries in the field of cultural industries. In addition, Japanese pop culture has a strong resonance among Chinese youth. Through Japanese animation, comics, and TV dramas, many young Chinese are exposed to different cultural values and lifestyles, which not only enhances their understanding and identification with Japanese culture but also changes their self-concept and cultural identity to a certain extent. This cultural exchange has promoted understanding and friendly relations between the people of China and Japan.

However, despite their success in the Chinese market, Japanese cultural products also faced scrutiny and limitations from the Chinese government. Due to historical and political sensitivities, the Chinese government often views some Japanese cultural and artistic products as negative influences, fearing that they may negatively affect the values and behavior of young people. As a result, the Chinese government has implemented import limitations and content review systems to prevent the flow of Japanese cultural products and to promote domestically produced animation and comics that are in line with core socialist values. However, these limitations have not completely prevented the influence of Japanese popular culture in China. Overall, although the spread of Japanese popular culture in the Chinese market has enhanced the economic and cultural links between the two countries, there are still barriers at the political level. In particular, restrictions at the governmental level and rising nationalistic sentiments may hinder economic and cultural exchanges between China and Japan in broader areas. Nevertheless, China and Japan still need to address the challenges posed by political sensitivities in cultural exchanges in the future to achieve a more balanced and stable bilateral relationship.

Acknowledgments

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