

Japan's Cultural Diplomacy in Southeast Asia: Soft Power Strategy and Multidimensional Impacts

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Abstract

Japan's cultural diplomacy in Southeast Asia underwent a significant transformation under Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, evolving from a peripheral promotional activity into a central pillar of foreign policy designed to operationalize the doctrine of "Proactive Contribution to Peace." This article examines the strategic objectives, institutional mechanisms, and policy instruments that defined this trajectory, focusing on the "Cool Japan" strategy, the MEXT scholarship framework, and the JENESYS youth exchange program. By systematically mobilizing creative industries alongside educational and people-to-people exchanges, Japan succeeded in projecting an image of a dynamic, reliable, and responsible nation, consolidating its position as a trusted strategic partner within ASEAN. The findings indicate that Japan's cultural diplomacy was remarkably effective in fostering strategic trust, stimulating the creative economy, and embedding cultural values into regional relational structures. The commercialization of cultural assets such as anime, manga, video games, and Washoku cuisine generated substantial economic benefits while establishing a sustainable ecosystem of soft power, particularly resonant among ASEAN youth. At the same time, educational initiatives and grassroots exchanges created durable intellectual and social networks that reinforced Japan's normative leadership and contributed to the construction of a trust-based regional order. However, the study also identifies inherent limitations and emerging challenges. Japan continues to face intense competition from South Korea's Hallyu wave and China's Confucius Institutes, both of which deploy alternative models of cultural influence. Internally, risks of over-commercialization raise concerns about the erosion of authenticity and philosophical depth in Japan's cultural heritage, while uneven audience segmentation leaves rural and marginalized communities underrepresented. These dynamics underscore the need for recalibration toward greater inclusivity, personalization, and multilateral collaboration. By situating Japan's cultural diplomacy within the theoretical framework of soft power and Indo-Pacific geopolitics, this article contributes to International Relations scholarship and offers policy implications for developing countries seeking to elevate cultural diplomacy as a strategic instrument.

Keywords: Cultural diplomacy; Japan; Southeast Asia; Soft power; Cool Japan; Proactive Contribution to Peace.

INTRODUCTION

In the turbulent currents of contemporary international relations, the limitations of traditional instruments of hard power have become increasingly evident. Military coercion and economic inducement, while still central to statecraft, often prove insufficient in addressing the multidimensional nature of modern conflicts and transnational challenges. Against this backdrop, soft power — defined as the ability to shape preferences and achieve objectives through attraction and persuasion rather than compulsion (Nye, 2004) — has emerged as a pivotal strategic resource. Within this conceptual framework, cultural diplomacy represents one of the most refined and enduring

mechanisms of soft power, enabling states to project values, identities, and narratives that resonate across borders and foster voluntary alignment.

Japan provides a particularly compelling case study in this regard. As a nation endowed with a distinctive cultural heritage and a globally recognized reservoir of creative industries, Japan has increasingly sought to reposition its foreign policy on the foundation of cultural diplomacy. This recalibration is not merely a matter of diplomatic choice but a historical necessity, reflecting the imperative to reaffirm Japan's global influence in an era characterized by shifting power balances and intensifying competition for normative leadership. The period from 2012 to 2020 under Prime Minister Abe Shinzo marked a decisive turning point in this trajectory. During these years, cultural values were elevated from peripheral instruments of image promotion to integral components of national security strategy and sustainable economic growth. This transformation reflected a profound shift in Tokyo's governing mindset, recognizing that empathy and trust from the international community constitute the most durable basis for safeguarding national interests. It was within this context that the doctrine of "Proactive Contribution to Peace" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2014) was operationalized, embedding cultural diplomacy into the broader architecture of Japan's foreign policy.

At the regional level, Southeast Asia has consistently occupied a critical geostrategic position in Japan's diplomatic calculus. The region functions not only as a potential consumer market and vital supply partner but also as a core arena for sustaining the vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). Yet, the competition for soft power in Southeast Asia has intensified dramatically, with China and South Korea advancing robust cultural strategies that penetrate deeply into local societies (Otmazgin, 2012). China's Confucius Institutes and infrastructure diplomacy, alongside South Korea's Hallyu wave, have created formidable challenges for Japan's leadership aspirations. This competitive environment compelled Tokyo to innovate continuously in its approaches, seeking to differentiate its cultural diplomacy through authenticity, inclusivity, and long-term trust-building.

Against this backdrop, the Abe administration launched a series of groundbreaking initiatives. Foremost among them was the commercialization of national creativity through the Cool Japan strategy, which transformed cultural assets such as anime, manga, and cuisine into instruments of both economic growth and diplomatic influence. Complementing this economic-cultural nexus were initiatives aimed at deepening human connections, most notably through educational exchanges and the JENESYS youth program. These efforts collectively sought to embed Japan's cultural diplomacy within a multi-layered strategic framework, simultaneously advancing national branding, economic resilience, and normative leadership.

Theoretical Foundations and Policy Context

To grasp the strategic essence of Japan's cultural diplomacy, it is essential to situate this instrument within the broader theoretical framework of soft power. Soft power, as articulated by Nye (2004), emphasizes the ability of states to achieve objectives through attraction and persuasion rather than military coercion or economic inducement. Within this paradigm, culture functions as a reservoir of humanistic values, ideologies, and lifestyles that can generate voluntary consensus among partner nations. By shaping perceptions and influencing social psychology, culture becomes a non-material yet profoundly consequential mechanism of international engagement. Cultural diplomacy, therefore, transcends the superficial showcasing of artistic forms or culinary traditions. It entails the deliberate mobilization of symbolic resources and identity-based values to construct a trustworthy national image (Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, 2015), thereby contributing to the resolution of latent conflicts and the consolidation of durable bilateral relations. The shift from diplomacy rooted in tangible interests to diplomacy grounded in empathy marks a significant advancement in contemporary foreign policy thinking, where cultivating trust among foreign publics is recognized as a strategic goal for sustaining national power in a lasting manner.

The formation of Japan's cultural diplomacy policy in Southeast Asia during 2012–2020 was closely intertwined with profound geopolitical transformations in the region. The rise of new powers triggered an unprecedented race for soft power, compelling Japan to recalibrate its strategies. For decades, Japan had maintained leadership through official development assistance (ODA), but by the early 2010s, it faced fierce competition from the cultural promotion strategies of neighboring states (Iwabuchi, 2015). China's "charm offensive," manifested through Confucius Institutes and infrastructure diplomacy, and South Korea's explosive Hallyu wave, posed significant challenges to Japan's national image. These dynamics raised the risk of Japan's cultural presence being overshadowed, necessitating innovative approaches to sustain influence. Compounding these external pressures were lingering historical barriers stemming from World War II, which continued to act as psychological obstacles to closer ties between Tokyo and ASEAN states. This context demanded a softer, more humanistic approach to building strategic trust at the grassroots level (Lam, 2013). The convergence of external competition and internal imperatives to reposition the national brand amid declining economic influence prompted the Japanese government to systematize cultural values into a coherent and comprehensive national strategy.

In this environment, the doctrine of "Proactive Contribution to Peace" and the philosophy of "Values-Based Diplomacy" under Prime Minister Abe Shinzo served as theoretical compasses. These frameworks enabled Japan to expand its influence by sharing universal values with the regional community, positioning cultural diplomacy as a strategic pillar of foreign policy. This orientation was not only aimed at amplifying soft power but also represented an optimal solution for Japan to circumvent constitutional limitations in the military sphere, thereby contributing to regional stability through effective non-traditional instruments. The strategy was reinforced by the robust growth of Japan's domestic creative industries, where modern cultural assets such as anime, manga, and Washoku cuisine became common languages bridging geographical divides with ASEAN youth.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodological framework of this study is deliberately designed to integrate interdisciplinary approaches, ensuring both theoretical rigor and empirical validity. Anchored in the epistemological foundation of **historical materialism**, the research situates Japan's cultural diplomacy within the dynamic and dialectical evolution of regional geopolitics. This ontological stance allows for the examination of cultural diplomacy not as an isolated phenomenon, but as a strategic instrument embedded in broader socio-political transformations and power relations.

At the core of the methodology lies **policy document analysis**, employed as the primary tool to decode Tokyo's strategic objectives. By systematically dissecting official texts such as the *Diplomatic Bluebook (2012–2020)*, reports on the "Cool Japan" initiative, and Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's foreign policy speeches, the study constructs a robust theoretical framework that illuminates how Japan redefined soft power and aligned it with national security imperatives. This textual analysis is complemented by a hermeneutic approach, enabling the interpretation of symbolic narratives and discursive strategies embedded in cultural diplomacy.

To strengthen the empirical dimension, the research incorporates **statistical methods** and secondary data analysis. This dual approach transforms qualitative insights into quantifiable evidence, thereby enhancing objectivity and reliability. Data sources include periodic public opinion surveys conducted by Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in ASEAN (2020), annual reports from the Japan Foundation, and internationally recognized indices such as *The Soft Power 30*. These datasets provide comparative benchmarks to assess Japan's relative standing and the effectiveness of its cultural diplomacy initiatives. The triangulation of multiple data sources ensures methodological robustness and mitigates potential biases.

Equally important is the application of **comparative analysis**, which serves to identify Japan's distinctive competitive advantages vis-à-vis the cultural strategies of South Korea and China. This

method highlights both the strengths and limitations of Japan's approach, particularly in relation to commercialization challenges and content saturation. By juxtaposing Japan's initiatives with the Hallyu wave and China's "charm offensive," the study uncovers structural asymmetries and strategic gaps that shape the regional soft power landscape.

Finally, the research employs a **case study method** focused on Vietnam, widely regarded as Japan's most successful model in cultivating strategic trust. This case study approach enables a micro-level analysis of how cultural diplomacy operates within a specific socio-cultural context, while also generating broader policy implications. Vietnam's receptivity to Japanese cultural initiatives provides fertile ground for examining the mechanisms of trust-building, identity negotiation, and nation branding. The findings from this case study are subsequently generalized to propose actionable recommendations for Vietnam's own international integration and sustainable brand development.

Strategic Objectives and Operational Structure

Between 2012 and 2020, Japan's cultural diplomacy in Southeast Asia underwent a profound transformation, evolving from a peripheral practice of image promotion into a multi-layered strategic architecture deeply interwoven with national interests. This evolution reflected both external pressures and internal imperatives. At the macro level, the Japanese government sought to consolidate soft power as a means of sustaining regional leadership while simultaneously counterbalancing the intensifying cultural influence of neighboring powers (Phạm, 2018). Unlike approaches that rely primarily on financial resources or centralized state-driven directives, Japan under Prime Minister Abe Shinzo adopted a model rooted in the organic diffusion of popular cultural values, epitomized by the Cool Japan strategy. This orientation aimed to cultivate long-term strategic trust, transforming cultural empathy into a foundation for overcoming historical psychological barriers and thereby facilitating deeper cooperation in economic and security domains under the doctrine of Proactive Contribution to Peace.

The operationalization of these objectives was reflected in the careful segmentation of target audiences, ranging from political elites to the broader youth population across ASEAN. In the educational sphere, Japan refrained from competing in scholarship quantity, instead emphasizing quality through the MEXT system. This approach nurtured a generation of local experts who not only possessed technical competence but also internalized Japanese governance standards and cultural values, thereby creating a reservoir of goodwill and mutual understanding. In parallel, the commercialization of aesthetic values and lifestyle practices into high value-added commodities transformed culture into a tangible economic driver. This process stimulated domestic growth, attracted international investment, and reinforced Japan's image as a creative economy. At the humanistic level, youth exchange programs such as JENESYS played a pivotal role in constructing future-oriented strategic support networks. These initiatives fostered interpersonal connections that functioned as natural barriers against xenophobic tendencies and served to protect Japan's national interests in an increasingly multipolar world.

From an operational perspective, Japan's cultural diplomacy was structured around a three-pillar model encompassing dissemination, absorption, and symbiosis. The dissemination pillar was highly professionalized, extending beyond traditional domains such as language and classical arts to encompass digital content industries like anime and manga, thereby securing dominance in youth cultural markets. The absorption pillar ensured domestic vitality by selectively integrating international cultural assets, positioning Japan as a global hub of creative coordination and innovation. Finally, the symbiosis pillar represented the normative apex, where Japan demonstrated ethical responsibility through cultural ODA projects and regional heritage preservation initiatives (Nakamura, 2013).

The seamless integration of these three pillars enabled Japan not only to safeguard its interests amid complex geopolitical dynamics but also to contribute to the construction of a peaceful regional order

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grounded in mutual understanding and co-creation of new cultural values. This operational structure reflects a paradigmatic shift in Japan's foreign policy, elevating cultural diplomacy from a peripheral instrument to a central strategic pillar. In doing so, Japan advanced its national security, reinforced economic resilience, and consolidated normative leadership in Southeast Asia.

Beyond its immediate objectives, this model illustrates how cultural diplomacy can function simultaneously as a mechanism of soft power projection, a driver of economic innovation, and a tool of normative influence. It demonstrates the capacity of cultural diplomacy to transcend traditional boundaries between security, economics, and identity, offering a comprehensive framework for sustainable regional engagement. Moreover, Japan's experience underscores the importance of cultural diplomacy as a means of constructing trust-based regional orders in an era of complex interdependence. By embedding cultural diplomacy into the broader architecture of foreign policy, Japan not only strengthened its bilateral ties with ASEAN states but also contributed to the shaping of a regional environment conducive to peace, stability, and shared prosperity.

The "Cool Japan" Strategy and the Cultural Industries

Within the architecture of Japan's cultural diplomacy during 2012–2020, the "Cool Japan" strategy emerged as one of the most groundbreaking and emblematic instruments, marking a paradigmatic shift from traditional academic and elite-centered promotion to the systematic harnessing of popular culture as a vehicle of national policy (McGray, 2002). In essence, this initiative represented a comprehensive plan to elevate entertainment products—previously disseminated spontaneously and informally—into a coherent, state-backed policy framework. By commercializing creativity, Japan sought not only to generate new growth drivers for its knowledge-based economy amid demographic aging and economic stagnation, but also to project an image of dynamism, modernity, and cultural sophistication in the minds of international audiences, particularly the youth of Southeast Asia.

The operational mechanism of this strategy was institutionalized through specialized management and financial structures, thereby creating a robust infrastructure for the export of soft power. Central to this framework was the Cool Japan Fund, established in 2013 as a public-private partnership (PPP), which acted as a coordinating nucleus between the state and private enterprises (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, 2013). The Fund assumed responsibility for providing strategic investment capital to support domestic firms in internationalizing products with distinctive appeal, including anime, manga, video games, fashion, and Washoku cuisine. Through its diversified portfolio, Japan skillfully linked symbolic national values with economic growth objectives, transforming culture from a budget-consuming sector into a spearhead industry capable of generating substantial added value. This institutionalization of cultural diplomacy through PPP mechanisms also reflected a broader trend in international relations: the blurring of boundaries between public and private actors in the pursuit of national branding and soft power projection.

In Southeast Asia, the implementation of Cool Japan was concretized through large-scale festivals designed to shape market demand and establish cultural presence. Events such as the Anime Festival Asia series in Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam became flagship platforms for showcasing Japanese creativity and engaging directly with local audiences. Alongside artistic performances, the Japanese government actively supported enterprises in establishing retail outlets, pop-up stores, and restaurant chains in major urban centers, thereby creating tangible cultural presence. By embedding Japanese lifestyle practices directly into the daily routines of local populations, abstract cultural concepts were transformed into lived experiences, fostering emotional resonance and forging invisible yet durable bonds between ASEAN publics and Japan's core values (Otmazgin, 2016). This strategy of "cultural immersion" was particularly effective in urban contexts, where youth populations were highly receptive to globalized cultural flows and digital content consumption.

The Cool Japan strategy also functioned as a mechanism of economic diplomacy, linking cultural exports to broader trade and investment objectives. By positioning anime, manga, and gaming industries as high-value commodities, Japan not only expanded its cultural footprint but also

stimulated domestic innovation ecosystems. The synergy between cultural industries and technological advancement reinforced Japan's image as a creative economy, capable of competing in global markets while simultaneously cultivating normative influence. In this sense, Cool Japan exemplified the dual function of cultural diplomacy: as both a symbolic resource for soft power projection and a tangible driver of economic growth.

Nevertheless, despite notable achievements in market penetration and enhanced public goodwill, the strategy faced critical scrutiny regarding the risks of excessive commercialization. Some scholars cautioned that prioritizing profit and mass appeal could overshadow the philosophical depth and authenticity of traditional culture, which constitutes the essence of national identity. The commodification of cultural heritage raised concerns about the dilution of values and the potential loss of cultural distinctiveness in the pursuit of global market share. Audit reports further highlighted imbalances between the substantial investments allocated to the Cool Japan Fund and the actual financial returns, fueling debates about fiscal sustainability and efficiency. These critiques underscored the tension inherent in cultural diplomacy: the need to balance economic imperatives with the preservation of cultural authenticity and normative credibility.

Despite these challenges, the coordinated efforts of the Cabinet Office and specialized agencies in implementing Cool Japan succeeded in constructing what scholars have described as a "Japan-friendly ecosystem." This ecosystem not only preserved Japan's competitive edge against neighboring cultural waves but also demonstrated the capacity of a nation to transform creativity into a sharp diplomatic instrument in the era of globalization. By embedding cultural diplomacy into the broader architecture of foreign policy, Japan effectively leveraged its creative industries to reinforce national branding, cultivate trust, and sustain influence in Southeast Asia.

In comparative perspective, Japan's Cool Japan strategy can be contrasted with South Korea's Hallyu wave and China's Confucius Institutes. Whereas Hallyu relied on centralized marketing and rapid adaptability to consumer trends, and China emphasized institutional expansion and infrastructure diplomacy, Japan sought to differentiate itself through authenticity, inclusivity, and the integration of cultural diplomacy into national security and economic growth strategies. This comparative lens highlights the uniqueness of Japan's approach: a deliberate attempt to embed cultural diplomacy within a multi-layered strategic framework that simultaneously advances economic resilience, normative leadership, and regional stability.

Education, Media, and People-to-People Exchanges

Beyond the domain of popular entertainment and the commercialization of creative industries, Japan strategically reinforced the intellectual depth and trust capital of its soft power through education, media, and people-to-people exchanges. These dimensions represent the more enduring and institutionalized layers of cultural diplomacy, designed not only to transmit knowledge but also to cultivate long-term affinity, empathy, and normative alignment with Japanese values. In this sense, Japan's approach transcended the transactional logic of cultural exports, embedding cultural diplomacy into the very fabric of human resource development and societal interaction across Southeast Asia.

Education was positioned as a cornerstone of this strategy. The Japanese government, through the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), offered prestigious scholarships that attracted and trained a generation of elite intellectuals from ASEAN member states. These individuals were not merely recipients of academic training; they became carriers of Japanese governance philosophy, management standards, and cultural values. The Vietnam-Japan University (VJU) project in Hanoi (Nguyễn & Nguyễn, 2018) exemplified this model, serving as a "beacon" of strategic partnership. By fusing Japanese educational philosophy with local practical needs, VJU nurtured future leaders who embodied both technical competence and cultural empathy. This

institutional linkage created sustainable personnel networks that functioned as bridges of trust, reinforcing Japan's role as a reliable partner in regional development.

Parallel to formal education, Japan intensified large-scale people-to-people exchange programs as effective mechanisms for building trust at the grassroots level. The most prominent initiative was the JENESYS youth exchange network (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2017), meticulously designed to foster mutual understanding through experiential activities and thematic workshops. These programs enabled ASEAN students to engage directly with Japan's cultural and technological landscape, visiting world heritage sites, participating in cultural immersion activities, and touring leading technology corporations. Such experiences helped participants overcome complex historical perceptions, while simultaneously constructing a holistic view of Japan as both spiritually traditional and technologically advanced. The effectiveness of this mechanism extended beyond empathy, successfully cultivating a cohort of "informal ambassadors" who would serve as enthusiastic advocates for Japan's foreign relations in the future. In international relations terms, these exchanges represent a form of "normative socialization," whereby individuals internalize values and practices that align with Japan's vision of regional order.

On the front of external communication, Tokyo undertook a decisive transformation by fully leveraging the power of multi-platform digital technology to reshape its national image. Major media outlets such as NHK World-Japan played a central role in disseminating Japanese values through high-quality content and interactive engagement on social media platforms like YouTube and Facebook. Unlike traditional one-way promotion, Japan emphasized dialogical communication, highlighting its role as a responsible power actively engaged in addressing non-traditional security challenges such as climate change, disaster prevention, and sustainable development. This strategic use of media allowed Japan to soften the rigidity of political messaging, replacing it with a national image that was dynamic, approachable, and aligned with the aspirations of ASEAN societies. Continuous presence and timely responsiveness in the digital sphere further reinforced Japan's credibility, ensuring that its cultural diplomacy resonated with younger, digitally literate audiences.

Taken together, education, media, and people-to-people exchanges constituted the normative and institutional pillars of Japan's cultural diplomacy. They complemented the economic-commercial dimension of Cool Japan by embedding cultural diplomacy into the everyday lives, aspirations, and identities of ASEAN publics. In comparative perspective, Japan's emphasis on education and grassroots exchanges distinguished its approach from South Korea's entertainment-driven Hallyu and China's institution-centered Confucius Institutes. Whereas Hallyu focused on mass cultural consumption and China emphasized ideological dissemination through formal institutions, Japan sought to cultivate trust through sustained interpersonal engagement and intellectual collaboration. This strategy not only reinforced Japan's soft power but also contributed to the construction of a regional order grounded in empathy, shared values, and mutual respect.

Ultimately, Japan's investment in education, media, and people-to-people exchanges during 2012–2020 illustrates the multidimensional nature of cultural diplomacy. It demonstrates how states can mobilize both formal institutions and informal networks to project soft power, build trust, and sustain influence in complex geopolitical environments. More broadly, Japan's experience underscores the importance of integrating cultural diplomacy into the broader architecture of foreign policy, highlighting its potential to serve as a strategic instrument for peace-building, regional stability, and the cultivation of long-term partnerships in the Indo-Pacific.

Achievements and Emerging Challenges

A comprehensive evaluation of Japan's cultural diplomacy in Southeast Asia during the period 2012–2020 reveals a set of transformative achievements that went far beyond the conventional realm of national image promotion, producing substantive shifts in the regional relational architecture. The most notable accomplishment was the consolidation of Japan's position as the most trusted strategic partner within the ASEAN community, achieved through the deliberate cultivation of sustainable

strategic trust. Public opinion surveys consistently demonstrated Japan's leading position in terms of favorability and political reliability, surpassing neighboring powers that often faced skepticism regarding their security intentions or the utilitarian nature of their investments. In Vietnam, Japan's appeal reached remarkable levels, with 94 percent of respondents expressing positive sentiment, underscoring the success of Japan's transition from a heavy industrial nation to a creative, responsible, and culturally vibrant actor (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2020). This achievement illustrates the capacity of cultural diplomacy to reshape national identity in the eyes of foreign publics, transforming Japan into a normative leader whose influence rests on empathy and trust rather than coercion.

Economically, Japan demonstrated exceptional capacity to translate soft power into tangible financial benefits through the flourishing of cultural industries and cultural tourism. The vigorous implementation of the Cool Japan strategy generated substantial revenues from the export of anime, manga, and video games, while simultaneously positioning Southeast Asia as a key consumption market for digital content. This expansion provided a new growth engine at a time when Japan's domestic market was approaching saturation, thereby reinforcing the strategic importance of external cultural markets. In parallel, education became a cornerstone of Japan's soft power, with historic milestones such as the presence of over 73,000 Vietnamese students in Japan by 2019. This created a durable pro-Japan intellectual network, serving as a bridge for transparent governance and future economic cooperation. The synergy between cultural industries and educational exchanges exemplifies the multidimensional nature of Japan's cultural diplomacy, which simultaneously advances economic resilience, human capital development, and normative influence.

Nevertheless, alongside these achievements, structural limitations and external pressures became increasingly evident. In comparative perspective, Japan's cultural diplomacy faced intense competition from South Korea's Hallyu wave, which benefited from centralized national marketing strategies, rapid adaptability to shifting consumer preferences, and a strong emphasis on digital platforms. Similarly, China's strong penetration through Confucius Institutes and massive infrastructure projects posed significant challenges to Japan's ideological leadership within ASEAN (Otmazgin, 2016). These rival strategies highlighted the competitive nature of soft power in Southeast Asia, where states actively vie for cultural influence as a means of shaping regional norms and identities.

Internally, risks associated with over-commercialization of cultural resources raised concerns about the erosion of authenticity and philosophical depth inherent in Japan's traditional heritage. The commodification of cultural assets, while economically lucrative, risked diluting the symbolic richness of Japanese culture and undermining its normative credibility. Audit reports highlighted imbalances between the substantial investments allocated to soft power initiatives and the actual financial returns of the Cool Japan Fund, fueling doubts about fiscal sustainability amid rising public debt and demographic aging (Iwabuchi, 2015). Furthermore, cultural influence remained disproportionately concentrated among urban, digitally literate youth, leaving rural communities and diverse social strata underrepresented. This uneven distribution of cultural diplomacy outcomes underscored the need for more inclusive strategies that address the heterogeneity of ASEAN societies.

These challenges collectively underscore the urgent need for Japan to recalibrate its cultural diplomacy strategy toward greater personalization, inclusivity, and multilateral collaboration. Personalization would allow Japan to tailor cultural initiatives to the specific needs and identities of diverse communities, thereby enhancing resonance and sustainability. Inclusivity would ensure that cultural diplomacy reaches beyond urban elites to engage rural populations and marginalized groups, thereby broadening the social base of Japan's soft power. Multilateral collaboration would enable Japan to embed its cultural diplomacy within regional frameworks, thereby reinforcing legitimacy and reducing the perception of unilateral influence.

In sum, while Japan's cultural diplomacy during 2012–2020 achieved remarkable success in consolidating trust, generating economic benefits, and reinforcing normative leadership, it also faced structural limitations and external pressures that demand strategic recalibration. The Japanese experience illustrates both the potential and the pitfalls of cultural diplomacy in contemporary international relations, offering valuable lessons for states seeking to harness soft power as a sustainable instrument of foreign policy in an era of complex interdependence.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has systematically outlined the strategic architecture and objectively assessed the multidimensional impacts of Japan's cultural diplomacy in Southeast Asia during the period 2012–2020. The findings confirm that under the leadership of Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, cultural diplomacy was elevated from a peripheral promotional activity into a core pillar of foreign policy, organically linked to national security imperatives and sustainable economic growth. The operationalization of the doctrine of Proactive Contribution to Peace through cultural values enabled Japan to successfully construct the image of a responsible, empathetic, and trusted power within ASEAN, thereby consolidating its normative leadership in the region.

The most striking highlight of this period was the expansion of cultural industries under the Cool Japan strategy. By shifting from traditional academic promotion to the commercialization of creative assets such as anime, manga, video games, and cuisine, Japan generated multi-layered appeal, particularly among the youth in dynamic Southeast Asian cities. This achievement not only produced economic benefits through digital content exports but also established a sustainable ecosystem of soft power, allowing Japan to maintain competitive advantage against neighboring cultural waves while simultaneously overcoming historical psychological barriers through vibrant cultural experiences. The synergy between cultural industries, education, and people-to-people exchanges illustrates the multidimensional nature of Japan's cultural diplomacy, which simultaneously advances economic resilience, human capital development, and normative influence.

Despite these successes, inherent limitations persisted, including uneven audience segmentation, fiscal sustainability concerns, and fierce competition from other regional cultural powers. South Korea's Hallyu wave, with its centralized marketing and rapid adaptability, and China's Confucius Institutes combined with massive infrastructure diplomacy, posed significant challenges to Japan's leadership aspirations. Internally, risks associated with over-commercialization raised concerns about the erosion of authenticity and philosophical depth inherent in Japan's traditional heritage. Furthermore, cultural influence remained disproportionately concentrated among urban, digitally literate youth, leaving rural communities and diverse social strata underrepresented. These challenges underscore the urgent need for Japan to recalibrate its strategy toward greater personalization, inclusivity, and multilateral collaboration in order to sustain influence in a volatile regional environment.

Yet, the lessons derived from Japan's experience—particularly in national brand management and the harmonization of heritage preservation with creative industry development—offer profound policy implications for developing countries, including Vietnam. From Japan's trajectory, Vietnam can learn to elevate cultural diplomacy into a sharp strategic instrument, packaging national identity through targeted investment in digital content industries, multi-platform communication, and grassroots exchanges. By doing so, Vietnam could strengthen its international image, cultivate trust-based partnerships, and safeguard national interests in the evolving global order.

Ultimately, Japan's cultural diplomacy during 2012–2020 illustrates the enduring power of heart-to-heart connections in fostering peace and regional stability. The transition from unilateral promotion to multilateral cultural collaboration represents an inevitable pathway for Japan to reaffirm its leadership in the digital era. These scientific conclusions contribute not only to the theoretical corpus of International Relations and Japanese Studies but also open new avenues for rethinking national identity, soft power competition, and the role of cultural diplomacy in safeguarding national interests

in the Indo-Pacific. More broadly, Japan's experience demonstrates that cultural diplomacy, when systematically integrated into foreign policy, can function as a strategic instrument of statecraft—capable of bridging historical divides, stimulating economic innovation, and constructing trust-based regional orders in an era of complex interdependence.

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