

French Cultural Strategy and the Japanese Example: How Can France Seduce In the 21st Century?

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French cultural diplomacy used to be among the most powerful, but needed to modernize its strategy in order to maintain an international position. France has a long history of foreign cultural policy and is one of the countries that has placed great importance on disseminating its culture abroad. However, France is being challenged by an emerging international rivalry. A cultural strategy is a crucial component of a State's overall strategies of power. Establishing a cultural strategy in the 21st century goes through a harmony in the projection of culture of elites and pop culture, but also by considering joint action between public and private actors. Yet Japan could be a model, a paradigm, for France and its cultural action abroad. Besides, both countries are empowering their soft power thanks to mutual spheres of influence and shared inspirations. Several French artists have been raised with Japanese culture through works from *japonisme* or *néo-japonisme* movements in accordance with the era, whereas Japanese creators often draw their early inspiration in French productions. In the new century, the real essence of soft power lies in mutual action, and public institutions are becoming only one agent of cultural influence among all the nonstate actors.

Keywords: cultural strategy, diplomacy, soft power, sphere of influence, France, Japan

Introduction

First of all, culture has a huge and specific place in France. Cultural policies are one of the vectors of France's attractiveness. However, this specificity does not only apply to domestic policy and has become a key advantage in a globalized world. In fact, culture supports public action in many fields, including diplomacy. Indeed, France acquires an international voice when it promotes its heritage, values, creativity or institutions. France's approach to cultural influence appears to be original: being a leader that promotes its own culture and a neutral mediator on the international stage at the same time. These two diplomatic positions are called "standing out" and "reaching out" (Nisbett and Doeser, 2017). The best example of the latter may be the eloquent speech of Dominique de Villepin, former French Minister of Foreign Affairs, against the war in

Irak in 2003 at the United Nations. Two principles summarize France's position: cultural exception and cultural diversity. Through the former, France tries to defend the latter, notably by enhancing artistic cooperation, providing hospitality to foreign artists and creations, and fostering mutual understanding between nations.

Nevertheless, in the 21st century, influence in global affairs has partly changed, giving prime importance to “*mainstream culture*” (Martel, 2010) because of the emergence of nonstate actors (Nye, 2011), especially companies from creative industries. This new context forces France to rethink its cultural strategy so as to preserve its ability to seduce other nations, and Japan could be an inspiration for this renewal. Japan has managed to remain a powerful “*soft power*” (Nye, 1990) thanks to a multimodal influence through public but also private vehicles. Thus, this paper will not only be about public diplomacy and French public agents because much has already been written on the topic, and one can find hundreds of theses, books and articles about cultural diplomacy and public policies. Our purpose is to show the possibilities of a combined action between public and private sectors so as to maximize influence and keep culture as a source of economic growth in France.

After describing the pillars of French cultural diplomacy and its issues in a context of increased international competition, we will speak about the evolution - or the lack of evolutions - of French influence, regarding its achievements and weaknesses, then we will study the processes of Japanese influence in France. Finally, we will tackle the matter of spheres of influence and how these spheres are, today, the most important components of any country's strategy to develop a powerful soft power.

The pillars of French cultural diplomacy

First and foremost, how can we define cultural diplomacy? Cultural diplomacy is seen as a subset of diplomacy - in the same way as scientific diplomacy - and facilitates prosperity. A country is more attractive when it showcases culture by offering a positive image, a national brand with strong language, traditions, lifestyle, values, and so on. So cultural diplomacy has to support the sectors that are of strategic importance to France, such as cultural industries. Moreover, culture and its heritage are assets for tourism and Paris remains one of the most visited cities in the world. As Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord (1754-1838), Napoleon's Minister of Foreign Affairs, said to French ambassadors: “*You have to make France loved.*”

To put it simply, the current and main missions of French cultural diplomacy are promoting the country's attractiveness, encouraging the teaching of language, and of course disseminating French culture abroad. The organization of this diplomacy is composed of three key agents: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and embassies, the French institute, which became, seven years ago, the main operator of cultural diplomacy, and the French alliances, independent local institutions created in 1883 and

working in cooperation with other agents. In addition to the main institutions, France still has a very strong basis of influence thanks to its immense cultural network. We can add the International Organization for La Francophonie (IOF), foreign media networks (France Médias Monde, TV5 Monde, Agence France Presse) and all educational networks abroad to complete the picture.

IOF defends the French language and encourages its learning in foreign countries, a task shared by French alliances. It must be underlined that French people are no longer the most numerous speakers of French. The fastest growing communities of French speakers are located in sub-Saharan Africa, to the extent that according to IOF studies, French could be among the most commonly spoken languages in the future. Nowadays, it is spoken by 200 million people and remains an official language in many international institutions (Olympics Committee, United Nations, European Union, UEFA).

Diplomacy of influence

Laurent Fabius, French Minister of Foreign Affairs between 2012 and 2016, developed his own conception of soft power with a concept called “*diplomacy of influence*”. Diplomacy of influence includes politics, economy and culture and carries the following ambition: to promote France abroad in the 21st century through traditional cultural diplomacy (institutions we just discussed), but also through brands, gastronomy, cultural industries or luxury industries (i.e. the private vectors), all of them making up the brand “*France*”. But can we speak of a shift in cultural strategy at this time?

France wishes to be more pro-active in terms of cultural influence, notably because competition in soft power with some countries is fierce, for example with China’s presence in Africa (Thussu, 2016). Yet in some African countries, French influence had been preserved due to history, colonization and cultural imperialism through several authors (Saïd, 1994). But that is no longer true. In other words, to be more pro-active means that a country must strengthen its cultural strategy. For years, this strategy has targeted Asia, Latin America and Africa and it was highly tactical because the new middle classes in these countries are increasingly open to cultural products. New markets are often the best ones. What is more, France has a number of deficiencies to be remedied and tried to develop new tools, for example digital ones, to reach new people and expand French influence online. Digital tools are not effective enough today but this was a beginning.

Although some projects have been successfully launched thanks to this diplomacy of influence, France still has much to do. For example, France has long understood the importance of educating large numbers of foreign students and attracting researchers, but it has not managed to structure its network, so as to make foreign students and researchers the ambassadors of its culture and values when they return

home. To accomplish this mission, France has to reinforce its *alumni* networks. Furthermore, it can also increase the part of cultural and creative industries in France's exportations. Enhancing the share of French content and creations on the global market generates employment in the cultural sector in France.

An old-new diplomacy

The classic scheme of cultural influence is to willfully determine a cultural story or narrative by choosing some cultural references more than others. A cultural story could be defined as a cultural base desired by elites and shared by citizens of the country (Martigny, 2016). In other words, this is a baseline that highlights a selection of artists, writers, thinkers and core values. With a cultural story one can show cultural unity, real or not, in global affairs and international cultural relations. This is a way to facilitate the projection of cultural power abroad, to strengthen soft power. France has defined and crystallized a cultural story through centuries, but today the country appears to have a weaker base than before because of the development of nonstate actors' and of new vectors as cyber power (Nye, 2011). Private sector outreach traditional French elites. Besides, France did not manage to rethink and modernize its own cultural story. French identity remains based on excellence. This is both its greatest strength and its greatest weakness, insofar as excellence is close to elitism, and elitism can be a hard position to hold against a powerful mainstream culture that is cheaper and more approachable.

Rather than a new French revolution, the shift under Laurent Fabius was more of a coming back to the roots of cultural story and diplomacy than a real modernization. France has great difficulties rethinking the content and vectors of its cultural influence. According to Laurent Fabius, promoting France through luxury and gastronomy was a concerted strategy in recent years, even if it looked like following the herd. As a matter of fact, private companies are now more powerful than ever before, notably in the case of the luxury industry. Meanwhile, within the last decade, the French government has cut funding to traditional means of promoting French language and culture abroad. There is an imbalance to resolve. Above all, foreign citizens - for instance in East Asia - recognize France not only through its ancient culture, but also through luxury brands: LVMH and Kering, two big French luxury brands, hold other brands such as Saint Laurent, Dior and Vuitton as well as many Champagnes and spirits. Dior has become as prominent as Victor Hugo.

Even with recent public initiatives, like *gastrono-diplomatie*, the diplomacy of gastronomy, launched by Laurent Fabius, one can see what we can call an “*old-new diplomacy*”. The gastrono-diplomacy is symbolized by operation Good France. Laurent Fabius used Michelin-starred chef Alain Ducasse and his name and worldwide reputation to launch an annual global French food event in 2015. If we take a look at this operation, and despite its relative success, we can see a gap between the reality of

gastronomic influence today and the French position, because in the 21st century, more than ever, we have a focus on individuals. The nationality of chefs is more important than the origin of the dish: individuals are modern day cultural ambassadors and France has to promote them to strengthen its influence. Whether they cook French cuisine or something else is irrelevant. For example, in gastronomy, a star like Ludo Lefèvre in California is almost unknown in France and he is one of the most valued chefs in Los Angeles. For comparison, several of the most recognized chefs in France are from Japan: Ryuji Teshima or Taku Sekine, for example. They use Japanese inspirations without offering Japanese meals. But they project a typically Japanese aura and charisma. Everybody who enjoys their food is more French than Japanese. Nevertheless, eventually, they are assets for French cuisine of course, but also for Japanese soft power. The actual passion for cooking TV shows - chef's table, and so on - underline this fact (Spies, 2010).

To succeed, the cultural network has to work more closely with the main French private actors, notably cultural and creative industries, but also individuals. A government and its public agents cannot act alone, especially in the field of culture. To summarize, cultural influence goes far beyond public institutions and museums and we will analyse it in the second part of this paper. At first look, French cultural diplomacy remains powerful today but very classic in its approach even if there was a so-called shift in 2012.

Towards a round and oblique cultural influence

Conventional soft power tools and vectors are changing and the effectiveness of conducted cultural diplomacy should be more encouraging to private initiatives as a creative addition to official strategies. In post-modern societies, governments and embassies are only one of many actors of the cultural strategy. The roles of new actors, individuals and companies, are increasing year after year. The best way to follow seems to be an alliance between public and private vectors, institutions with companies and individuals. However, how can France modernize the content of its cultural strategy?

Pop culture as a bridge

In the near future, France has to accept the growing commercialization of culture as an inevitable fact instead of ignoring the phenomenon and thinking that only high culture should be deployed. It has to consider mainstream culture and not only the culture of the elites, whose rules and codes remain difficult to access and understand, contrary to more popular culture. All these elements could be combined together to maximize influence in the 21st century.

Thus France can improve its position by developing its pop culture. Pop culture can be seen as a subculture inside popular culture. In a way, pop culture is the contemporary version of popular culture, a subculture at the crossroads of English-speaking Culture, notably American, and Modern Japanese Culture, and enhanced with

creatives industries and new technologies. Some people, such as the French critic Rafik Djoumi, also call this subculture “geek” or “nerd culture.” It refers to modern TV shows (HBO, Netflix), comics / manga / manhwa, animation art, video games and so on.

Pop culture or geek culture could be a bridge between low and high culture, a hybrid culture more valued than popular culture and easier to access and understand than high culture. Moreover, it provides the opportunity to reinforce the culture of elites and its reception in a country, like a springboard for high culture. And the best example of this specific cultural strategy based on pop culture as a bridge can be the case of Japanese influence in France from the 19th to the 21st century.

Japanese cultures in France

The relationship between France and Japan is marked by a long history of cultural exchanges. However, if the influence of French culture in Japan remains very classic in its content and vectors, influence of Japanese culture in France could be split in two moments with different content and vectors: *japonisme* and *néo-japonisme*.

The French term japonisme refers to the late 19th century when European (Chiba, 1998) and notably French citizens fell in love with Japanese high culture: silk, porcelain, woodblock prints, haiku, and many other cultural products. We can see the influence of japonisme on artists especially among painters. Japanese imagery (temples, cherry blossoms, lanterns, travel scenes, particular landscapes) and style (flat colors, composition, calligraphy) were a source of inspiration. This influence was obvious on the works of Vincent Van Gogh and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. For example the *Flowering Plum Tree (1887)* from Vincent Van Gogh is inspired by Utagawa Hiroshige's painting *The Plum Garden in Kameido (1857)*; Utagawa Hiroshige embodied this Japanese soft power of japonisme through ukiyo-e, an artistic movement. This first Japanese wave had a remarkable impact on the development of French visual culture, an impact that would help the introduction of anime and manga in France a century later.

The second wave of Japanese influence in France, in the second half of the last century, is called néo-japonisme (Rafoni, 2010). The new wave is going through productions as anime first, then manga and videogames: in other words, several elements from pop culture, and not from the culture of the elites anymore. Animation art was the first pillar of néo-japonisme because Japan began producing animation early in the 20th century, and they were cheaper to produce than Western animation. Two highly influential anime marked the beginning of this wave in France, both released in 1978: *Goldorak (UFO Robot Grendizer* in Japanese) and *Candy*. Both were broadcast on the French public channel, Antenne 2 in a children's program called *Récré A2*. *Goldorak* was so popular that it landed on the cover of the French news magazine Paris Match under the heading *La Folie Goldorak* on January 5, 1979 and the generation who grew up in the late 1970s and early 1980s is sometimes called the “*Goldorak*

generation". These two TV shows' have paved the way for the others, notably those produced by Toei Animation (*Dragon Ball*, *Sailor Moon*, *First of the North Star*, and so on...).

Besides these two anime, a third production became very influential in France ten years later: *Akira* from Katsuhiro Otomo in 1989. This masterpiece was a bit different than *Goldorak* and *Candy* because it was the first great bridge between popular culture and the culture of the elites. The work structured the aesthetic movement of cyberpunk and its legacy is impressive. Many works were inspired, directly or not, by *Akira*, such as *Ghost in the Shell* in the 1980s or *Cowboy Bebop* in the 1990s. Even today, *Akira* remains an inspiration for filmmakers. For example, in *Ready Player One* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 2018), an adaptation of *Player One* written by Ernest Cline in 2011, Spielberg introduced the character of Art3mis riding a red bike, inspired by Kaneda's bike in *Akira*. This motorbike became an icon in comic book history. Through all these productions, young French people grew up with Japanese animation and their affiliated toys. But although it was very popular among youth, some politicians rejected it, like Ségolène Royal, former French minister, calling it "Japoniaiserie" (a portmanteau word combining the words for Japanese -- *japonais* -- and silly -- *niaiserie*) and criticizing the violence and sexuality in these works. Nevertheless, despite these voices, the anime fan base continues to grow in France, and movies created by Studio Ghibli gave a new legitimacy to Japanese animation. Thanks to the success of animation art, it was easy for manga and videogames, notably J-RPG, to find a public. Some events, as the Japan Expo created in 2000, show the incredible achievement of Japanese soft power through néo-japonisme, with hundreds of thousands of French visitors every year¹.

Japan is fully aware of its pop culture's influence and can take advantage of it. Furthermore, it is not a negation of high culture at all. Japan proves a country can promote both cultures at the same time. Japan and France have made several events together. Among these events, Japonisme 2018, an extensive cultural season, defends the beauty of traditional Japanese culture in Paris and other cities in France. During this season, Anne Hidalgo, the mayor of Paris, inaugurated a giant Furoshiki just in front of the Paris City Hall in fall 2018. The Furoshiki, a type of traditional Japanese wrapping cloth, was a pavilion that welcomed original creations from Japanese creators.

To summarize, Japanese influence was constructed, willingly or not, over a very efficient scheme: propagation of high culture, pop culture then high culture again. In a nutshell, a powerful cultural strategy is based on combination but also alternation. But one question remains: could we share the same vectors of influence? More precisely, could France enjoy Japanese vectors? The answer is yes. In a way, France does not have to create its own. Besides, cultural initiatives are more efficient when they come from

¹ Almost 240 000 visitors in 2018.

foreigners: influence and soft power have to be oblique, not direct. We also see that influence takes some time to be effective and often begins with an access to high culture from pop culture. To complete this approach, we will study in the last part of this paper, the interests of spheres of influence nowadays to maximize soft power.

Mastering the spheres of influence: the future of soft power

A sphere of influence could be defined as a round influence shared by several countries and concerning one main work of high culture that inspired several works of pop culture. The particularity of a sphere of influence is to enhance the soft power of many countries. Every link of this chain can enjoy the final effect, not only economically with copyrights but also in terms of influence. The spheres are an unofficial and oblique cultural diplomacy. The sphere can be simple or complex, depending on the links of the chain: number of works, countries and so on. Today, undoubtedly, East Asia and the USA are the best parts of the world to develop a sphere of influence thanks to South Korea and Japan, two powerful countries in terms of soft power. France makes the most of East Asian spheres of influence. We will have a look at a complex sphere of influence between France and Japan: the origins of Studio Ghibli.

Studio Ghibli's path

To show a complex sphere of influence, we will analyze the production of one of the world's most famous production companies outside of Hollywood: The Studio Ghibli. Founded in June 1985 in Tokyo, Studio Ghibli was founded by Hayao Miyazaki, Isao Takahata and Toshio Suzuki. Although *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* is widely considered to be Studio Ghibli's first production, it was actually released a year prior to the formation of Studio Ghibli. Their first production inside the studio, is *Laputa: Castle in the Sky*, which was released in 1986.

This studio has had an enormous impact on the French market, it has prepared French people for a style of animation art without violence or sex, and it has explained the recent success of movies like *Your Name (Kimi no na wa)* or *A Silent Voice (Koei no Katachi)*. In the films, there are many references to Japanese traditional culture. It is therefore a perfect vector to learn Japanese culture. If Japonisme 2018 is for now a success, this is notably because of Studio Ghibli and their films. Furthermore, Studio Ghibli embodies the cultural relationship between France and Japan. The films are directly linked to French works. The studio has never hidden its main inspiration, the French movie *The King and The Mockingbird*.

A French asset: The King and The Mockingbird

The King and the Mockingbird has been cited by both Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata as a profound influence on their work and early films, for example *The Castle*

of *Cagliostro* and the *Castle in the sky*. *The King and the Mockingbird* is the result of a collaboration between Paul Grimault, a French director, and Jacques Prévert, French poet and scriptwriter. The movie shows a tyrannical King ruling over the kingdom of Takicardia, who is in love with a shepherdess in a painting on his wall. The film was beautifully animated and filled with many cultural references (European architectures, principally Parisian and Venetian, surrealist artists such as di Chirico and Magritte,...). The result is a perfect mix between narrative and imagery. And this perfection explains its influence on Studio Ghibli. Isao Takahata said about *The King and the Mockingbird*:

If I had not seen this film, I would have never imagined entering the world of animation. I was obsessed not only because its expressions were superb but also because I realised that these unexpected ideas and images were not just fantasies or jokes but instead were concealing the difficult and harsh reality of modern history. This was not just an old revolutionary fantasy that illustrates liberation from dictatorship and oppression. It is the seemingly contradictory and nonsensical details that hide the tragic truth of the 20th century's 'history' and 'people'. The creator tells the next generation to be aware of this and be careful of the 'trap' of this world².

In other words, this film was not just an aesthetic inspiration but also an ideological one. The French work deals with isolated and selfish people in the modern world like the king, but also a city destroyed by a giant robot. Both elements show the danger of the “*verticality of governance structure*”³ but also the collapse of an environment and the question of ecology, very important for Japanese and French people. On this topic, Isao Takahata said “*I see the burnt field that I escaped through after an American air raid during the war and the tragedy of 9/11 and ask what it means.*”⁴

However, *The King and the Mockingbird* is itself a remake of an old fairy tale, not a French fairy tale but a Danish one: *The Shepherdess and Chimney Sweep* written by Hans Christian Andersen in 1845. Of course, over a long period, the sphere of influence will continue to move on and vectors will change. For example, John Lasseter, the Director of Pixar Studio, paid tribute to Miyazaki and his “*unbelievable hand-drawn animation*”⁵. *Spirited away* of Studio Ghibli has inspired *Inside Out* of Pixar. Here again influence remains as aesthetic as ideological, both are two epic coming-of-age narratives with the imagery of a strong young female character who grows up through dangers and hardships.

² “Isao Takahata on the film that inspired Studio Ghibli”, *bfi-org.uk*, 6 april 2018.

³ *Ibid.*,

⁴ *Ibid.*,

⁵ “John Lasseter (III) ”, *theguardian.com*, 19 november 2001.

Conclusion

To conclude, the first question to ask in matter of soft power is quite simple: How can a country improve its influence using contents and vectors of its time? The ultimate goal of cultural diplomacy is to create a positive environment in foreign countries so as to receive and understand the sent culture. Cultural action abroad must be seen as an investment for the future of the power and not only as a spending, with benefits to be expected after only one or two years; rankings, as *TheSoftPower30*, focus on international political communication more than real cultural influence. Only time will tell if the cultural actions undertaken were efficient. A country can create a positive environment not only with public institutions but also thanks to individuals and private actors. More than ever public and private have to work together in the 21st century in order to strengthen soft power.

High and low culture, whatever their precise outlines are, have to be valued by cultural policies and diplomacy because both are linked into a sphere of influence. Of course, the original work could make room for an other in this kind of sphere. No one recalls the fairytale of Andersen and maybe no one will remember *The King and The Mockingbird*. After a while, the original inspiration is forgotten but its message and aesthetic remain in the new works. So the influence is not completely lost but diluted. When it happens, or in order to prevent it from happening, cultural diplomacy with public institutions, making exhibitions or giving lectures, have an important role to play. Cultural diplomacy is, on the one hand, a vector of influence by teaching language and spreading values, but also the memory of great works (pop / high culture) that inspired foreign artists and writers. So exhibitions, celebrations and lectures have to be chosen skillfully depending on the country. Speaking about Japan, France could organize its cultural influence around writers such as Victor Hugo, Maurice Leblanc or Jacques Prévert and make it accessible to young people. Bertrand Fort, former Director of the French Institute of Japan, confirmed this analysis when he said in 2014: “*We put priority on the young generation and their preferences. That’s why we work notably in fields that appeal to them, like the gaming industry, digital arts, music, cinema, and also French manga.*”⁶

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⁶ Haraoka, Naoyuki, Johansson, Elena K., “The Realms of Power in Cultural Diplomacy from France’s perspective”, *Japan SPOTLIGHT*, march / april 2014.

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