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The Global Image of Japan

Japan is one of the top economic powers in the world; though its culture does not dominate as Western culture does, it is fairly well known and even popular among some circles. The Japanese government and corporations also put great effort into promoting a “Cool” and enticing image of Japan to draw in tourists and sell Japanese products in order to boost the economy. This paper is an examination of the global image of Japan. I wanted to see what imagery both Japanese people and foreigners actually have of Japan. I also wanted to compare how Japan markets itself to how ordinary Japanese people want others to view Japan. First, the general topic of globalization as we discussed in class will be connected with the main topic of this essay. Then the methods and framework of my specific research will be explained, followed by a more in depth introduction to the topic “global images of Japan” and examination and analysis of my research findings. Finally, a conclusion will summarize and wrap up the themes present in this paper.

The Merriam-webster dictionary defines globalization as, “the development of an increasingly integrated global economy marked especially by free trade, free flow of capital, and the tapping of cheaper foreign labor markets.” As the third largest economy in the world, Japan is a major global contender. Globalization is currently a main focus of the government in order to keep their economy competitive in the world. Many companies, including Sanrio and Toyota, have successfully spread their product throughout the world and become part of mainstream culture in many places. However, these companies may not actually be associated with Japan. For example, as we discussed in class, Sanrio has purposefully cultivated an ambiguous and neutral image so their main products can more easily connect with anybody. Furthermore, although globalization may be good for the Japanese economy,

it may not be good for traditional and local culture. For example, Coca-cola is present throughout the world and has successfully cultivated an image of summer and freedom and a romanticised version of American culture. Nearly everybody recognizes Coke, even if they don't like to drink it. However, Coca-cola's widespread popularity can drive out locally produced colas and push a westernized image as "cool" on people. But we can see at the local level, places such as Kurashiki in Okayama Prefecture use the imagery of traditional Japanese culture to draw in tourists and money; in this way preserving more traditional buildings and shop fronts.

I use a qualitative framework to examine the image of Japan through the eyes of Japanese Okayama students and international Okayama students in the context of globalization. My primary method of research and the basis for this essay are two questionnaires, one administered to fourteen international students and one administered to thirteen Japanese students. The international students were generally aged twenty to twenty-three with on thirty-three year old. The nationalities of the international students were British, American, Chinese, Canadian, Korean and Australian. The age range of the Japanese students is eighteen to twenty-three. Below are the questions from each questionnaire I focus on.

Questionnaire for International Students:

- What do you associate with Japanese culture/society? (First things that comes to mind.)
- What did you associate with Japanese culture/society before coming to Japan?
- Do you think of Hello Kitty as Japanese? Why and how?

Questionnaire for Japanese Students:

- What do you associate most with Japanese culture/society? (First things that comes to mind.)
- Do you think of Hello Kitty as Japanese? Why and how?
- How do you want Japan to be represented to the world?
- What do you think of Weeaboos, people who are obsessed with Japanese pop culture? (They think of Japan like it is in anime and manga.)

The Japanese government and corporations put a lot of effort into making an enticing global image of Japan to create consumers of Japanese products and to draw in tourists to Japan. People around the world are exposed to Japanese products and media and form their own images of Japan that may or may not match up with the actual reality of the country. The goal of my research was to find what images foreigners associated with Japan at the forefront of their minds, and if this imagery had changed after studying and living in Japan. Also, this research delves into what imagery of Japan Japanese people have as well. Furthermore, I wanted to know if the image of Japan ordinary Japanese people wanted to convey differed from the image of Japan promoted by the government and corporations.

When I originally considered what the imagery people might hold of Japan would be, I thought it might be things like kawaii, omotenashi, festivals, anime, manga, and perhaps shrines and temples. I wasn't completely wrong, though I found that there is a large amount of variance in the images people hold of Japan. When asked what their current image of Japan is, traditional culture, politeness, and foods including sweets, sushi, and ramen were the most popular answers. The second most popular answers were tea and tea ceremony, the contrast between old and new, and anime. Other answers included kawaii, omotenashi, closet racism, sexism and homophobia, dangerous cyclists, youth culture, Tokyo, Kimono, group culture, and samurai. Some of these answers, such as "dangerous cyclists" clearly come from specific personal experience in Japan. The most commonly held image of Japan students had before coming to study in Japan was, hands down, anime. Manga was the second most common image with traditional culture as the third most common answer. Other answers included fashion, Harajuku girls, tech, dramas, sexism and racism, food including fish dishes, ramen, and sushi, kimono, geisha, cherry blossoms, weird, Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift, salarymen, Japanese language, Kyoto, Sailor Moon-like high school uniforms, and elegance. The most glaring change of image after coming to Japan was that anime and manga no longer were as huge a part of people's' perceptions. When asked what

their of Japan is, the most popular answers from Japanese students were food, global change, quietness, anime, temples and shrines, and kimono. Other answers included omotenashi, politeness, variety, Japanese language, Kyoto, summer, humidity, economic power, and the prime minister. As you can see, there are some similarities between the answers of Japanese and international students. I believe this is likely due to the widespread imagery of Japan within Japan and around the world. Within Japan and other countries anime is very popular and Japan promotes itself as a tourist destination using imagery of its traditional culture.

The answers Japanese students gave regarding what they desired Japan's global image to be differed a little from the images Japanese and international students held, though there was overlap. The most popular desired images were safe, beautiful and interesting, nature, gardens, and seasons, and a rich history and culture (not just anime-land!). Other answers included kind, Tokyo, Fujisan, fun, peaceful, good food, politeness, omotenashi, anime, manga, kimono, samurai, and high tech and cool. It seems Japanese people generally want people to have a view of Japan that is beautiful and enticing to visit. However, many Japanese students wrote multiple images they wanted others to have of Japan; it's clear that many students want others to experience a lot of different things Japan has to offer at a deeper level and not just hold a single shallow image of Japan. For example, though some students wanted anime to represent Japan, others were adamant that Japan was not just an anime-land and that not all Japanese people liked anime.

The view of Japan as a sort of mythical anime-land is actually a subculture in other countries; members of the subculture are called Weeaboos. Many Japanese people do not know what a weeaboo is, but they are basically obsessed with Japanese culture and generally form an idealized image of Japan based on anime and manga and other pop culture elements. I asked the Japanese students how they felt about such people and their

images of Japan and received a mixed bag of responses. Six Japanese students felt that it was good for people to have any interest in Japan. Three students felt it was bad and weird that people could be so obsessed with Japan. Four students didn't feel it was bad, but preferred people to have a deeper understanding of Japanese culture beyond anime and manga. One student wrote "I want them to appeal good culture of Japan! Ex. To wear "kimono" beautifully. To pronounce some Japanese words well." Another wrote that they appreciated the interest in Japan, but felt sad that some people they'd met in Australia only wanted to talk about anime and be friends with them because they are Japanese.

Regardless of what ordinary Japanese people feel, the Japanese government uses a lot of cute and anime imagery to market Japan to the world. For example, Japan has capitalized on the popularity of Hello Kitty, and she is now the tourism ambassador for Japan to China and Hong Kong. This is an interesting choice of imagery because, as we spoke of in class, Hello Kitty does not necessarily go hand in hand with Japan. When I asked Japanese and international students if they thought of Hello Kitty as Japanese six Japanese and international students said "no" and seven said "yes" in each group. This shows that Hello Kitty is not a decisive image of Japan. The United States has also used Kitty as an ambassador for UNICEF. In light of this, it's clear Japan is capitalizing on the global popularity Hello Kitty already has and use familiar and cute imagery to draw people to Japan. However, Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched an "Anime Ambassador" program in 2008 using Doraemon to promote anime, manga, and Japan across the world. Doraemon is a uniquely Japanese character, and beat out Hello Kitty to be the Olympic bid Ambassador. It's clear that Japan has recognized and embraced the popularity of Japanese anime as a promotional tool. The Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry also implements a program called the "Cool Japan Initiative" in order to promote a "cool" and desirable image of Japan. The goal of this initiative is to commercialize "Japanese culture, lifestyle and clothing, food and housing, and contents (anime, drama, and music)" in order to draw in

overseas demand and achieve Japanese economic growth. Omotenashi is currently another buzzword in the promotion of Japanese culture to tourists. Popularized in August 2013 by Christel Takigawa during her final successful speech as the Tokyo Olympics bid ambassador, it is translated to mean hospitality but has the deeper connotation “to entertain guests wholeheartedly” and implies a uniqueness present in Japanese hospitality. Japanese corporations are now using it to promote their services as a unique omotenashi experience for foreigners.

It's clear that some of these marketing tools line up with the desired image of Japan by Japanese students. Omotenashi, for example, is a very positive image of Japan. However, often these promotions of anime, omotenashi, and other “cool” aspects of Japan don't paint a complete and deep picture of Japan. People like Weeaboos latch on to Japan being a specific way due to the media and marketing they've been exposed to, and this can create unrealistic expectations of Japanese people. Fortunately for Japanese people, the image people hold of Japan is generally positive; there was only one international student who held a more negative view of Japan. In fact, it's apparent that by coming to Japan and living there, people's perceptions broaden and become more realistic and similar to the images Japanese people themselves hold.

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