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Girls in Sailor Suits: Constructing Soft Power in Japanese Cultural Diplomacy

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Introduction: Popular Culture for Japanese Foreign Policy

Japan, having been a former colonial empire which occupied many regions of the Pacific, has often been accused of indifference to repatriation, justice, and vindication. Japanese popular culture, on the other hand, has ameliorated its wartime stereotype. Manga, anime, graphic novels, music, and related cultural products such as figures and characters from Japan are popular in Asia and Europe, as well as the Americas. Hong Kong, for example, has been quite receptive of Japanese popular culture. Sociologist Annie Hua-nung Chan connected the construction of cultural identity among Hong Kong residents with their consumption of Japanese pop culture.[1] Japanese department stores and character products like Hello Kitty and Little Twin Star have been widespread in Hong Kong (Figure 1). Cartoon programming such as Doraemon and Pokémon were well-received in television.[2] Manga booms led many countries to import ladies' comics with sexually explicit content.[3]

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[1] Annie Hau-nung Chan, "Consumption, Popular Culture, and Cultural Identity: Japan in Post-Colonial Hong Kong," *Studies in Popular Culture* 23, no. 1 (2000): 35-55. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23414566.

[2] In the 1980s, Hong Kong imported 1,357 hours of U.S. television shows; 768 hours of Italian shows; and 391 hours from Japan. Chan, "Consumption," 45.

[3] Gretchen Jones, "'Ladies' Comics': Japan's Not-So-Underground Market in Pornography for Women," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal. English Supplement*, no. 22 (2002): 3-31. http://www.jstor.

Japan has used cultural diplomacy to burnish its political image since the 1930s. Historian John Gripentrog showed how Japan wanted to reinvent itself after the occupation of Manchuria and the establishment of Manchukuo in the 1930s. Japan set up a state-sponsored initiative called the Society for International Cultural Relations (Kokusai Bunko Shinkōkai, KBS) in 1934 with dignitaries from the Japanese aristocracy and government as advisors and officers.[4] In 1936, KBS organized a special exhibition with rare works loaned by private collectors, the imperial family, and national museums in Japan at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boson and later at other museums in the United States. It is common for Japan to showcase high-level art and culture to enhance its value and prestige, and this type of cultural diplomacy is familiar to the West. What is notable in the postwar period is that the Japanese government and private sectors alike included popular culture in this concerted push for soft power.

Girl characters wearing school uniforms, such as in the anime series *Sailor Moon* (*Bishōjo Senshi Sērā Mūn* 美少女戦士セーラームーン, Beautiful Girl-Warrior Sailor Moon, shown in Japan from 1991 to 1997), have many fans beyond Japan. Horror film series like *Haunted School* (*Gakkō no Kaidan* 学校の 怪談, 1995), made viewers familiar with students dressed in uniforms. Girls in school uniforms are reproduced in images in magazines, manga, anime, and contemporary art. For example, contemporary artist Mariko Mori's *Love Hotel* (1994) shows a woman in her sailor uniform kneeling on a round bed in a love hotel (Figure 3).[5] Sociologist Susan Napier included girls in sailor uniforms among four major types of girlhood in Japanese popular culture.[6] Sociologist Anne Allison also pointed out the global impact of these "Sailor Scouts" on global communities.[7]

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org/stable/42772180.

4   John Gripentrog, "Power and Culture: Japan's Cultural Diplomacy in the United States, 1934-1940." *Pacific Historical Review* 84, no. 4 (2015): 478-80. https://doi.org/10.1525/phr.2015.84.4.478.

5   Jonathan Wallis, "The Paradox of Mariko Mori's Women in Post-Bubble Japan: Office Ladies, Schoolgirls, and Video-Vixens," *Woman's Art Journal* 29, no. 1 (2008): 3-12. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20358141.

6   Susan Napier, "Vampires, Psychic Girls, Flying Women, and Sailor Scouts: Four Faces of the Young Female in Japanese Popular Culture," in Yamaguchi Masao, Nagashima Nobuhiro, Isolde Standish, Halldor Stafansson, and Dolores Martinez, eds., *Worlds of Japanese Popular Culture: Gender, Shifting Boundaries and Global Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 91-3.

7   Anne Allison, "Can Popular Culture Go Global: How Japanese Scouts and Rangers Fare in the US," Douglas Slaymaker, ed., *A Century of Popular Culture in Japan* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2000), 138-45;

Soft power in the form of popular culture, however, may not carry much weight in political issues of nuclear disarmament and military authority. Japanese foreign policy, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, focuses on efforts toward peace, disarmament and world economic development. The emphasis on being a "member of the West" in East-West relations is well maintained in the context of the influence of popular culture on broad regions beyond Asia-Pacific geopolitics. From the 2000s, the Japanese government has embraced this effort as it has realized the advantages of cultivating Japan as a diplomatic partner that embraces peace and culture, and girls in sailor suits became an accessible icon of cultural diplomacy, emulating the image of 'the girl next door' among fans of Japanese popular culture in the West since the 1990s. While their American counterparts wear casual jeans and shirts, these girls wear school uniforms —a symbol of conformity and group identity. Although Japan did not plan a geo-strategic vision of Japanese school girls representing its popular culture as a foreign policy, it succeeded in creating an image of accessible, disciplined partners of international cooperation.

This paper examines the development of girls in sailor suits from the 1920s school uniforms to the 1990s iconic subculture in Harajuku known as *kogal* fashion. It evaluates the dissemination of girls in sailor suits outside Japan, which coincided with other forms of popular culture such as J-pop, films, or literature. How Japan exerted soft power on its diplomatic partners is analyzed as a policy-driven mechanism. In the historiography of previous literature about girls in sailor suits, anthropologist Laura Miller is most important in discussing dissemination of juvenile subculture in the domain of popular culture.[8] Tomoko Namba is a dress historian specializing school uniforms and wrote extensively on the development of sailor suits to become a most representative design for school girls in Japan.[9] Fashion historian

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See also E. Taylor Atkins, *History of Popular Culture in Japan: From the Seventeenth Century to the Present* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022).

8   Miller, author of *Beauty Up: Exploring Contemporary Japanese Body Aesthetics* (Berkeley and Los Angelies: University of California Press, 2006) wrote extensively on Japanese popular culture and gender. Her cultural depictions of women based on linguistic anthropology are crucial for scholars of Japanese studies in general. More works are cited later in this paper.

9   Namba wrote several monographs (only available in Japanese) on school uniforms of Japanese girls based on the archive of Tokyo Women's Normal School, Japan's first institute of higher education for women founded in 1875. It was the predecessor of Ochanomizu University where Namba currently teaches. It was renamed and established in 1949 as a women's university in Tokyo, Bunyō-ku. Namba's paper on this topic

Brian McVeigh on the other hand has interpreted Japanese school uniforms as an iconic symbol of conformity and group identity.[10] Educational or behavioral scholars have also connected implementation of discipline and national identity to the school uniform policy in the early twentieth century. These views are briefly introduced when pertinent to the historical changes of sailor suits and contribute much to the shared assumption of utilitarian purpose of the mandatory school uniform policy behind popular images of girls in sailor suits. This paper is not about a chronological survey of different fashion styles themselves with regards to girls in sailor suits.

The paper, instead, presents a geo-strategic vision for Japan to make the image of girls in sailor suits icons of contemporary art as well as representative symbols of popular culture, which would leave lasting impression of Japanese cultural authenticity beyond the realm of popular culture. This may bring a provocative, cutting-edge paradigm of new culture replacing the Cold War binary relationship between Japan and the United States. Political scientist Alexander Bukh argues that Japan's own definition of national identity emphasizes its cultural diplomacy.[11] As Bukh stressed, with the post-war national identity of Japan as culturally unique (the phenomenon of *Nihonjinron*, or theories of Japaneseness) and the bridge between East and West, as in Katō Shū'ichi's "hybrid culture," Japanese cultural diplomacy tries to exude cultural autonomy. School girls in sailor suits, represented in literature, manga, anime, or dramas, successfully fulfill their mission to look unique yet universal and accessible.

Girls in Sailor Suits:
From School Uniforms to the Kogal Fashion Subculture

Schoolgirls in sailor suits are an iconic image of Japan in public mind. The sailor suit originated in the early twentieth century. Schoolgirls in the late

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(in English) is cited later in this paper.

10 Brian J. McVeigh, *Wearing ideology: State, schooling and self-presentation in Japan* (New York: Berg, 2000).

11 Alexander Bukh, "Revisiting Japan's Cultural Diplomacy: A Critique of the Agent-Level Approach to Japan's Soft Power," *Asian Perspective* 38, no. 3 (2014): 461-85. This is an important essay to replace agency-centered cultural diplomacy with the international ideational structure shaping a country's cultural diplomacy. Bukh argues that Japan's pre-1945 national identity and its post-1945 identity after Cold War hegemony are different in perceiving its status within Asia's racial dynamics.

1880s adopted the *hakama*, or trouser-skirt, worn by samurai and ladies-in-waiting in the Edo period (1603-1868). The garment was suitable for physical education and other active lessons.[12] By the 1920s, *hakama* made of brown *meisen* (inferior silk, not suitable for export) were a popular style of girls' school uniforms. Along with *meisen*, imported wool muslin was also used for uniforms.[13] From the 1920s, girls at prominent schools wore sailor suits modeled on nineteenth-century Edwardian British boys' clothing.[14] As modern styles become more established among adults in Japan, female students were given sailor suits (セーラー服 *sēra fuku*) comprising a jacket and skirt.[15] This style has remained popular to the present day. The black jacket with white stripes and matching black pleated skirt emphasizes a coherent group identity as proper students respecting school rules. A "royal navy" sailor suit became standard for girls, while young boys and adolescent male students adopted a high-collar military style uniform in black. There are some variations in color, but most sailor suit school uniforms are black or navy. In the 1950s, sailor suits were rather big and loose on the body as families anticipated the children's growth over time in one outfit. Usually, the pleated skirt reached below the knees. White socks were worn to the ankle or calf. Students did not have many accessories as seen in youth magazines in later periods.

In the 1970s, girls in school uniforms became part of the general public's fascination with cuteness or '*kawaii*' culture. The iconic character of cuteness for Japan is Sanrio's Hello Kitty. (Figure 1)

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12 Sheila Cliffe, "Mode Becomes Modern: Meiji to Twenty-First Century," *The Social Life of Kimono: Japanese Fashion Past and Present* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 39-68.

13 Cliffe, "Mode Becomes Modern," Fig 3.11: "*meisen* kimono were literally as ubiquitous as jeans became in western fashion."

14 Kyunghee Pyun, "Transformation of Monastic Habits: Student Uniforms for Christian Schools in East Asia," *Journal of Religion and the Arts* 24:4 [Special Issue: Faith/Fashion/Forward: Dress and the Sacred] (2020): 604-640.

15 For development of girls' school uniforms in Japan before the 1920s, see Tomoko Namba, "School Uniform Reforms in Modern Japan," *Fashion, Identity, and Power in Modern Asia*, ed. Kyunghee Pyun and Aida Yuen Wong (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 91-114 and Rebecca Copeland, "Fashioning the Feminine: Images of the Modern Girl Student in Meiji Japan," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal*, no. 30/31 (2006): 13-35.

Figure 1: Hello Kitty in Sailor Suit. Cultural Product of Sanrio. Photo: Public Domain.

Marketing experts explain that cute visuals appeal to consumers because they call to mind the infantility and vulnerability of the young.[16] Hello Kitty, for example, invites feelings of tenderness and protectiveness, in a similar way to pet owners who are rewarded with positive emotions as concerned caregivers when consuming pet products. Hello Kitty earns Sanrio $5 billion per year. Other kawaii characters developed in Japan include *Doraemon* (1969), *Princess Minky Momo* (1982), *Sailor Moon* (1991), and *Pokemon* (1997). Uniform-dressed girls, as part of kawaii culture, inspire feelings of protection

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16 Tingting Wang, Anirban Mukhopadhyay, and Vanessa M. Patrick, "Getting Consumers to Recycle 'NOW'! When and Why Cuteness Appeals Influence Prosocial and Sustainable Behavior," *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* 36, no. 2 (2017): 269-83. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44878341.

or kindness among viewers. Psychologists agree that cuteness provides two kinds of emotional impacts: *Kindchenschema* and whimsicality. While whimsicality provides excitement and playfulness, *Kindchenschema* generates a sense of caregiving and protection.[17] School girls in sailor suits generally fall into two types: cute, innocent and naive, or cute warriors and scouts with magical powers. Adolescent femininity in school uniforms evokes a sense of *Kindchenschema* —a similar sensation to looking at the infantile face of Hello Kitty or Doraemon.

In the 1970s, with the rise of *shōjo* fiction for young girls (in the United States, the similar genre is called "chick lit" from the late 1990s written by women authors for women readers, addressing issues of modern womanhood), visualization of school girls became more prominent. In the genre of high-teen romance literature, girls interacted for friendship, validity, academic success, or love. In this genre of *shōjo* fiction, which eventually spread to foreign audiences via graphic novels, girl students still embodied conformity and adolescent femininity. The dramatization of certain characteristics of schoolgirls, however, became apparent in the 1980s in adult magazines and the video industry.[18] Adolescent femininity was aggrandized into overt femininity and hypersexuality as Japanese economic influence was at its apex.

In the 1990s, street fashion in Tokyo's Harajuku district and other subculture groups in Osaka presented a new type of schoolgirl. Young women called *kogals* (*kogyaru*) expressed their heterogeneous identity which deviated from adolescent femininity and conformity. Women between fourteen and twenty-two embodied a new style of fashion, language, and behavior. Magazines like *Egg* became a venue for *kogals* to express their candid opinions against the conservative views of the mainstream media, which portrayed them as misbehaving youngsters. *Kogals* thus represented Japanese schoolgirls distinguished by distinctive fashion and culture for international audiences through fashion magazines. The term *kogal* derives from "high school student" (*kōkōsei*) and "gal" or "girl" (*gyaru*), and indicated young women who wore cutting-edge fashion and congregated in centers of

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17 Wang et al., "Getting Consumers," 271.
18 Hiroko Tabuchi, "In Tokyo, a Crackdown on Sexual Images of Minors," The New York Times, February 9, 2011. https://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/10/business/global/10manga.html [accessed on February 15, 2022].

youth culture such as Shibuya and Harajuku. The phenomenon peaked in the 1990s and quickly found influential models among popular idols, such as singer Namie Amuro. *Kogals* followed her style, which resembles surf fashion and Los Angeles fashion from the 1970s. Those who admired and tried to look like Namie Amuro called themselves "Amurā" (Amurers).

Linguistic anthropologist Laura Miller emphasizes the diversity of language used by kogals.[19] In the early 1990s, high school girls flocked to music clubs or discos admitting minors. Among these crowds, the fashionable style of loose socks and short school-uniform skirts coined the visual identity of kogals. Their style embraced hybridity, showing affinity with African American hip hop culture and British punk culture of the 1970s, as studied by sociologist Dick Hebdige in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979). These "cool" Japanese girls in school uniforms, highly stylized with individual accessories like socks or backpacks, drew attention from the global youth who had been exposed to Japanese popular culture via graphic novels, music videos, cartoons, animations, or films. Miller notes that not all subculture groups pursue kawaii aesthetics, which are vehemently criticized by mainstream media in Japan.[20] Audacious expressions like tattoos and tanned skin could be seen as rebellious in the Japanese tradition of conformity and disciplined bodies.

Popular manga writer Kazuo Koike (1936-2019) was influential on American fans of Japanese graphic novels. His *Lady Snowblood* (1972-1973) became a movie in 1973. A sequel, *Lady Snowblood: Love Song of Vengeance*, was released in 1974. The manga was translated into English in 2005-2006. It is known that American directors like Sam Mandes and Quentin Tarantino are fans: Tarantino not only revealed his fascination with *Lady Snowblood* as a basis for his *Kill Bill* series, but also made Tokyo the setting of *Kill Bill: Volume 2* (2004), which features a Japanese character named Gogo Yubari, a teenage killer. Yubari's school uniform style is reminiscent of the kogals of the 1990s, but instead of a sailor suit Yubari wears a three-piece outfit: a navy-blue jacket, a white blouse with a red ribbon tie, and a tartan checkered

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19 Laura Miller, "Those Naughty Teenage Girls: Japanese Kogals, Slang, and Media Assessments," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 14, no. 2 (2004): 227.

20 Laura Miller, "Media Typifications and Hip Bijin," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal. English Supplement*, no. 19 (2000): 176-205.

skirt; with a shorter skirt and looser socks Yubari would be transformed into a playful kogal in Roppongi or Harajuku, but as a disciplined killer, her uniform exudes an attitude of seriousness rather than of naughtiness.

Japanese fashion magazines *Egg* and *FRUiTS* were both founded in the mid-1990s during the rise of *kogals*, and soon found readership outside Japan. *FRUiTS* in particular led the Western interest in Japanese street fashion, and British publisher Phaidon Press published collections of photographs from the magazine in 2001 and 2005. In 1999, American pop idol Britney Spears appeared in the music video for "Baby One More Time" as a uniform-clad student at a Catholic school.[21]

Girls in school uniforms were well received among foreign audiences, as seen in the success enjoyed by the animation import industry in the United States. Historian Andrea Horbinski notes that Japanese anime had gained some fandom in California and Hawai'i, where Japanese-language television channels were available, before 1994. Fans traded pirated anime on VHS tapes or obtained copies via family members stationed in Japan as soldiers.[22] Fans in the 1970s and in the 1980s were mainly interested in science fiction and its anthropomorphic creatures: cute animal characters such as feline and bunny girls.[23] These hybrid girl action heroes were precursors to the genre of *bishōjo* (beautiful girl) anime featuring a female characters in short skirts in adventure fantasies for male viewers.[24] When Sailor Moon came out in the early 1990s, American fans of Japanese anime greeted it enthusiastically.

From the mid-1990s, Japanese animation in the United States gained a robust market share, which culminated in 2003 with revenues of more than US $4.84 billion.[25] Japanese scholars connected this extraordinary success in the 2000s with the rise of otaku culture in the United States; positive reception of Japanese animation by American fans; shrewd tactics to diminish cultural

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21 It is no accident that worldwide audiences were fascinated Britney Spears' performance. The video was produced in November 1998, and the album was released worldwide in January 1999.

22 Andrea Horbinski, "What You Watch Is What You Are? Early Anime and Manga Fandom in the United States." *Mechademia: Second Arc* 12, no. 1 (2019): 14.

23 Horbinski, "What You Watch," 12.

24 *Bishōjo* genre in Japan is quite complicated as female authors write narratives for a male gaze. See Kathryn Hemmann, "Short Skirts and Superpowers: The Evolution of the Beautiful Fighting Girl." *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal*, no. 47 (2014): 45-72.

25   Nissim Otmazgin, "Anime in the US: The Entrepreneurial Dimensions of Globalized Culture," *Pacific Affairs* 87, no. 1 (2014): 53 and 59ff.

Figure 2: Tomoko Sawada, School Days/A, 2004, c-print, 13 x 18 cm. Photo credit: Tomoko Sawada.

differences through adaptations by entrepreneurial importers; and Japanese sponsorship of major anime expos.[26]

School girls in sailor suits were also visible in the high-brow art world. Japanese contemporary artists are critical of group identity and conformity associated with the school uniform culture. Tomoko Sawada's 2004 photograph *School Days* features a class of girls in black sailor suits with red scarves. (Figure 2)

The black jackets with white stripes and matching black pleated skirts emphasize the coherent group identity of the wearers as proper students respecting their school's rules. The girls in the identical sailor suits are a

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26 See note 9 in Otmazgin, "Anime in the US," 55. Otaku refers to people passionate for Japanese manga, anime, video games, pop idols. The term carried some negative connotations because young men who consumed these materials and bought electronic devices at Akihabara, a neighborhood in Tokyo famous for pop culture shops, were considered geeky but lazy and lonely at home instead of actively seeking for full-time employment and social connections. The meaning has been changed over time and inclusive of non-Japanese fans of popular culture from Japan.

Figure 3: Mariko Mori, Love Hotel, 1994. Fuji super gloss (duraflex) print, wood, aluminum, pewter frame, 48 x 60 x 2 inches (121.9 x 152.4 x 5.1 cm). Edition of 4 with 1 AP. Private collection © Mariko Mori. Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York.

ruthless image of ideal citizens, human resources trained to perform their best in a replaceable and interchangeable manner, raised and educated to conform to the group identity imposed by society; deviation, albeit legitimate and reasonable, is not be tolerated or condoned. In fact, all the students in the image are avatars of the artist herself.

Previously, contemporary artist Mariko Mori depicted an adult woman in a school sailor suit in her now-famous work entitled *Love Hotel* (1994). (Figure 3)

This work suggests tolerance of young girls being consumed as objects of desire and is simultaneously critical of the illicit use of images of girls in school uniforms. One can imagine that the woman depicted, possibly a so-called "office lady" or OL, is moonlighting as a sex worker.[27] Viewers of

27 Allison Holland, "From Gothic Lolita to Radiant Shaman: The Development of Mariko Mori's

this artwork, usually shown in a gallery or in a museum, are invited to bring memories of Japanese popular culture they have experienced. Many will not be subscribers to the adult magazines which often depict paid models as objects of desire. Their exposure to this woman in Mori's work could be the first time they see a Japanese woman in a school uniform, or may resonate with their memories of characters in Japanese pop culture products.

However, Mori's depiction of a woman follows her a cyborg alter-ego in other works of the same period. At a close look, one can see a helmet-like silver hair and a pair of metallic legs. She replicated the tradition of being "uncanny" or bizarre in sailor-suited girls. Aida Makoto created an endless path among rice fields connected from a girl's parted hairline in his work called *Azemich* (A path between rice fields) made in 1991 and now kept at the Collection of Toyota Municipal Museum of Art, Aichi, Japan. A serene landscape of endless rice fields and distant mountains is reminiscent of westernized Japanese traditional painting at the turn of the twentieth century, painted on Japanese paper with mineral pigments in the manner of an illusionistic perspective. However, focusing on a girl showing her back with sailor suit flaps, one see a grotesque image of a girl's hair part sticking out like a horn or a spire until one recognizes an accidental alignment of her part with the path. In Makoto's other illustration-like works such as *Harakiri Schoolgirls* of 1999-2001, school girls in sailor suits show dismembered body parts.[28] Makoto's more gruesome and infamous sadistic depiction of women in *The Giant Member Fuji versus King Gidora* (1993) or *Dog* series (1996) enabled viewers to make inferential imaginations of prohibitive exploitation of under-age girls in school uniforms in fiction and perhaps in heinous crimes.

Contemporary artist Ryoko Suzuki's series *Anikora-Seifuku no. 6* (2007) shows a girl in a black sailor suit. (Figure 4)

In fact, this robot-like figure depicts popular Japanese collector dolls, with the artist's face grafted onto the hypersexual body. Suzuki intentionally creates a life-like, uncanny image with exaggerated physical proportions to

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Ethereal Personae," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal*, no. 40 (2011): 3-28. http://www.jstor.org/stable/42772304.

28 Ryan Roth, "School Girls—The Aida Makoto Interview," Japan Today, March 13, 2013. https://japantoday.com/category/features/school-girls-the-aida-makoto-interview?comment-order=popular [accessed on March 17, 2022]. Roth writes that "he's not a man who wants to do anything sexual with young girls, no matter what you may assume, from his works."

Figure 4: Ryoko Suzuki, Anikora-Seifuku no. 6, 2007. Lambda print, 47 x 71 in. Edition 1 of 3. Courtesy of Corkin Gallery, Toronto.

denote the origin of fantasy dolls. These dolls, intended for male collectors, depict traditionally "appropriate" images of women as schoolgirls, nurses, waitresses, guides, and so forth. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that these figures evoke the highly sexualized roles expected or fantasized for these "professional" women —attractive, sexy, but still inviting, docile, and feminine. Suzuki called the series kawaii. But these imagined dolls are seductresses and clandestine sex workers.

Within Japan, schoolgirl characters are in the minority among fans of romance comics for teenage girls.[29] Japanese studies expert Deborah Shamoon explores *shōjo* manga, romance comics for teenage girls, by reviewing Japanese girls' print culture from its origins in 1920s and 1930s girls' literary magazines to the 1970s "revolution," when young women artists took over the *shōjo* manga genre. These women writers and artists guided narratives

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29 Deborah M. Shamoon, *Passionate Friendship: The Aesthetics of Girls' Culture in Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016).

and aesthetic features of girls' literature and illustration across the late twentieth century. Scholars agree that these texts addressed and formed a reading community of girls. Sociologist Andrew McKevitt included a chapter on anime in his influential book *Consuming Japan: Popular Culture and the Globalizing of 1980s America*.[30] Inclusion of school girls in magazines and popular literature in Japan has had a long history since the emergence of mass culture, as shown by Amy Bliss Marshall.[31] Throughout the systemic, global exportation of Japanese culture, this type of *shōjo* literature was disseminated to other countries. The reception varied due to the level of translation, adaptation, and cultural heterogeneity. However, contemporary art, manga, and anime presented multilayered meanings of schoolgirls in uniforms and in other contexts.

Soft Power on Diplomatic Partners: Asia and Beyond

Management scholar Takeshi Matsui argued that Japanese political entities adopted new policies of promoting popular culture to expand Japan's soft power.[32] Postwar American popular culture had a significant impact on Japan in the 1950s, which diminished in the 1970s as Japanese people became more affluent and traveled to European countries.[33] Gradually Japan gained economic influence in the region. Singapore, for example, was inundated by Japanese anime, manga, popular music, and video games.[34] Taiwan has had a long relationship with Japan, since 1894, including fifty years of colonial rule. Japanese pop culture enjoyed large audiences in Taiwan from the 1990s onward.[35] French political scientist Le Bail argues that market saturation with Japanese soft power was effective for winning fans of Japanese culture known

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30 Andrew C. McKevitt, *Consuming Japan: Popular Culture and the Globalizing of 1980s America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

31 Amy B. Marshall, *Magazines and the Making of Mass Culture in Japan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019).

32 Takeshi Matsui, "Nation Branding through Stigmatized Popular Culture: The 'Cool Japan' Craze among Central Ministries in Japan," *Hitotsubashi Journal of Commerce and Management* 48, no. 1 (48) (2014): 81-97. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43295053.

33 Matsui, "Nation Branding," 83.

34 Benjamin Wai-ming Ng, "Japanese Video Games in Singapore: History, Culture and Industry," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 29, no. 1 (2001): 139-62.

35 Hélène Le Bail, "Japanese Culture in Asia: Infatuation, Identification and the Construction of Identity: The Example of Taiwan," *China Perspectives*, no. 43 (2002): 54-62.

as *harizu* (obsession with Japan) in Taiwan. Japanese television programming came to Taiwan as its cable television system became liberalized and open to foreign companies in 1992. Le Bail argues that these television dramas, manga, and anime enabled Taiwanese young people to perceive a form of optimism toward Japan as being a country with a high standard of living and economic success.[36]

Laura Kanji emphasized that recent initiatives in Japan were successful in using soft diplomacy and nation branding through popular culture.[37] Pop culture diplomacy was firmly installed in the Japanese government in 2007 when it organized the International Manga Award. It also inaugurated the Anime Ambassador Program and the Annual World Cosplay Summit.[38] Government officials and policy makers saw both economic and diplomatic opportunities in "Cool Japan" campaigns. Cultural exports and the tourism industry both benefitted from international interest in Japanese popular culture.

The Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transportation, and Tourism also accepted this approach and announced Hello Kitty as their ambassador of tourism in the Visit Japan campaigns for China and Hong Kong in 2008. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs chose Doraemon, a cat-based cute hero with superpowers as its ambassador in 2008. Trade models cosplaying schoolgirls dressed in sailor suits and jacket-skirt ensembles featured prominently in the Japan Festa in Bangkok and the Japan Expo in Paris in 2009. Anthropologist Christine Yano interprets Japan's reliance on cute/cool characters for international cultural exchange as a clandestine or subconscious strategy to get the attention and alliance of unsuspecting fans who consume cultural products like Hello Kitty and kogal fashions. She calls this phenomenon "pink globalization."[39] In this wave of consumption-driven popular culture, critiques of Japanese sovereignty dissipate without much impact. To global consumers of Cool Japan, the country's role as instigator of WWII and its equivocal gestures toward acknowledgement of its war atrocities by some

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36 Le Bail, "Japanese Culture," 59-60.
37 Laura Kanji, "Illustrations and Influence: Soft Diplomacy and Nation Branding through Popular Culture," *Harvard International Review* 37, no. 2 (2016): 40-45.
38 Kanji, "Illustrations and Influence," 41.
39 Christine R. Yano, "Wink on Pink: Interpreting Japanese Cute as It Grabs the Global Headlines," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 68, no. 3 (2009): 682.

conservative politicians becomes blurred or unheard. Samurai warriors, the Kamikaze pilots of WWII, and black-suited businessmen were replaced by Sailor Moon, Doraemon, Hello Kitty, or kogals in hypersexualized sailor uniforms as "benign masks," winking at larger, serious issues.[40]

In a 2008 survey of Thai students on fondness for Japanese popular culture, an overwhelming majority of 90%, especially high among girls, replied that they like Japanese fashion, manga, and anime.[41] Media scholar Toyoshima explains why these young people show enthusiasm for Japanese popular culture: "by receiving all kinds of media images, young Thais form their own ideas about Japan and feel a closeness to Japanese lifestyles, which in turn lead them to consume Japanese cultural products."[42] This is a crucial key to assess the process and impact of consumption patterns of Japanese cultural products, including cosplay or imitation of Japanese school girls in sailor suit uniforms. The inundation of media images of "Cool Japan" is working on all fronts.

Political scientist Otmazgin emphasized that Japan became a cultural power in the 1990s after it lost its glamour as an industrial pioneer and economic superpower in the 1980s. Japanese fashion magazines and comic books are translated into local languages in East Asia.[43] School girls in sailor suits could be seen as cultural products in the process of cultural commodification. The proliferation of Japanese popular culture including familiar images of Japanese school girls in sailor suits helps Japan generate a new image of Cool Japan, which is antithetical to the salarymen culture of the postwar economic miracle or Japan as a belligerent empire during WWII. Nonetheless, Japanese influence is met with suspicion and concerns in East Asia. Moreover, this type of soft power does not necessarily translate into diplomatic power and influence on public opinion. In contrast to economic and military power, for example, as represented by Russia in Central Eurasia, soft power disguises territorial or ethnic dominance. Cultural industries such as publishers, film production companies, entertainment agencies and magazines, to name

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40 "Benign mask" is an expression used by Yano, "Wink on Pink," 686.
41 Noboru Toyoshima, "Longing for Japan: The Consumption of Japanese Cultural Products in Thailand," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 23, no. 2 (2008): 257-65.
42 Toyoshima, "Longing for Japan," 276.
43 Nissim Kadosh Otmazgin, "Contesting Soft Power: Japanese Popular Culture in East and Southeast Asia," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 8, no. 1 (2008): 74.

a few, have led the public opinion of Japan like public relations agencies. These use non-traditional ways of exerting power or clout co-opt instead of coercion. Soft power may be effective but it is difficult to measure or quantify its impact.[44] As shown in the example of the United States (with Hollywood movies or spectator sports), soft power can have a resonant impact. But it can also backfire due to the values or assumptions embedded in these types of soft culture (for example, American liberalism, excessive consumerism, or ideological glorification) generating animosity or resistance. In the case of Japanese popular culture, however, anti-Japanese sentiment is rarely seen among fans and followers in East Asia, and characters and cultural products such as school girls in sailor suits or Hello Kitty are often perceived without political or economic motives (Figure 1).

Japan is occasionally the subject of controversies over wartime crimes and compensation for war victims in East Asian media. However, contemporary Japan's constitutionally limited role in militaristic intervention has enabled the country to focus more on humanitarian aid and economic development in the Global South —particularly in South and Southeast Asia. As Nissim Otmazgin and Douglas McGray have shown, the Japanese government was not keen on maximizing cultural exports for both economic profit and diplomatic influence until around the year 2000.[45] It was in the early part of that decade that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs made serious efforts to utilize Japanese popular culture to strengthen diplomacy in regions beyond East Asia.[46]

Girls in school uniforms have featured prominently in these efforts. In the world of gaming, for example, Nintendo Switch now offers the visual novel *Tokyo School Life*. A widely available video game called *High School Simulator* has a warning for "Gore, Violent, Sexual Content," while the game *Japanese School Life*, with its cute school girls in sailor suits, is available to all ages. Sony launched *Summer Lesson* in 2014, which created controversy by showing the bedroom of a school girl. *Yandere Simulator* (2005) features girls in sailor suits killing other students; the anime *Mirai Nikki* and *School Days*

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44 Joseph S. Nye, "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616 (2008): 94-109. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25097996.

45 Douglas McGray, "Japan's Gross National Cool," *Foreign Policy*, no. 130 (2002): 44-54.

46 See various journal issues and committees by MOFA in Otmazgin, "Contesting Soft Power," 81-3.

were inspirations for the game developer. Digital character shops like Unity Asset Store have a number of sailor suit girls.

Japanese popular culture industries have been effective in disseminating their products in East Asia. To overcome the image of Japan as an empire during WWII, Japan reestablished itself as an industrial pioneer and model throughout the 1980s. Simultaneously, it stressed its status as a cultural power. Political scientist Nissim Otmazgin argues that Japan became a "popular culture powerhouse" in South and East Asia by efficiently expanding its cultural industries into Asian markets.[47] He particularly emphasizes that Japan carefully curated its image through these cultural products that were disseminated to different age groups and social classes. Otmazgin explores the connection between popular culture and soft power by analyzing the activities of the Japanese popular culture industries in East Asia, and by examining the images their products disseminate. The study is based on export data, market surveys, and interviews with media industry personnel and consumers in five cities in East Asia, arguing that the impact of Japanese popular culture lies in shaping the region's cultural markets and in disseminating new images of Japan, but not in exerting local influence or in creating Japanese-dominated "spheres of influence."[48] It should be noted that Japan is not the only country using soft power for cultural diplomacy. India and Turkey have shown strides in this effort.[49]

Geo-Strategic Vision: From Popular Culture to Contemporary Art

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Japanese government promoted a new image of Japan as a pioneer of avant-garde aesthetics. Design historian Ory Bartal argued that Japanese economic success in the 1980s coincided with a concerted effort to promote avant-garde design.[50] Casio's personal calculator,

47 Nissim Kadosh Otmazgin, *Regionalizing Culture: The Political Economy off Japanese Popular Culture in Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2013).

48 Otmazgin, "Contesting Soft Power," 80-97.

49 H. H. S. Viswanathan, "India's Soft Power Diplomacy: Capturing Hearts and Minds." *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 14, no. 2 (2019): 129-36. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48636719. Federico Donelli, "Persuading through Culture, Values, and Ideas: The Case of Turkey's Cultural Diplomacy," *Insight Turkey* 21, no. 3 (2019): 113-34. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26776106.

50 Ory Bartal, "Postmodern Critiques, Japan's Economic Miracle, and the New Aesthetic Milieu," *Critical Design in Japan: Material Culture, Luxury, and the Avant-Garde* (Manchester: Manchester Uni-

Sony's portable audio player (the Walkman) and other consumer electronics promoted individualism. Rei Kawakubo, Yohji Yamamoto, Issey Miyaki, and Junya Watanabe, pioneers of high-fashion design in both the domestic and foreign markets, were activists promoting new idealism. According to Bartal, "These styles were thus far from being decorative or embodying inherently Japanese form of design. Rather, they were a tool by the designers to make sociopolitical statements […]."[51] Bartal connects the revolutionary spirit of these designers to the 1968 protest movement. Japanese youth in the 1970s were not vocal dissidents of postwar conservative politics in Japan, but expressed anti-establishment sentiments through material culture.

The Japanese government promoted new creators of interior design, consumer electronics, fashion, and architecture throughout the 1980s. After the economic bubble collapsed, the government moved its attention to the emerging popular culture. In the late 1990s, many municipal government mascots were reinvented as cute characters. Some appear in familiar school uniforms as shown in graphic novels, films, or television shows. Just as 1980s Japanese consumers of design products were part of a social and aesthetic elite embracing the cutting-edge design principles of Rei Kawakubo and others, foreign consumers defined themselves as cultural elites patronizing "cool" Japanese popular culture. These consumers do not necessarily support or promote Japanese diplomatic positions on nuclear policy, national security, economic aid in Southeast Asia, or the China-Japan military confrontation. However, they are amicable opinion leaders for Japan in their own domestic interactions related to Japan's culture. As shown in films like Steven Spielberg's 1987 *Empire of the Sun*, Japan was once an empire with many colonies around the Pacific Ocean. Although the movie was a box office disappointment, this historical narrative of Japan during the interwar period was an affirmation of Japanese economic achievement in the 1980s. The murder of Vincent Chin, who was mistaken for a Japanese-American man by two Caucasian men in Detroit in 1982, coincided with the American public's fear of Japanese economic success across many types of consumer and industrial goods. If the People's Republic of China was the world's factory in the 1990s, it was

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versity Press, 2020), 14-25.
51 Bartal, *Critical Design*, 47.

Japan that supplied everything from consumer goods to heavy equipment like ships and cars.

Popular culture in the form of girls in sailor suits was a way of ameliorating a hard-liner image of Japan as an economic superpower. Characters like school girls, Hello Kitty, and Doraemon arouse a sense of vulnerability, caregiving, or infantile dependence in viewers, consumers, and readers. Especially those who have grown up with these characters would embody less hostile, more sentimental reception of Japan in the long term. As a geo-strategic vision, promotion of popular culture as part of cultural diplomacy should be further explored in the age of virtual reality and the metaverse.

The transition from popular culture to institutionalized contemporary art was visible in Yoshitomo Nara and Takashi Murakami. Vulnerable-looking girls with large eyes by Nara and Murakami's Mr. DOB —who are reminiscent of Mickey Mouse and Hello Kitty— underscore the violence and distress beneath their superficial cuteness. Aesthetic philosopher Sianne Ngai analyzed these works as reflections of postwar aesthetics bridging cuteness and kitsch disguised as "avant-garde" in visual commodity culture.[52] The same type of transition took place in the transformation of school girls in sailor suits from images of complacency to those of suppressed deviation —from Sailor Moon to Gogo Yubari to Tomoko Sawada's photography, for example (Figure 2).

Kawaii as an aesthetic concept has been the subject of significant debate in recent years. Starting with Hello Kitty, it could mean an affordable commodity relying on universal feelings of caring and friendship. However, the concept includes a deeper, subversive critique of Japanese corporate culture in which male prerogatives are prioritized. Art historian Kirstin Ringelberg agrees with cultural studies experts that fascination with kawaii owes much to the rejection of traditional Japanese values: conformity, responsibility, group identity, corporate culture, or even totalitarianism as opposed to individualism.[53] Whether one is infatuated with Sailor Moon, under-age school girls in uniforms in Japanese adult magazines, or Hello Kitty products, what one embraces as 'Cool Japan' is not just superficial cuteness, but 'a

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52 Sianne Gnai, "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde," *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 4 (2005): 813-4.

53 Kirstin Ringelberg, "Little Sister, Big Girl: Tabaimo and the Gendered Devaluation of Contemporary Japanese Art," *Woman's Art Journal* 38, no. 2 (2017): 33.

Figure 5: Sailor Moon Cosplayers at the 2014 Amazing Arizona Comic Con at the Phoenix Convention Center in Phoenix, Arizona. Photo: Gage Skidmore. Creative Common 2.0.

sense of freedom and individuality' as manifested in a carefree childhood as opposed to duty-bound adulthood (Figure 5).

Taking the example of American adults cosplaying as Sailor Moon at the 2014 Amazing Arizona Comic Con at the Phoenix Convention Center in Phoenix, Arizona, they are united as fans of Sailor Moon despite their various ethnic, racial, and linguistic backgrounds. However, these women dressing as Sailor Moon is a powerful statement about the cultural influence of Japan on people far from the major centers of Washington DC, Los Angeles, or San Francisco: Arizona is so far removed from the coastal cities in the Pacific, that it was the location of several internment camps for Japanese-American citizens during WWII. Nonetheless, Japanese popular culture in the form of sailor-suited girls is enthusiastically embraced.

Conclusion

In the U.S.-Japan bilateral relationship, Japan was the victim of two atomic bombings, but also the first ever country to invade U.S. territory, in the

attack on Pearl Harbor. In the postwar period, like Germany, Japan has been cautious not to act like a diplomatic superpower like Russia or China. Both Germany and Japan have been economic superpowers, but mindful of the atrocities committed by the two countries in WWII, both have kept a low profile in militaristic matters since. Girls in sailor suits have become cultural ambassadors, exuding creative zeal and alternative behavior, shattering the conservative, submissive image of Japan during the Cold War reconstruction period. If images of salarymen or samurai warriors are on one end of the spectrum, fun-loving, sometimes brave, sometimes caring school girls in sailor suits are on the other. Girls in sailor suits became a more accessible icon of cultural diplomacy emulating the image of friendly, unsuspecting, innocent people. This could not only valid for girls in sailor suits but also for Hallo Kitty, Draemon and other kawaii characters. However, sailor suits from its military origin to conformity-driven homogeneity within some design variations —associated with girls as opposed to kimono-clad women, salarymen, boys, or anthropomorphic, dependent animals— serve the synecdoche for Japanese diplomacy. The values unique to girls in sailor suits are humane, reliable, observant of rules, harmless, collegial, collaborative yet sometimes creative, flexible, resilient, and enchanting. Although Japan did not plan a geo-strategic vision of Japanese school girls representing its popular culture as a foreign policy, it has succeeded in creating an image of accessible, disciplined partners of international cooperation.

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