

“Cool Japan” Goes Global

Japan’s pop culture is attracting international attention, being featured regularly on television shows and at special events around the world. Japan Echo reports on the world’s growing enthusiasm for Japan’s sense of “cool” and the marketing potential of this phenomenon.

Discovering Cool

The phrase “Cool Japan” first appeared in a 2002 *Foreign Policy* article by journalist Douglas McGray. The title of the article was “Japan’s Gross National Cool.”

“The phrase really took off about four years ago,” says Kazuhiko Tsutsumi of NHK Enterprises, who is executive producer of the NHK television show *Cool Japan Hakkutsu: Kakkoi Nippon!* [Discovering Cool Japan]. “Pop culture products like anime, manga, and computer games became huge hits overseas, and people started to think of Japan as ‘cool.’ The idea behind the show was to take a closer look at what aspects of Japan foreigners found most attractive.”

Each episode focuses on a particular aspect of Japanese culture. A panel of foreign participants then discusses the “coolness” or otherwise of the cultural manifestations and products related to that subject. In the early days of the show, the focus was on pop culture—which came to symbolize “Cool Japan.”

An episode on manga prompted some particularly enthusiastic reactions. “Japan has created a new art form,” said a German panelist. “Just like America invented the Internet, Japan has in-

vented manga. Japanese manga are brimming with creativity.” A Canadian man echoed these sentiments: “I can’t believe the way Japanese people just toss away their manga magazines when they finish reading them. I could never throw them away—for me, they’re works of art.”

Fashion was another subject that went over well. “Fans of Japanese culture often use the Japanese word *kawaii* [cute],” a French woman said. “For French women in their twenties, the word has become part of their everyday vocabulary.”

Going Deeper

But Tsutsumi says there is more to the Japan boom than pop culture. “As time went by, we realized that people overseas were interested in all kinds of aspects of Japanese culture—old and new. *Omuraisu* and iced coffee, for example. *Omuraisu* is a Japanese twist on the Western omelet, which was modified when it arrived in this country by the addition of rice. The Japanese were also the first to come up with the idea of adding ice to coffee and enjoying it as a cool, refreshing drink. This is an aspect of Japanese style that nowadays is on sale at coffee stands around the world. When Ja-



Kazuhiko Tsutsumi

pan imports something from overseas, adjustments are made to cater to Japanese tastes. These twists on what were originally foreign dishes then strike foreigners as being very Japanese—and very cool.”

The makers of the show also discovered “cool” aspects of Japan’s traditional culture, such as the kimono. The kimono can easily be converted back into cloth and can therefore be remade to a new design any number of times. This means that a mother can pass her kimonos on to her daughter, and so on through the generations. Several foreigners remarked that this was very cool. “A lot of Japanese people also said the show had made them proud of their traditional culture,” Tsutsumi says.

The program marked its 100th episode this fall. To commemorate the occasion, foreigners who had

participated in past shows were invited to vote for the aspects of Japan they thought were the coolest. Nestled in the rankings next to such pop culture phenomena as *manga kissa* (24-hour Internet cafes with extensive comic book libraries) and gadgets like “washlet” toilets (high-tech bidets with heated seats) were traditional seasonal events, including fall foliage viewing, summer fireworks and Bon dances, and spring cherry blossom parties.

“I think it’s wonderful how the Japanese like to mark the changing of the seasons,” said a woman from Norway. One Dutchman was impressed by Japan’s annual celebra-

tion of the cherry blossom season: “For the Japanese, spring is the beginning of the year, with all the associations that come with it. So they have a party to celebrate it. Very cool!”

“One episode that totally surprised us by the interest it provoked was on the subject of mourning and memorial services,” Tsutsumi says. The broadcasters expressed their concerns about doing a show on death. But when the episode aired they discovered there was much more interest than they had expected in the subject—one that encapsulates the very essence of Japanese tradition and sensibility. In particular, many of the for-

eign participants were impressed to learn that Japanese families traditionally gather once a year during the Bon festival to remember family members who have passed on.

“People may initially be drawn to Japan by their interest in pop culture,” says Tsutsumi. “But once they’re here, their daily experiences bring them into contact with Japanese culture and spirituality at a deeper level. We’ve seen this over and over on the show. This leads to an even greater interest in Japan. And in turn, this understanding of the culture and tradition brings fresh insights into Japanese pop culture and what makes it so special.”

Tokyo Girls Collection

Fashion is another area of content in which Japan is earning the world’s attention. In particular, Japanese fashion for women in their teens and twenties is of great interest in Asia, Europe, and other parts of the world.

Tokyo Girls Collection, which got its start in 2005, has been setting girls’ fashion trends in Japan as one of the largest fashion festivals in history. TGC introduces the latest in fashion trends using popular models to communicate to the world Japan’s affordable yet highly fashionable clothing that is actually meant to be worn, not just shown as concept pieces.

“Just like the magazines *CanCam* for the enticingly feminine look (targeting women in their early twenties) and *PS*, which showcases street fashion (for girls

around 20 years old), there are a whole range of categories to appeal to every girl’s taste,” says TGC producer Ayako Nagaya. “The fact that there are fashion magazines and models exclusively for each of these categories is one of the things that makes Japanese girls’ fashion so special.

“Each category covers not just clothes but also hairstyles, makeup, and accessories, and there is an established market for each. When I started TGC, I wanted to bring all these diverse fashions together under one roof and create a brand to communicate Japanese girls’ fashion as a whole, both here in Japan and around the world.”

Nagaya is particularly concerned with the perspective of the end-users. Typical fashion shows are geared toward people in the fashion industry or buyers for retailers, but at TGC the audience is

the people who will buy the clothes and accessories as consumers. Only at TGC are the exact clothes worn by the models available for purchase, just by placing an order from one’s mobile phone.

“Today’s generation has much more sway thanks to tools like social network services and blogs,” Nagaya continues. “By getting core groups of consumers involved, we thought that the event could reach out to an even greater number of people. No matter how good an event we put on, it needs to be recognized if it is going to have any impact. In order to gain that recognition, we needed to make sure that it was a user-oriented event. Because past fashion events had not involved users to the same degree, we were extensively covered by the media and received greater exposure on television and in magazines.”

Media outlets from 50 countries now come to cover TGC, and it is broadcast in 207 countries worldwide. Since 2007 TGC events have been held in Beijing as well.



A Tokyo Girls Collection show held in Beijing in 2008. TGC now generates extensive media coverage and popular interest around the world. ©Jiji

“In China, Japanese fashion magazines like *Vivi* and *Ray* dominate the top ranks in magazine sales, and there are many people who have long had an interest in Japanese fashion. We worked to boost interest by featuring popular Chinese models and Japanese models who are popular in China. The response has been tremendous. We were featured broadly in the Chinese media, so I think we’ve succeeded in conveying the appeal of Japanese girls’ fashion to the Chinese market as a whole. I met many people there who said they wanted to buy Japanese clothes.”

Japanese girls’ fashion is fast gaining popularity overseas, but Nagaya points out that there are issues that need to be addressed as well.

“Even though Japan has created great fashion products, and there is demand for them in other countries, people often can’t purchase them locally because efforts haven’t been made to market them abroad. It is because manga and anime are successful as businesses that they have emerged as attractive aspects of Japanese culture. Fashion will be the same; when

people in other countries are actually buying Japanese clothing, wearing it, and walking around with it on the street, only then will it truly develop as part of Japanese culture. And this will then help the growth of the Japanese apparel industry.

“Under present circumstances, though, it’s difficult for Japanese brands to make headway overseas and open up stores. Unlike anime and digital content, clothing takes up physical space, so there are shipping costs that have to be considered, and if it just ends up as dead inventory, it’s not good for business. Also, fashion is very seasonal, and tastes differ from country to country, so brands need to make hefty investments. Most Japanese fashion brands are small and medium-sized businesses, and the challenge of overseas expansion is too risky.

“If it’s too difficult to secure overseas sales channels, perhaps customers can be persuaded to visit Japan to do their fashion shopping. Overseas visitors who have made the long trip to Japan will buy fashion even on rainy days, when other tourist options

are less appealing. If these visitors become repeat customers, some stability to Japanese brands will be achieved. There are many young women in other countries who read Japanese fashion magazines and come here to shop.

“But around Shibuya 109, where many girls’ fashion shops are clustered, there are virtually no foreign-language signs. Foreign-language tourist guidebooks are still inadequate, and so tourists aren’t able to have a fully satisfying shopping experience. If the government and private enterprises team up to build the infrastructure needed for foreign shoppers, opportunities for overseas shoppers to purchase Japanese clothing will increase.

“With less than twenty years of history, Japanese girls’ fashion is still young as an industry, but there are already so many brands, and the market is quite saturated. Through public-private partnerships to grow the overseas sales channels for the apparel industry, I think that business opportunities can be expanded and a place for fashion as a part of Japanese culture can be established.” 