

Specific Strategy of the Japanese Government's Public Diplomacy: The Case of Japan House

Chen Yuchen

School of International Studies, Dalian University of Foreign Languages, Dalian, Liaoning, 116044, China

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Abstract: Since the 1970s, Japan has made a series of attempts at public diplomacy. In recent years, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan has been actively promoting the implementation of the “Japan House” strategy, which is in the same line of Japan's traditional public diplomacy practice. Japan House, led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and operated by multiple organizations, integrates political outreach with commercial features, and has become a new stronghold for Japan's public diplomacy.

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the Japanese government has made a series of attempts in public diplomacy. In addition to the “Cool Japan” and “Japan Brand” strategies, the most recent initiative is the “Japan House” strategy, which began in 2015 and was officially implemented in 2017. In Japan's Diplomatic Blue Book, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs defines the Japan House strategy as one of the measures of “strategic communication.” “Japan House”, established in São Paulo, London, and Los Angeles, serve as hubs for Japan's strategic public diplomacy, aiming to attract broad attention from various sectors by disseminating Japan's charm, policies, actions, and positions, ultimately increasing foreign understanding and support for Japan.

2. The Concept of Public Diplomacy

The concept of “public diplomacy” was first introduced in 1965 by American scholar Edmund Gullion. He defined public diplomacy as diplomacy that “goes beyond traditional diplomatic scope,” where a nation communicates and interacts with foreign audiences through official and unofficial channels to shape foreign public attitudes and behaviors. Since then, research on public diplomacy has flourished globally. Chinese scholar Han Fangming defines public diplomacy as “a country's efforts to enhance its international visibility, reputation, and recognition by having its central government or authorized local governments and other social entities commission domestic or foreign social actors to conduct two-way communication with foreign publics through dissemination, public relations, media, and other means to engage in diplomatic activities aimed at clarifying information, spreading knowledge, and shaping values to better serve national interests.”^[1] Japanese scholars Kaneko Masafumi and Kitano Mitsuru argue that “public diplomacy involves activities aimed at achieving a nation's foreign interests and goals, enhancing its status and

influence, improving its international image, and deepening understanding of the country through building connections, maintaining dialogue, conveying information, and mutual exchanges with individuals and organizations abroad."^[2]

By synthesizing these definitions, public diplomacy can be characterized by the following features: its primary agents are governments or relevant institutions; its targets are foreign publics; its purpose is to enhance foreign understanding of the country, thus improving international image and achieving national interests. In the context of the Japan House strategy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan is the agent, and the general public in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Brazil are the target audiences. The objective of the Japan House strategy is to deepen foreign publics' understanding of Japan and cultivate pro-Japanese and Japan-aware individuals.

3. Evolution of Public Diplomacy in Japan

Japan's practice of public diplomacy began in the 1970s. After World War II, the Japanese government focused on economic development, and in the 1960s and 1970s, Japan experienced rapid economic growth, emerging as an economic powerhouse. In 1968, the Agency for Cultural Affairs was established. Although not a dedicated foreign propaganda agency, its functions included promoting Japanese culture abroad, enhancing international cultural exchanges, as well as revitalizing domestic arts, preserving cultural heritage, and copyright protection. However, in the early 1970s, Japan faced intense friction with the United States over textile exports and trade imbalances. The United States feared that Japan might replace its global position, amplifying the "Japan threat." At the same time, tensions also arose in Japan's relations with Southeast Asia, where some critics labeled Japan an "economic animal" solely focused on economic growth and feared a resurgence of militarism. In 1972, Thailand saw an anti-Japanese movement, and in 1974, during Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei's visit to Southeast Asia, large-scale anti-Japanese protests occurred in Thailand and Indonesia. As a result, the Japanese government gradually recognized the need to supplement economic development with cultural diplomacy to bridge misunderstandings abroad and build a positive national image. In 1972, the Japan Foundation was established as one of the key actors in Japan's public diplomacy. It aims to deepen mutual understanding between Japan and other countries by organizing cultural programs and providing information. Its activities cover three main areas: "cultural and artistic exchanges," "overseas Japanese language education" and "Japan studies and international dialogue."

Subsequently, Japan's public diplomacy practices expanded. In 1987, the Japanese government launched the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program (JET), inviting young foreigners to teach foreign languages and sports at Japanese schools to foster mutual understanding through educational and regional exchanges. In 1989, Prime Minister Takeshita Noboru introduced the "International Cooperation Concept" in a speech in London, emphasizing the importance of international cultural exchanges as a means to promote mutual understanding and enhance economic and political development. After this speech, Japan set up the "International Cultural Exchange Council" to further emphasize the importance of cultural diplomacy.

The term "public diplomacy" officially appeared in Japanese government discourse in the early 21st century. The Japanese word "koho" means "the dissemination of information by government agencies, enterprises, and various organizations to inform the public of their policies and activities," and the corresponding English term is "public diplomacy." In the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' 1997 Diplomatic Blue Book, the term "koho" first appeared, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs clarified that its public diplomacy activities aimed to strengthen both domestic understanding and foreign understanding of Japan. In 2004, the Ministry underwent an organizational reform, establishing the "Public Diplomacy and Cultural Exchange Department." The 2005 Diplomatic Blue Book

emphasized that, in addition to hard power such as military and economic strength, soft power—using cultural values and allure to attract others—had become increasingly important in promoting Japan’s image and diplomacy. This led to the creation of a mechanism integrating government and civilian efforts.

Following the 2011 earthquake and the nuclear disaster, Japan’s image was severely damaged, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs mentioned "crisis communication" in the Diplomatic Blue Book, aiming to provide swift and accurate information to eliminate misunderstandings and repair Japan’s national image.

In recent years, the Japanese government has rolled out a series of systematic strategies in public diplomacy, including the “Japan Brand” strategy (2009) led by the Intellectual Property Strategy Headquarters, the “Cool Japan” strategy (2010) coordinated by the Intellectual Property Strategy Promotion Office, and the “Japan House” strategy (2015) led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

4. Japan House Strategy

4.1. Preparations for the Japan House Strategy

Japan House strategy is primarily led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Ministry established the Office for Strategic Communication Hub to manage Japan House-related affairs. In May 2015, the Ministry formally submitted a draft for the Japan House project, elaborating on six key aspects of the concept. Prior to the official launch, the government engaged in discussions with relevant individuals and experts through a platform called the "Japan House Advisory Council." The first meeting of the council took place in 2015, and it included experts from various fields such as education, media, design, and technology. Japan Houses were designed as new hubs for Japan's cultural diplomacy, with the goal of conveying Japan’s "correct image" and diverse charms, cultivating more pro-Japanese and Japan-aware individuals.

In 2017, Japan House in São Paulo opened first, followed by the openings in London and Los Angeles in 2018. The final meeting of the advisory council took place in February 2019, completing its work.

4.2. Operation of Japan House Strategy

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs set three main goals for Japan House initiative: (1) to spread Japan's charm in collaboration with government, private enterprises, and local governments; (2) to gather feedback from experts both domestically and abroad to meet local needs; (3) to provide a one-stop venue for Japan-related information. Japan House emphasize the integration of information and content, seeking to showcase as many aspects of Japan as possible within a limited space. They cover traditional culture, art, high technology, nature, architecture, food, and design, and function as spaces for exhibitions, dining, cafes, shopping, and events such as workshops and lectures organized by Japanese companies and local governments.

Each Japan House location tailors exhibitions to the local culture, changing themes every three to four months. For example, in São Paulo, Japan’s well-known department store MUJI opened a pop-up store, and various martial arts groups hosted an exhibition on martial arts. Japan Houses also serve as venues for discussions on Japan’s foreign policy. In 2018, Japan's Foreign Minister Kono Taro delivered a lecture on Japan’s foreign policy at the Japan House in São Paulo.

5. Characteristics of Japan House Strategy

5.1. Combining Political Cultural Diplomacy with Commercial Features

Japan Houses are not merely venues for Japan's cultural diplomacy; they also combine the functions of public diplomacy and commercial activity. They aim to deepen foreign understanding of Japan and foster empathy through flexible, everyday engagement, as opposed to traditional, rigid foreign propaganda methods.

Each Japan House also incorporates commercial facilities, such as shops and cafes, where visitors can experience Japanese culture firsthand. For example, the café in the São Paulo Japan House is inspired by late 19th-century Japanese coffeehouses, and the London Japan House sells items such as Japanese bonsai trimmers and hand-painted pouches.

5.2. Multi-Agent Collaborative Operation

Although the Ministry of Foreign Affairs leads the Japan House strategy, the implementation is a collaborative effort involving government, private enterprises, and other non-governmental entities. The Japan House initiative adheres to Japan's tradition of "public-private-academic cooperation," involving non-governmental participants to reduce ideological bias in the official messaging.

In sum, the Japan House strategy reflects a complex interaction of diplomacy, culture, commerce, and collaboration, designed to improve Japan's image and foster deeper global understanding.

References

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