

English and immigration for soft power deficit

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Despite its economic weight, Japan lacks strength in what is known as soft power. Though hard to define, this type of power is the cultural and intellectual clout of a country, its ability to shape the international conversation.

Anime and sushi are world famous, but soft power comes from intellectual enterprises. On this front, Japan keeps a low profile. Japanese universities wield minimal international influence. Only a few Japanese thinkers in the social sciences and humanities have a foreign audience. With the exception of Northeast Asians, the only—and not very numerous—overseas students and professors in Japan in the fields of history, philosophy, or sociology are Asian experts.

Japan is also underrepresented in transnational networks. Samuel Huntington coined the term “ampersand” (i.e. “&”) for individuals who are simultaneously from one country & another one. Examples could be a Singaporean banker in London with professional ties to his homeland, or an Indian-American movie executive who acts as a go-between between Hollywood and Bollywood.

These ampersands are giving birth to a new cosmopolitan class. Individuals from places as North Korea and some African nations are still noticeably absent from this transnational society. National differences and cul-

tures have yet to vanish, but in the past several decades this group has grown in scope and influence.

As an economic giant, Japan should be a key node in this new Transnational Republic, but it is not. Most Japanese overseas are employed by Japanese businesses rather than working for non-Japanese corporations where they could sink roots into a foreign society.

Many of the small number of Japanese executives in foreign firms and international organizations are female exiles from Japan who wield little influence in the country of their birth despite their achievements. As for foreign professionals in Japan, they too are generally expatriates with very shallow roots in Japan.

Why are Japanese relatively rare in this planetary “Facebook?” First, Japan is one the few countries to be neither western nor a former European colony. Therefore, it is disconnected from the Western-Anglophone core of this loose confederation (learning English is easy for speakers of other Western European tongues who can therefore be much less handicapped than Japanese).

This cultural chasm makes it more daunting for Japanese to settle abroad, and for outsiders to move to Japan. It also hinders communications between Japanese and foreigners. Second, Japan is rich, big, and stable. Consequently, Japanese have less incentive to leave home than citizens

of poorer nations such as China and India, violent ones like Lebanon, or rich but small ones like New Zealand. Not being western (or westernized), Tokyo feels more “alien” to most non-Japanese than do London, New York, Vancouver, Hong Kong or Singapore.

How could Japan boost its soft power? First, there is English. Many Japanese will never need English. But since it is so hard for them to learn it, Japanese need to start studying from a young age. Due to the dire shortage of good instructors, the logical remedy is to hire well-trained teachers from overseas, as opposed to the young westerners who make ends meet teaching English but whose only qualifications are their blue eyes.

There are many underpaid but excellent English teachers in India, Africa, and Eastern Europe who would be happy to relocate to Japan. Some Japanese might be concerned about Indian, African or Ukrainian accents, but English is an international idiom, there is no “right” accent. Importing these foreign instructors in large numbers is the only way to breach the linguistic Berlin Wall which isolates Japan.

Second, there are the universities.



Robert Dujarric

Non-East Asian foreigners will never learn Japanese in large numbers. Except for those fascinated by Japan, there are no overwhelming reasons for foreigners to make the effort of learning thousands of kanji. If Japan, like England, had given birth to vast New Worlds and established colonies on every continent, Japanese would be a lingua franca, but that is not the case.

Therefore, if Japan wishes to develop international human networks, it will need elite undergraduate programs, as well as some high schools, where most courses are taught in English. This will allow the country’s future leaders to establish global connections from the time they enter college while familiarizing themselves with foreign cultures thanks to overseas professors and students.

Third, immigration is vital to soft power (and economic dynamism as well). The more foreign professionals that feel welcome in Japan, the easier it is for them to acquire residency and citizenship, the more likely it is that Japan will stop being the insular society it is now.

Over time, these steps will allow more Japanese to thrive overseas and foreigners to make their mark in Japan, thereby enhancing Japan’s soft power.

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