

Policy Watch: Japan's cultural power

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If you have a teenager in your house, then chances are you know something about Japanese anime manga, whether in the form of paperback comics, television series, movies, electronic games, or -- as teenagers like to say -- whatever. If indeed your teenager has made you aware of this, then he or she has undoubtedly also made you aware that Japan -- the country these products emanate from -- is a truly awesome place!

And the fact that millions of teenagers and young adults in America and all around the world think positively about Japan because they love its anime manga is important for Japan's image.

The image of Japan popular among young people now is very different than it was in the past. Asians and Westerners who lived through World War II generally had an extremely negative image of Japan both during the war and long afterward. When I was growing up in the 1960s, the image of Japan was negative due to both memories of World War II and resentment over Japan's growing economic competitiveness. Indeed, the image of Japan as an economic superpower taking jobs away from workers elsewhere persisted long after the Japanese economy underwent a prolonged downturn beginning in 1990 and lasted until relatively recently.

The growing popularity of Japanese anime manga in the West and elsewhere has done much to counter these older, negative images of Japan. Anime manga, though, is something that has been popular in Japan itself for decades. Its popularity in the West seems to have begun with Pokemon, starting about a decade ago. My daughter -- along with so many other young children -- became thoroughly caught up in this craze when she was in kindergarten. Pokemon then paved the way for interest in other series, including Rurouni Kenshin, InuYasha, and Naruto (just to mention a few) aimed at older children and young adults.

This interest in Japanese anime manga has led some teenagers (including my own) to become interested in Japan itself. Japanese language classes have become more popular at secondary schools in the United States and elsewhere. For example, the school my daughter will soon attend -- Oakton High School in Oakton, Va. -- offers Japanese I through V, plus a Japanese Advanced Placement course.

Not clear about why Japanese anime manga has become so popular or how it benefits Japan? You are not alone. A recent trip to Japan taught me that many older Japanese are just as clueless (like my daughter would say) about the anime manga phenomenon as their counterparts in America and elsewhere. Many Japanese who are aware of its popularity indicate that it has caught the Japanese government by surprise -- and that Tokyo is not certain how to capitalize on it.

The truth of the matter is, maybe it can't -- at least not directly. There is little reason for the Japanese government to do anything to popularize anime manga around the world. That has already been accomplished by the private sector. Nor does it seem likely that the popularity of anime manga among their teenage and young adult citizens will somehow induce other governments (generally run by older people who have little interest or knowledge about this craze) to make concessions to Japan or alter their policies in order to benefit it.

Yet while the popularity of anime manga may result in few concrete benefits for Tokyo, the increasingly positive image of Japan that has grown along with it does benefit Japan in an important way. For it helps convey the image that Japan is a friend and should be treated as such. And it is much better to be liked than to be feared -- a lesson that too many other governments have yet to learn.

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