70 Years of Rebranding Tokyo:
The Social, Cultural, and Economic Factors that Helped Create a New Japan

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Table of Contents

Introduction: How the World Sees Japan Today **1**
Post-WWII Socio-economic Situation: 1950s–1970s **2**
The Emergence of the Concept “Kawaii” 3
The Bubble Economy and the Effects of its Collapse: 1980s–2000s **3**
Tokyo as a Global City 4
“Karoshi”: To Work or to Die 4
The “Cool Japan” Project 6
The Necessity for Rebranding Japan 6
The Popular Culture of Japan and its Effects 7
The Impact of 3/11 on the Country: 2011-now **8**
Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games: 2013-future **9**
Tokyo becoming Foreigner-Friendly 9
The New Constructions and Investments Being Made 10
The Anticipated Impact the Olympics will have on Tokyo 10
Conclusion **11**
Works Referenced **12**

Introduction: How the World Sees Japan Today

Since the 1950s, Japan's homicide rate has been significantly decreasing, ranking it as the country with the lowest homicide rate in the world thanks to its strict gun policies and the stigma that Japanese people have with crime (Engel). However, even a phenomenon like this did not just appear out of the blue. Factors such as the rejection of violence after World War II, the growth in wealth and social stability during the bubble economy, and Japan being a "prosperous society with low inequality and high levels of development" (Engel) are just some of the reasons why Japan is constantly noted as the safest country in the world. The "Japan Brand" that has developed over the years symbolizes security, innovation, and expression. Not only has the world's view of Japan changed due to the rebranding strategies that have taken place, but the Japanese society's view of their own country has shifted as well, emphasizing soft power and becoming a more foreigner-friendly nation.

Tokyo, as a global city, has undergone many cultural, societal, and economic changes in just the past 70 years. Starting with the period after World War II to the collapse of the bubble economy in the early 1990s, and most recently the 3/11 disaster, the country has gone through many tragedies, forcing it to recreate its identity many times. Japan has rebranded itself as less corporate-centered through the "Cool Japan" project and has started opening its closed doors to foreigners by hosting the Olympic Games for 2020. Behind the global success also lie many societal problems that have yet to be addressed, but the construction of a new identity for Tokyo and for Japan as a whole has helped regain its position in our global society despite all the setbacks that have occurred.

Post-WWII Socio-economic Situation: 1950s–1970s

After Japan lost the war in 1945, they were struggling to reestablish itself in global society; they no longer had a powerful army nor a strong government, which were both central to Japan's identity before the war. Their desire for a fresh start pushed the country to focus on the "development of another manner with amiable approaches and to become a nation of technological advancements and drive toward business superiority" (Cheok 296). Being a very self-reliant country, it was one of the first major times that Japan sought assistance and guidance from other countries. Japan had eventually decided to use "mostly North American cultural models" (Choek 296) as a tool to rebrand itself during a period when the world was directing their attention towards military advancement.

The Emergence of the Concept "Kawaii"

In the 1970s, the popular culture of "kawaii" emerged as "a rebellion against the traditional cultural values and a belated reaction to the destruction of World War II and its aftermath" (Cheok 298). Even 20 years after WWII had ended, the Japanese people were still living through the consequences of the war. One of the key features of "kawaii" is its babyish attitudes and cutesy appearance; the emphasis on these features "conveyed the unexpressed desire to be recognized as a new culture that will not be outmaneuvered or blindly led" (Cheok 298). It contrasted the country's new identity of being technologically advanced and business-centered by developing a culture that was customizable and personable, concepts that were not associated with Japan when it was still a strong military power. The globalization of this soft culture that was soon implemented in "entertainment, fashion, and animation" (Cheok

295) helped recreate Japan's national identity and became a key concept for future nation branding projects.

The Bubble Economy and the Effects of its Collapse: 1980s–2000s

During the periods after the war when Japan was recreating itself as a new nation, "the institutional pillars of lifetime employment, seniority wages, and corporate welfare benefits contributed to [the] rapid economic growth and corporate industrial relations" (Song 1014). However, the decline in domestic demand and the intensification of the global economy pressured companies to devise new strategies to accommodate for the change in business conditions (Song 1014). Japan was slowly and successfully establishing itself as a business superpower.

Tokyo as a Global City

By the end of the 1980s, Tokyo was able to position itself as a global city alongside New York and London due to it "being preeminently a world's goods and money exporting center" (Kamo 79). However, the excessive financialization in the late 1980s that was caused by the fluctuating interest rates and exchange rates "as well as the deregulations of financial trade encouraged enormous investments in money and financial markets across national borders" (Kamo 79). This "transformed the world economy into a 'casino economy'" (Kamo 79), ultimately leading to the Tokyo Crash of 1990 and 1992, or better known as the "burst of the bubble."

The collapse of the economy was very detrimental to Japan; for one, there was a significant decrease in global economic activities in Tokyo (Kamo 79). Tokyo's "share in the world's currency and portfolio trade markets" declined, and the Japanese financial institutions

were forced to withdraw their investments abroad due to Japan's short-term capital account becoming in the red (Kamo 80). The money and exporting capacity that were mainly directed towards the North American market became smaller, and Japan started shifting their target to the Asian market as a whole, "using Tokyo as a base for their Asia-wide strategy" (Kamo 81). In other words, Japan was using the city of Tokyo to position itself as an industrial center in Asia in the 1990s after their economy had crashed and their foreign investments had failed.

***"Karoshi":* To Work or to Die**

Due to the collapse of the bubble economy, the employment structure had drastically changed. The seniority wage system and the lifetime employment system that were very popular during Japan's period of economic growth had to be changed to an outcome-wage system to accommodate for the recession. This shift worsened the mental and physical conditions of workers because they suddenly no longer had the reassurance of being able to keep their job until retirement. The concept of *karoshi*, a "fatal condition in which the living rhythm of a human being is collapsed due to excessive fatigue" (Kanai 209), or more commonly defined as "death by overwork," had existed as early as the 1980s. However, it was only after the bubble economy had crashed that it got serious: workers were "permanently unable to work or dead to acutely attacking ischemic heart disease" and even committed suicide (*karo-jisatsu*) due to the mental disorders that had resulted from the long work hours (Kanai 209).

Though *karoshi* had affected mainly regular workers working in private companies, it also had a heavy impact on a new and special type of employment that had emerged in the early 2000s. The slow recovery of the economy created a segment of workers called "freeters," which are non-regular workers that include temporary and part-time workers. Because of the flexibility

in their jobs, it was often seen as if freeters were not impacted by *karoshi*. However, a study showed that "the number of non-regular employees who work 60 or more hours has increased by 70,000 from 1995 to 2001" (Kanai 213). Their long work hours were caused by the fact that they were earning low wages but still had to pay the high living costs of Tokyo.

The unfortunate situation with *karoshi* is that not much is being done by the government to address the issue; the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare took action a few years after the number of *karo-jisatsu* had skyrocketed, and it is only these past few years that different programs are being implemented to discourage workers from working so many hours. Hidden behind Japan's successful efforts to rebuild and rebrand are the stories of lives lost to answer to the demands and expectations set by their society.

The "Cool Japan" Project

Because of the collapse of the bubble economy in the early 1990s, Japan was going through "a period of dramatic sociocultural and economic changes" (Daliot-bul 247). During this time, many industries started producing "sluggish, playful teen-centric products and services - fashion, telecommunication, entertainment and in particular the multimedia culture of *anime*, *manga* and computer and video games" (Daliot-bul 247). These products and services built itself upon the concept of "kawaii," with its youthfulness and authenticity, and soon became the "fastest growing components and among the most successful export industries of Japan's recession stricken economy" (Daliot-bul 247). While Japan was focusing internally on its own problems, the world was regaining interest in "Things Japanese" (Daliot-bul 247). The Japanese politicians decided to jump on this opportunity to create a new national policy that not only focused on "intelligible intellectual property in the form of innovative and creative

products(Daliot-bul 248) but also responded to “the significant decline in the international competitiveness of [the] Japanese industry” (Daliot-bul 248).

The Necessity for Rebranding Japan

Inspired by the Cool Britannia campaigns in the 1990s (Valaskivi 491), the Japanese government executed the national project “Cool Japan” in 2002 as part of the Japanese Intellectual Property Strategy in an attempt to circulate the idea of soft power. Popular culture items such as manga and anime started being used in cultural diplomacy (Valaskivi 489) to develop a consumer culture. The “Cool Japan” image started replacing the “‘Corporate Japan’ image of a work-oriented ‘enterprise society’ (*kigyōshakai*)” (Daliot-bul 247) that the rest of the world had of Japan at the time. While adults associated Japan with technology and the service economy, the younger generation was becoming obsessed with the values and lifestyles of Japan (Cheok 298). The term “cool” not only implied trendiness or creativity, it signified a “rebellious attitude towards authorities...the shift from industrial capitalism to cultural capitalism” (Valaskivi 492). When Japan, and particularly Tokyo, was shifting their focus towards an Asian market, they realized that they were having difficulty due to “collective amnesia in regard [to] Japan’s colonial past” (Daliot-bul 254). “Cool Japan” was Japan’s hope for rebranding a new image and improving foreign relationships with countries that they had a dark history with.

The Popular Culture of Japan and its Effects

The “young” and “fun” concept of “kawaii” started spreading around the world as “a universal trend with arrays of inspirations and inventions” (Cheok 299). The “kawaii” trend created a culture that soon became associated with the city of Tokyo for foreigners. The emergence of the virtual idol Hatsune Miku, a crowd-sourced idol that offers an innovative way

to produce music (Condry 12), allowed everyday people to take part in the popular culture of Japan for themselves. The government pushed for participation and the spread of contemporary popular culture through implementing programs such as sponsoring international exhibitions and local competitions in the arts, design, and media, awarding prizes of excellence to students and artists, and even "hosting programs in Japan for non-Japanese artists" (Daliot-bul 255). Whether it be through design and media, or even through musical genres such as digital music, the Japanese popular culture that emerged encouraged not only Japanese artists but also non-Japanese artists to contribute to the culture in innovative ways.

The Impact of 3/11 on the Country: 2011-now

The disaster of 3/11 had impacted Japan not just geographically but also mentally. Natural disasters bring to light the problems in our society that we would usually glance past or underestimate due to our well-being. People didn't really think too deeply about where their electricity came from or even the dangers of nuclear power until the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant crisis. Prior to 3/11, only major earthquakes and natural disasters would be reported live on the screen; now, even small ones will be projected, followed by whether or not there is a chance of a tsunami. Small things that people didn't think much about before are now crucial to their everyday lives.

One of the biggest issues that arose as a result of 3/11 was the role of the government in Japanese society. Many Japanese citizens raised questions in relation to what the country seemed to prioritize even after such a tragic event had occurred. 3/11 happened just a few years after the Cool Japan program had picked up pace. Unfortunately for the government, 3/11 had caused the Cool Japan project to come to an end. The images that were being projected by the news of the

disaster deeply contrasted with the images being portrayed by Cool Japan. There was suddenly a divide between the reality the Japanese people were experiencing and the expected reality the world imagined of Japan. The government's poor response to the disaster caused many citizens to wonder what was more important for the country: the well-being and safety of its people or their global image, which was now "ruined."

During a time when the government was not very supportive, everyone else around the world helped Japan get back on its feet. Many campaigns and collaborative works, such as with the Red Cross, helped not only bring the Japanese community together but also the world together during a time of solidarity. Instead of focusing on culture and branding on a large scale like Cool Japan did, these projects focused on creating brands out of local products and artists (Valaskivi 495). The rebranding strategies that took place after 3/11 emphasized the people rather than the country and were composed of multiple small-scale projects rather than one large national one. This allowed for not only more people to become involved with branding their community, but also helped the country become more united when trying to start fresh after the disaster.

Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games: 2013-future

On September 7, 2013, just two and a half years after 3/11 had deadly impacted Japan, Tokyo had won the bid to host the summer Olympic Games of 2020. This win was met with much criticism initially because it seemed as if the government was trying to market Tokyo as a highly-advanced and innovative city during a time when many of their citizens were still living in temporary housing due to the earthquake. An estimated 920,000 spectators are expected to visit Tokyo every day during the time of the Olympics. However, how could a country

accommodate outsiders when they can't even take care of their own citizens? As the construction and development of the city started taking place, more people started viewing the hosting of the Summer Games in a positive light and were eager to use this as an opportunity to bring Japan back to its feet again.

Tokyo becoming Foreigner-Friendly

Hosting the Olympic Games means that there will be a significant boost to foreign tourism and travel balance and thus "can be expected to make a positive contribution to the Japanese economy as a whole" (Osada 6). To encourage foreign visits and spending, Japan recently increased the number of items subject to duty-free treatment (Osada 8) and even eased the visa requirements for sightseeing (Osada 6). As a country that has been closed out from the world for many years in history and strongly emphasizes a homogenous community, the shift towards welcoming outsiders into their city is a huge step forward towards change for Japan.

The New Constructions and Investments Being Made

The construction work that is taking place in Tokyo currently does not only include the building of the facilities directly related to the Games but also "the construction of new hotels and the refurbishment of existing hotels in the private sector, urban redevelopment, the construction of commercial facilities, and the enhancement of transportation infrastructures" (Osada 2). The total construction investment is estimated to be around 10 trillion yen (Osada 12), or 100 billion dollars. There is also an estimated need of an additional 700,000 workers, particularly to help with the construction and services (Osada 16). The boost in the workforce is beneficial for society, especially for the temporary workers, or "freeters," who make a living off of multiple part-time jobs.

Though the construction and rebuilding of the city may only seem to benefit the foreign guests and the Games itself, the redevelopment of commercial facilities and transportation infrastructure is very important for the rebranding of the city. Facilities and buildings that have been taken for granted by civilians or have been neglected are now regaining attention. Therefore, the construction that is taking place in Tokyo for the Olympics is expected to improve not only the foreigner experience of navigating the city but also the lifestyle of the citizens living there.

The Anticipated Impact the Olympics will have on Tokyo

In addition to the expected positive impact on the level of GDP, the hosting of the Summer Olympic Games is a sign that the city is committed medium- and long-term to "greater international openness" and thus is willing to strengthen international economic ties (Osada 5). Hosting the Olympics is also a creative way for Tokyo and Japan to rebrand itself, especially after the multiple natural disasters that have been attacking the country these past few years. By encouraging foreigners to come to Tokyo and to take in everything that the city has to offer, the people are able to form their own image of what Tokyo is and what Japan is. They can then go back to their respective home countries and expand on their thoughts and memories from their experiences. This is a much more inclusive and personable way of creating an image of a country than forcing a specific image to the world through a project created by the government. Therefore, the hosting of the Summer Games in 2020 may be the first time in these past 70 years that the government is encouraging others to create an image for their own city and country, rather than the other way around.

Conclusion

Through the social, political, and economic shifts that the country has gone through in the past 70 years, Japan has been able to rebrand itself to meet the needs of each time period. Their loss in WWII formed a soft culture that soon became the foundation for its future national branding programs. The collapse of their strong economy in the 1990s forced them to reevaluate their identity as a corporate-centered society, leading to the creation of the “Cool Japan” nation branding project. Unfortunately, the impacts of the 3/11 disaster had brought the project to an end, causing a shift in branding strategies from being country-centered to people-centered. As Tokyo prepares to host one of the biggest sporting events in the world in 2020, the Japan Brand continues to evolve as an innovative and authentic culture. It is now up to the world to help Japan redesign itself in this global economy and society.

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