A conference on the changing nature of regionalism and regional powers naturally begs questions of measurement: first, by what metrics should we evaluate significant changes in integration? Economic cooperation or market interdependency? Bi- or multilateral agreements? Mutual exchanges of labor, capital, or people? Second, who are the actors or catalysts of integration? Governments? Diplomats? Publics? In other words, in evaluating regionalism, what and who matters? With the popularization of his phrase “soft power” in the early 1990s, Joseph Nye has drawn attention to the importance of culture in international relations and politics. His proposition was that what increasingly matters in building international relationships today is not the traditional power sources of military coercion or economic incentive, but rather the ability to attract others to your values, policies, and culture—in short, to persuade others by getting them to want what you want (Nye 2004: x). So from Nye’s perspective, what matters in today’s shifting map of geopolitics is culture. And who matters, despite some hedging on the part of Nye, is ultimately the nation state and those members who stand to gain from its increased prestige.

Despite the rich and varied forms of art, ideas, behaviors, and everyday life that go into the notion of culture, Nye’s definition is a surprisingly limited one. He might be forgiven this if we consider the political motivations out of which his study was produced: namely, as he has often explained (cite), to take account of the United States’ current reserves of power and to through them demonstrate that the US has, despite its critics in the 1980s, maintained its position at the top of the global hierarchy of nations. And if there was any doubt about this, as there was at a major symposium on soft power in Japan in 2009, former US secretary of State Richard Armitage was there to dispel it for them: “Soft power is about cold, calculating national interest.” As an anthropologist interested in international relations, I want to add what I think is an important dimension to the role of culture in international governance: the
register of ideologies and feelings of cultural proximity. My proposition is that one way to understand regionalism in international studies—or, at least, to inform it—is not through conventional metrics of treaties, agreements, partnerships, and economic cooperation zones, but through a more anthropologically informed study of the forms and feelings of conviviality. My argument is that these forms are changing in two ways: one that represents a progressive cosmopolitan politics of shared cultural heritage, and another that coopts the global flow and proliferation of cultural commodities for the benefit of building national, not regional, prestige. In presenting my case I present evidence from East Asia, notably Japan, in showing that this process is part of a larger trend of global governance in which culture increasingly becomes the field for political and economic contest and problem solving.

Here is an example. In 2009 (cute ambassadors at MOFA) at Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs on February 26, 2009, Public Diplomacy Department Director Monji Kenjirō presented Aoki Misako (age 27), Kimura Yū (age 27), and Fujioka Shizuka (age 21) with their official appointments: *popukaruchā hashinshi - fuasshon bunya* (New Trend Communicators of Japanese Pop Culture) or, abbreviated, kawaii taishi (Cute Ambassadors [fig. 8]). “The main mission of the three ambassadors,” Monji-san explained, “is to transmit the new trends of Japanese pop culture in the field of fashion to the rest of the world and to promote understanding of Japan through their respective cultural projects carried out by the Japanese Embassies and the Japan Foundation” (MOFA 2009). As the three young girls lined up in front of flashing cameras, Monji-san elaborated:

> Pop culture, including fashion, is an integral part of today's Japanese culture. It enjoys worldwide popularity and we witness that its fans are ever-increasing. Pop culture is expected to help the people of the world have more chances to know about contemporary Japan, hand-in-hand with other parts of traditional and contemporary Japanese culture. [MOFA 2009]

The introduction, part two of a daily announcement MOFA holds for the Ministry’s *kisha kurabu* (press clubs) (there are usually two meetings a day), directly followed a briefing on a symposium held a day earlier, a follow-up to the Tokyo International Conference on African Development IV, titled “Japan's Efforts to Promote Peace and Security in Africa: The Case of Sudan and Beyond.” Foreign Ministry Deputy Press Secretary Kawamura Yasuhisa summarized Foreign Minister Nakasone’s four major points concerning Japan’s role in building sustainable peace in Africa:

> One, Japan's active involvement in ending conflicts and achieving peace by citing the cases of Sudan and Somalia. Two, Japan's active involvement in implementing peace agreements. Three, the importance of enhancing Africa's capacity for peace building. And, four, the necessity of strengthening Japan's personnel contribution
to peace-building efforts in Africa. [MOFA 2009]

The irony of the especially discordant two announcements would not have eluded Monji-san himself. Five months later while talking about the transition from his old job as Ambassador to Iraq to his new one as Public Diplomacy Department Director (kōhō bunka koryū buchō, the literal translation would read something closer to “Public Relations and Cultural Exchange Director”), he handed me a 9x11 sheet of paper with two pictures. The top picture showed him in Iraq during his appointment as ambassador, posing in front of a HMMWV with members of Japan’s defense forces and Iraqi translators.1 The bottom picture showed him with the winners of the World Cosplay Summit championship, held annually in Nagoya, Japan, where young fans dress up as their favorite anime characters and compete for prizes. Sharing laughter with Monji-san at the juxtaposition of the two images, my mind recalled other images I had encountered that evoked similar sentiments. One was of another group of Japanese self-defense forces, this time distributing water in Iraq. On the side of the Japanese water tanker trucks was an image of Captain Tsubasa, a character from a famous 1980s soccer anime in Japan and popular throughout the Middle East where he is known as Captain Majed (fig. 9). Another image was of former Foreign Minister Kōmura Masahiko presenting a life-size figure of Doraemon, a popular animated robot cat, with a formal letter of assignment making the cat the official Anime Ambassador of Japan (figs. 10 and 11).

(Figure 8. Cute Ambassadors Fujioka Shizuka, Kimura Yū, and Aoki Misako)

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1 Monji-san inserted black lines over the eyes of the Iraqis to protect their identity. I have decided against publishing this photo altogether.
(Figure 9. Water tanks with popular anime figure called “Captain Majed” in Iraq presented by MOFA)

(Figure 10. “Inauguration Ceremony of Anime Ambassador”)
Whereas each of these images taken alone might elicit a casual smile at the ironic juxtaposition of playful cuteness and hard line security operations, taken as a series, they encourage us to think further, asking what circumstances allow young girls in eighteenth century French haute fashion, anime soccer stars, and robot cats to share discursive and temporal space with African and Iraqi peacekeeping efforts? The answer points to the capacity of soft power to function not simply as a political tool transforming strategies of public diplomacy but also as a new category of cultural imagination which enables the transformation of regional relationships of conviviality—in how politicians, bureaucrats, and diplomats imagine the publics of other regional nation states: not as foreign citizens but as cultural resources for cultivating political prestige.

I think this new form of conviviality has taken shape within what is considered a new status quo of cultural diplomacy in East Asia that, which was modeled for me on a restaurant napkin by an official of the Japan Foundation (the state’s institutional arm of cultural diplomacy). It imagines conviviality between nations as dependent not on state-to-state relations but on state-to-public ones [SLIDE: state-public model]. Fundamental to what is called the “new public diplomacy” (Melissen 2005) is precisely this discourse of soft power and, in particular, the practices of nation branding that inform it. Soft power as diplomatic strategy assumes that nations are not only ethically entitled to engage publics of their regional neighbors in attempts to secure acquiescence through attraction (Nye 2004: 6), but, considering the fall out from failing to do so (and 9/11 is often given as a watershed in defining this new thinking on diplomacy), cannot afford to do otherwise as a matter of
political security. As articulated by Keith Dinnie in the first textbook on the subject, nation branding as a strategy within the new diplomacy is not only natural, it is indispensable (2007: 11).

You have noticed by now that my methodology is entirely anthropological, presenting what seems like anecdotal incidents that may or may not contribute to a wider narrative on changing forms of regional integration. I take these examples not just from news clippings but from 16 months of fieldwork among Japanese government administrators working in the field of public and cultural diplomacy. In observations, interviews, and an internship at the Japan Foundation, Japan’s nationally-funded agency for international cultural relations, I looked at how these individual incidents told a larger story about how the image of foreign publics is changing in political strategies of both regional integration and competition.

Michael Warner writes that a public “exists by virtue of being addressed” (2005: 67). Informed by this observation, then, I want to present a few more brief vignettes from the perspective of Japan of how the forms of address imagined within the ideology of soft power circulating throughout East Asia engender foreign publics through practices of cultural diplomacy. Most fundamental to these forms of address is the way soft power as theory is able to conceptually align interests in international politics with practices of consumption. Characteristic of the reformulation of the ethics of cultural diplomacy, and evidenced most clearly by nation branding’s primary role in it, is its shaping by an increasing economic rationalization in which, citing George Yúdice again, social ideologies are “absorbed into economic...rationality such that management, conservation, access, distribution, and investment—in ‘culture’ and the outcomes thereof—take priority” (2002: 1). This is more than culture-as-commodity, he emphasizes, it is culture-as-political resource. However, to be sure, culture-as-commodity is in no way superseded in this shift. As a major avenue of soft power cultivation open to direct government participation, nation branding assumes something new and specific about consumers of popular media. In Japan, for example (though one can identify the same logic in South Korea), administrators thinking through the lens of soft power understand fans of anime, manga, J-pop, film or literature not as consumers of purely transnational and in many cases cosmopolitan cultural commodities, but as fans of Japanese culture at large. By branding culture in Japan as “Japanese culture,” nation branding assumes something commensurable between a Miyazaki Hayao film and a Murakami Haruki novel. Much like in Marx’s description of the commodity’s exchange value, these two things must have in common a third thing to which they are both reducible. The mysterious and ephemeral “third thing” here is “Japanese culture,” a label that, if
marketed broadly and strategically enough, can convince Miyazaki and Murakami fans that they would likely take pleasure not just in film and literature but also in learning the Japanese language, visiting Japan, and perhaps even studying or working there. In general, the logic continues, as fans of specifically Japanese cultural commodities, they are likely to appreciate the charms of everything Japanese, from popular media to foreign aid endeavors. At the same time that the transnational flow of cultural commodities breaks down national borders and identities, the logic of nation branding reveals the capacity to, in turn, efface cosmopolitan, multivalent, nuanced, and complex meanings of media consumption as it reduces heterogeneous subculture fans into a single body of mass consumers. Fans of anime and manga, for example, typified as the marginalized and geeky otaku—not only in Japan but also across East Asia—are through the branding campaign of “Cool Japan” brought into the fold of mainstream, mass consumption. Under classic branding logic, to the degree that Cool Japan can attract consumers qua fans of Japanese culture, it seeks to turn all aspects of culture into political resource—thus NHK’s extension of the label of “cool” to an ever-growing list of cultural commodities, shown here on a list of episode themes for its TV series “Cool Japan”:

Stationary, shopping, winter, examinations, childbirth, childrearing, memorial services, Japanese men, Japanese herbivorous men (sōshoku kei danshi, the name given to men characterized by a lack of traditional masculinity, a disinterest in women, and soft, effeminate features), Japanese women, mothers, fathers, anniversary parties, sweets, discipline, hot pots, sightseeing, toys, health, luck, konkatsu (the variety of activities designed to facilitate the meeting of couples wanting to wed), lights, rain/the rainy season (tsuyu), privacy, the Japanese language, Japanese companies (parts 1 and 2), prayers, gifts, tears, containers, soy sauce, shame (haji), sleeping, books (including the book published by NHK on the program “Cool Japan,” titled Cool Japan), and disaster prevention. [“Cool Japan” 2010]

In another branding strategy managed by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) called “Japanesque Modern,” the Japan brand is stamped upon not only culture but on everyday commodities as well. The “New Japan Style 100 Selections” project (Shin nihon yōshiki 100 sen) designates a hundred specific items chosen by the group that, in the words of their mission statement, “represent the link between cutting edge modern technologies and our country’s most highly valued traditional culture, expressed in modern lifestyle trends” (Japanesque Modern 2006) [SLIDE: “100 Items”]. Whether in using a sleekly designed toilet or monster-shaped pencil erasers, one cannot help but think of these things as Japanese.

Of additional interest here in how these forms of mediation construct subjects as consumers of specifically Japanese forms of culture is how cultural history is, in turn,
implicated and rewritten in the process. As seen in Prime Minister Abe Shinzo’s address to the Diet in 2007, an additional strategy for building a mass public through cultural consumption is to establish historical continuity between Japan’s traditional and contemporary arts:

Japanese pop culture such as manga (comic), animation, game, music, movie and TV drama, as well as modern art, literature, theater arts and others are referred to as "Japan cool." It is gaining popularity among the younger generation around the world. Japanese lifestyle represented in its cuisine and fashion has also widely spread in other countries. However, [it is not only] the attractiveness of [contemporary] Japanese culture transmitted and spread through cultural exchanges [that can] be classified as being "cool." As shown by the fact that Japan is the very country of the cradle of "Japanimation," Japanese contemporary culture's coolness is founded in and derived from its traditional culture. [Abe, Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet: 2007]

If soft power thinking can establish commensurability between both traditional arts and contemporary pop culture, it can also do so between both national and resolutely cosmopolitan cultural forms—few more central to the fixing of a national cultural ethos than literature. For the majority of his early career, author Murakami Haruki was excluded from the national canon by Japan’s literary establishment. The Nobel Prize laureate Ōe Kenzaburō once stated, “Murakami Haruki writes in Japanese, but his writing is not really Japanese…I suspect that this sort of style is not really Japanese literature” (in Strecher 1990: 374). Murakami’s exclusion was reciprocated by an understandable antagonism toward Japanese culture: “All I could think about when I began writing fiction in my youth was how to run as far as I could from the ‘Japanese condition.’ I wanted to distance myself as much as possible from the curse of Japanese” (in Rubin 2003: 47). The obvious animosity, though lately tempered, makes the Japan Foundation’s organization of a symposium celebrating the charm of Murakami Haruki’s literature all the more illustrative of soft power’s capacity to nationalize culture, here interpelling foreign readers of “not really Japanese literature” as fans of Japanese culture. The purpose of the symposium administered by the institution formally under the operation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and charged with showcasing Japanese culture to the world is communicated in the symposium’s program announcement: “Focusing on the novels and the translations of one of the most popular contemporary novelists in the world, it is aimed at exploring the secret of this Murakami boom” (Japan Foundation 2006) [SLIDE: Symposium flyer].

While these examples introduce just a few ways that foreign publics emerge as increasingly homogenous bodies of mass consumers amenable to influence and, ultimately
for some, political persuasion, a rather utilitarian view of cultural conviviality, they also hint at an important way affects are cultivated through media representation and international cultural administration. It is tempting to read the hardly inconspicuous national sentiment permeating soft power policy as a product of national thinking at large—as simply the style in which the national community is imagined. Tracing soft power through multiple sites of its administrative inscription, however, reveals a more dynamic system in which national affect is channeled. In horizontally organized institutions of international cultural relations—the Japan Foundation, British Council, Goethe Institut, Korea Foundation, Confucius Institutes—national affect is better understood as an emergent product of certain uneven forms and practices of diplomatic exchange—feedback from a mode of address that constructs a mass body of cultural consumers as political resource.

Where does this ideological feedback take place? Based on my own fieldwork exercises tracing soft power from one agency to another as its ideas are informed and transformed through conversations, join symposiums, and workshops, I found that the horizontally-integrated network of national culture institutes play a major role in sustaining this ideological flow of globally-integrated, national management. While one can certainly understand regionalism in international relations by seeking resemblances in practices and policy within a traditionally-designated “region” such as “East Asia,” I argue that one can also do it through an anthropological framing of cultural difference—not in terms of classically distinguished organic national cultures but rather in terms of a strategically-situated fieldwork positioning that reveals the production of cultural similarities and differences as they are allowed to emerge within networks of global cultural administration. Situating foreign publics within the circuits of mainstream popular culture that are at least in part facilitated by national cultural administrators is one way to better understand both the interpellative role of the nation state in generating transnational but interregional forms of mass culture. Thus, through increasingly naturalized practices of global governance like nation branding, soft power constructs conviviality as at once a relationship with foreign publics through shared cultural consumption at the same time as it appropriates those consumers as resources for cultivating political prestige and soft power.
References


