

Sake as Cultural Diplomacy: A Soft Power Approach to Japan's Nation Branding in Europe

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Abstract

This study examines the strategic role of *sake* as an instrument of cultural diplomacy within the framework of trade relations between Japan and Europe, using a theoretical approach that combines the concepts of soft power, gastrodiplomacy, and nation branding. *Sake*, as a traditional Japanese fermented beverage rooted in the spiritual and social practices of society, has undergone a reorientation of its function from domestic consumption to a symbol of national cultural identity promoted internationally. Through the Cool Japan policy, the Japanese government actively positions *sake* as a key element in public diplomacy, linking cultural heritage with export trade strategies.

The implementation of the EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) since 2018, which includes geographical indication (GI) protection, provides additional legitimacy for the authenticity of *sake* in the European market. Promotional strategies involving culinary festivals, cross-industry collaborations, and product narratives emphasizing aesthetic value, origins, and traditional production techniques have successfully enhanced European public perception of *sake* and, more broadly, of Japan. Export data shows significant growth, with France, the United Kingdom, and Germany contributing the most, indicating the success of this approach in expanding market penetration. However, this dynamic is not without criticism, including the commodification of cultural values, exclusion of small producers, and the risk of reducing the spiritual meaning of *sake* in a commercialized context.

Therefore, this study emphasizes the importance of cultural diplomacy that not only highlights visual appeal and market narratives but also commits to preserving values and the participation of local cultural communities. In conclusion, *sake* diplomacy offers an intriguing model for the integration of culture and economy in international relations, demonstrating that cultural products can serve as an effective means to build cross-national relations rooted in empathy, experience, and appreciation for the uniqueness of traditions.

Keywords: *Sake* diplomacy, soft power, Japan–Europe trade relations, nation branding, Cool Japan, Japan–EU Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA).

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, the dynamics of international relations have undergone significant shifts, where diplomatic instruments are no longer dominated by military power or heavy industry trade alone, but also rely on culture-based soft power. [Nye 2004]. One rapidly growing form of cultural diplomacy is gastrodiplomacy, which involves introducing national cuisine to the international stage as part of public

diplomacy strategies [Rockower 2012]. This phenomenon has gained momentum with the rise of global mobility, international tourism, and cross-border cultural exchange, enabling cuisine to serve as a means of building positive perceptions of its country of origin. East Asian countries, including Japan, have been pioneers in leveraging the power of cuisine as a diplomatic tool to expand cultural influence while opening up trade opportunities [Strugar 2015].

In the context of Japan-Europe relations, this approach gained new relevance following the signing of the EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) in 2018, which not only eliminated trade tariffs but also facilitated cultural promotion through culinary festivals, exhibitions, and exchange programs [Farina 2018]. Gastrodiplomacy offers strategic advantages as it can transcend language and political ideology barriers; shared culinary experiences and flavors can foster cross-cultural familiarity, ultimately influencing public perception of the country of origin of the products [Pokarier 2018]. Japan, through its “Cool Japan” program, actively promotes culinary heritage such as *washoku* (traditional Japanese cuisine) to Europe, leveraging culinary diplomacy to strengthen its national brand and enhance the competitiveness of its products in the global market [Assmann 2017]. This strategy is not merely about promoting gastronomy but is also part of economic diplomacy aimed at boosting exports and building a positive image of Japan in the eyes of European trading partners.

One of the strongest representations of this strategy is *sake*, or *nihonshu*, which has a long history and deep symbolic value. The earliest records of *sake* production date back to the Nara period (710–794 CE), when the beverage was used in Shinto religious rituals and imperial court ceremonies [Sato & Kohsaka 2017]. During the Heian period (794–1185), production techniques evolved and consumption expanded to the nobility and general public, though it remained an integral part of celebrations and significant events. This tradition has persisted into the modern era, where *sake* has become an essential element in seasonal celebrations, festivals, and formal banquets. The recognition of *washoku* as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage in

2013 further solidified *sake*'s position as an integral part of Japan's national culinary heritage with global appeal [UNESCO 2013].

In contemporary developments, *sake* has transcended its domestic role to become a cultural ambassador for Japan in international markets. The growing global interest in Japanese cuisine, particularly in Europe, which has a long tradition of appreciating fermented beverages like wine and beer, presents significant opportunities for *sake* market penetration [Bargain 2024]. The similarity in approach to the European wine industry makes *sake* more easily accepted by the market.

Economically, this success is reflected in the latest export data. According to the Japan *Sake* and *Shochu* Makers Association (JSS), the value of *sake* exports in 2023 reached 47.49 billion yen, an increase of 21.6 percent from the previous year, with Europe contributing approximately 15 percent of the total value. The main markets include the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, driven by the growing number of Japanese restaurants, international food festivals, and the shifting perception of *sake* from an exotic drink to a premium product on par with high-end wine [Association 2024]. The implementation of the EPA since 2019 has further strengthened this trend through the protection of geographical indications (GI), ensuring the authenticity of products in the European market [Walravens & Padrón-Hernández 2024].

The success of *sake* in the European market is closely tied to promotional strategies that combine commercial approaches with cultural diplomacy. Producers, both large and small, tell the story behind each bottle: from the water source originating from specific springs, the history of the family behind the production that has spanned centuries, to the Japanese aesthetic philosophy reflected in the packaging design [Ishizuka et al. 2024]. *Sake* festivals in Paris, London, and Berlin not only introduce flavors but also foster cultural interactions that enrich consumers' understanding of Japan.

From a cultural diplomacy perspective, *sake* is not merely an export commodity, but a representation of Japan's national identity on the international stage. Through trade exhibitions, culinary festivals, and diplomatic events, Japan positions *sake* as a premium product that

reflects craftsmanship, raw material quality, and the philosophy of harmony with nature [Pokarier 2018]. Trade momentum has increased following the implementation of the EPA, which eliminated import tariffs on *sake* and provided GI protection in the European market, thereby enhancing its competitiveness [Suzuki 2020]. Events such as the *Sake* Fair in Paris and the London *Sake* Challenge serve as platforms for direct interaction that foster positive perceptions of Japan [Okano-Heijmans 2014]. Narratives about history, production processes, precision, quality, and sustainability serve as an effective “diplomatic language” bridging cultural differences [Akagawa 2014; Suzuki 2020].

Although there are many studies on Japan–Europe trade diplomacy, research integrating cultural diplomacy analysis with *sake* trade is still limited. Previous studies have primarily focused on the promotion of *washoku* in general [Pokarier 2018] or Japan’s soft power strategies in the popular culture sector [Iwabuchi 2018], while empirical analyses of *sake* as an instrument of economic diplomacy are rare. The lack of studies examining the spillover effects of *sake* promotion on related sectors such as tourism and cross-cultural cuisine indicates a research gap. Similarly, the role of non-state actors such as European producer and importer associations in strengthening “*Sake* Diplomacy” has not been extensively discussed, despite the fact that this aspect could determine the effectiveness of the strategy in practice [Okano-Heijmans 2014].

Based on these gaps, the objective of this study is to comprehensively examine the role of the *sake* industry as an instrument of cultural diplomacy and a driver of Japan–Europe trade relations. This study is designed to integrate the perspectives of soft power, cultural marketing, and free trade policy within the framework of bilateral relations. Drawing on Nye’s [2004] concept of soft power as the ability to influence through cultural appeal, *sake* is positioned as a cultural product that carries diplomatic messages while opening up market expansion opportunities. This study will analyze Japan’s cultural diplomacy strategies, identify the impacts of trade policies such as the EPA, measure the spillover effects of *sake* promotion on related sectors, and explore European consumers’

perceptions of *sake* as a symbol of Japanese culture and economy (J. S. Nye, 2004).

Theoretical Framework Soft Power Theory

The concept of soft power was first introduced by Joseph S. Nye Jr. in 1990 in his book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. Nye defines soft power as the ability of an actor, usually a state, to influence others through attraction and persuasion, rather than through coercion or payment [Nye 1990]. In other words, soft power is “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment” [Nye 2004]. The primary sources of soft power come from culture, political values, and foreign policies that are considered legitimate and have legitimacy by the international community [Nye 2011].

Nye emphasizes that culture becomes an important element when it is seen as attractive by outsiders. The political values of a country become a source of soft power when they are consistent with internal and external practices, while foreign policy has a soft power impact when it is considered legitimate and has moral authority [Froehlich 2021]. In the context of international relations, soft power enables a country to achieve political goals without relying solely on military force (hard power) or economic instruments. For example, the United States utilizes its entertainment industry, higher education, and democratic foreign policy as instruments of soft power [Rugh 2009].

The concept of soft power introduced by Joseph S. Nye explains that a country's power is not only measured by its ability to coerce or reward, but also by its attractiveness, which influences the preferences of others. This attraction arises when a country has a fascinating culture, trusted political values, and foreign policies that are considered legitimate. These three elements are not merely theoretical elements but can be operationalized as indicators showing the level of a country's soft power [Nye 2004].

The first indicator is culture. Culture has great potential to shape a positive image at the international level, both through traditional cultural heritage such as art, literature, and cuisine, as well as popular culture such as music, film, and other creative products. Culture becomes an attractive resource when it transcends geographical boundaries and captivates people across nations. Cultural appeal is not always uniform; it heavily depends on the alignment of values and the preferences of the global audience. Japan, for example, leverages animation, manga, and traditional cuisine like *sushi* and *sake* as tools of cultural diplomacy to build a positive image of the country abroad [Otmažgin 2012].

The second indicator is political values and domestic institutions. Political values include principles of democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and transparent governance. A country gains political appeal when these values are consistently upheld domestically and projected through foreign policy. Credibility is an important factor; a country that promotes democracy but does not respect it domestically will find it difficult to maintain soft power [Nye 2011]. In this context, indicators include the level of civil liberties, the independence of legal institutions, public participation in decision-making, and the government's reputation in the eyes of the world.

The third indicator is foreign policy. A country's appeal can increase if its foreign policy is seen as legitimate, fair, and contributing positively to the international community. Cooperative diplomacy, involvement in international organizations, participation in conflict resolution, and humanitarian aid are examples of activities that strengthen soft power. On the other hand, aggressive or exploitative foreign policy can damage a country's image and reduce the appeal it has built up [Hall 2010]. Therefore, foreign policy indicators include diplomatic reputation, the level of multilateral cooperation, and contributions to global issues such as climate change or public health.

In addition to these three primary sources, Nye [2017] emphasizes that international public perception of a country is an important cross-dimensional indicator. Nation brand, international media presence,

and digital presence are instruments that strengthen or weaken soft power [Seilkhan 2023].

Thus, soft power indicators can be summarized into four major categories: attractive cultural assets, credible political values and governance, legitimate and constructive foreign policy, and positive international public perception. These four elements interact and form a comprehensive force that distinguishes soft power from other forms of power. Understanding these indicators is not only useful for academic analysis but also relevant in practice for countries seeking to design effective diplomatic strategies in the era of globalization [Nye 2004].

The relevant indicator for this study is culture. In Joseph Nye's soft power theory, culture is one of the primary resources that can shape a positive image and influence others without coercion. Culture here encompasses traditional heritage, art, language, cuisine, and values inherent to a nation. *Sake*, as a traditional Japanese beverage, is a tangible manifestation of Japan's rich cultural heritage and can serve as a diplomatic tool in Japan–Europe relations [Nye & Power 2004].

Sake is not merely viewed as a consumer product but also as a symbol of Japanese identity. Its production process combines traditional expertise, high-quality local ingredients, and a philosophy reflecting harmony (*wa*), sacredness in celebrations, and respect in social interactions. These aspects make *sake* a cultural representation that can attract European attention, especially in an era when consumers increasingly value authentic products with strong cultural narratives [Otmažgin 2012].

Thus, cultural indicators in Soft Power Theory are not merely supporting elements but the core of *sake* diplomacy strategy. By leveraging the cultural narratives, historical values, and emotional experiences associated with *sake*, Japan can expand its influence in Europe peacefully, strengthen trade relations, and build a positive national image in the eyes of the world [Nye 2004].

Public Diplomacy & Nation Branding Theory

Simon Anholt views a country's international reputation as a strategic asset that can significantly influence political, economic, and cultural relations. According to him, nation branding is not merely about building an image through promotional campaigns, but a long-term effort to shape a country's competitive identity through tangible, consistent, and verifiable actions. This identity is reflected in policies, behavior, as well as the products and services produced by the country, thereby forming a positive perception in the eyes of the global community [Anholt 2007].

To guide this strategy, Anholt developed the Nation Brands Index (NBI), which measures international public perceptions of countries through six dimensions: exports, government, culture and heritage, society, tourism, and investment and immigration. This index serves as an analytical tool to understand the strengths and weaknesses of a country's image, as well as a guide in designing effective public diplomacy policies and activities. Through systematic measurement, countries can assess the impact of their policies and activities on their reputation in the eyes of the world [Dinnie 2015].

The alignment between public diplomacy and nation branding is key to the success of this theory. In Nicholas Cull's view, integrated public diplomacy involves strategic communication, cultural diplomacy, educational exchanges, and media relations management. All these elements support each other to ensure that the image of the country projected abroad is consistent with the reality experienced by the international audience [Cull 2009].

This principle of alignment is further emphasized by Wally Olins, who stresses the importance of consistency between the messages conveyed and the actual behavior of the state. Inconsistency between the two can undermine credibility and even damage the reputation that has been built. Therefore, nation branding requires integration between public policy, diplomatic behavior, and the quality of products or services that reflect the values of the country [Olins 2014].

In a cultural context, this theory can be applied through national product diplomacy that holds high symbolic value. For example, Japan's promotion of *sake* in the European market is not only aimed at increasing exports but also at introducing the richness of its cultural heritage and lifestyle. Such strategies demonstrate how cultural products can function as a medium of public diplomacy that strengthens the nation brand, creates appeal, and builds stronger trade relations at the international level [Van Ham 2008] Simon Anholt explains that a country's global reputation is not formed solely by marketing campaigns, but rather by the real-world experiences of the international public toward that country. He developed a model known as the Nation Brand Hexagon, which consists of six key indicators: exports, government, culture and heritage, society, tourism, and investment and immigration [Anholt 2007].

The first indicator is exports. According to Anholt, the quality, innovation, and competitiveness of a country's products significantly influence international perceptions of that country. Products with a good reputation can serve as effective brand ambassadors, as they carry the country's image of quality to global markets [Fan 2010]. The second indicator is governance. This aspect measures international public perception of a country's domestic and foreign policies. Political stability, the rule of law, protection of human rights, and the integrity of foreign diplomacy determine the image of a government [Dinnie 2015]. The third indicator is culture and heritage. This dimension encompasses art, music, cuisine, traditions, sports, and historical heritage that shape a nation's identity. Culture often serves as an effective channel for public diplomacy because it can create emotional connections with foreign audiences [Cull 2009]. The fourth indicator is society. The reputation of citizens, in terms of friendliness, openness, professional expertise, and global contributions, can influence a country's overall image [Melissen 2005]. The fifth indicator is tourism. A country's natural, cultural, and tourism infrastructure attractions can create a positive and lasting image. Foreign tourist visits serve as an important gateway for introducing a country's cultural and social values

[Olins 2014]. The final indicator is investment and immigration. This dimension relates to a country's appeal as a place to invest, work, study, or settle. Factors such as a stable business climate, job opportunities, quality education, and a high standard of living are key considerations [Van Ham 2008].

The indicators relevant to this study are Culture and Heritage indicators. In Simon Anholt's theory of Public Diplomacy & Nation Branding, Culture and Heritage indicators have strategic power because they can build a country's image through emotional appeal and symbolic value. Culture is not only seen as an aesthetic asset but also as a diplomatic instrument that can influence the perceptions and behavior of the international public. Anholt emphasizes that countries that successfully leverage their cultural strength can create differentiation in the global arena, making historical heritage and traditional practices a distinguishing identity from other countries. In this context, culture functions as a non-verbal language that communicates the values, skills, and worldview of a nation [Anholt 2007].

Discussion

Sake as an Instrument of Japan's Soft Power

Cultural power has the capacity to influence international relations through non-coercive channels, creating positive images and shaping public preferences. In the past two decades, Japan has increasingly highlighted *sake* as one of its primary soft power instruments, alongside anime, manga, cuisine, and traditional arts. The concept of soft power proposed by Nye [2004] emphasizes that cultural appeal can create more enduring relationships than political or economic pressure. Within this framework, *sake* serves as a strategic tool to project Japan's identity rooted in tradition yet relevant in modern markets, particularly Europe, which has a strong culinary tradition and a culture of alcohol consumption [Nye 2004].

The uniqueness of *sake* as a tool for cultural diplomacy lies not only in its distinctive taste or technical quality but also in the narrative that accompanies it. It carries a story about humanity's relationship with nature, the cycles of the seasons, and the philosophy of *wa* (harmony), which forms the foundation of social relationships in Japan. In Europe, where consumers are increasingly drawn to authentic experiences, *sake* offers a cultural journey in every sip. Japanese restaurants in Paris, fusion bars in London, and culinary festivals in Rome now position *sake* not merely as a complementary beverage but as the core of a gastronomic experience. This sensory and emotional experience is the key to soft power, as it creates a personal connection between consumers and Japanese culture [Iwabuchi 2018].

Sake promotion in Europe is carried out through public diplomacy strategies that emphasize direct interaction with the audience. Events like the Salon du Saké in Paris have become a meeting point for Japanese producers, European distributors, and international food enthusiasts. Visitors not only taste *sake* but also participate in workshops, learn to distinguish between categories like *junmai daiginjo* and *honjozo*, and understand the role of water and rice in creating distinctive flavor profiles. According to Cull [2009], effective public diplomacy relies on two-way interaction that builds mutual understanding; *sake* tasting events and cultural festivals fulfill this function by creating a space for conversation between producers and consumers [Bukh 2014].

The Japanese government plays an active role in supporting *sake* promotion through the Cool Japan policy, which aims to enhance the nation's image abroad. The Japan Sake and *Shochu* Makers Association (JSS) and the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) have initiated various promotional programs in Europe, ranging from participation in international exhibitions to collaborations with Michelin-starred restaurants. This approach is designed to present *sake* as a symbol of Japanese quality and aesthetics, in line with the nation branding strategy that emphasizes consistency of image at every point of interaction with foreign audiences [Ma 2023].

The success of *sake* in Europe is closely tied to its ability to adapt to local market preferences through the principle of glocalization. Adaptation is achieved without compromising its core cultural identity, but rather by adjusting presentation methods, marketing narratives, and consumption contexts. For example, in France, *sake* is often paired with seafood or cheese during pairing dinners, allowing consumers to understand it within a gastronomic framework they are familiar with. This strategy enables *sake* to enter the European culinary culture without losing its Japanese characteristics [Iwabuchi 2018; Otmažgin 2012].

Competition in the European premium alcoholic beverage market is fierce, with French wine, Scotch whisky, and Belgian beer dominating. Rather than competing on quantity, *sake* has adopted a differentiation approach through gastrodiplomacy. Its selling point is not just the taste, but the experience and story that accompany each bottle. Narratives about the producing village, the family history of the makers, and annual rice harvesting rituals serve as emotional elements that give *sake* a unique position in the market. Rockower [2012] emphasizes that gastrodiplomacy is effective when a product carries a strong cultural identity and builds emotional connections with consumers—a strategy consistently implemented by Japan [Rockower 2012].

Case studies in several European countries highlight the diversity of promotional strategies. In France, *sake* is positioned as a natural pairing for high-end gastronomy, supported by renowned sommeliers and chefs. In the UK, the focus is on cultural events and pop-up events that combine *sake* tastings with Japanese music and art. In Italy, promotion is carried out through collaborations with culinary schools to introduce *sake* in the context of fusion cuisine. This country-specific approach demonstrates Japan's understanding of the importance of local context in the success of cultural diplomacy [Ma 2023; Otmažgin 2012].

Data from MAFF (2022) shows that *sake* exports to Europe have increased by an average of 10–15 percent annually over the past decade, with France, the UK, and Germany as the largest markets. This surge coincides with intensified event-based promotions and positive media

coverage. Formal achievements such as the recognition of *nihonshu* as a geographical indication in the Japan-EU Economic Partnership Agreement (2019) provide additional legitimacy, equivalent to the protection enjoyed by iconic European products such as Champagne and Prosciutto in international markets [Otmazgin 2012].

The impact of *sake* diplomacy extends beyond economic aspects. Country image surveys conducted in several European countries show an increase in positive associations with Japan, where *sake* emerges as one of the most recognized cultural icons after sushi and anime. This effect reinforces the argument that promoting cultural products can have a dual impact: boosting trade while shaping favorable public opinion [Iwabuchi 2018].

Looking ahead, the success of *sake* diplomacy will largely depend on its ability to maintain a balance between tradition and innovation. The European market continues to evolve, and younger consumers have different preferences from previous generations. Innovation in packaging, presentation formats, or technology integration can be key to maintaining relevance, provided that the cultural values that form its core strength are not compromised. If this balance can be maintained, *sake* has the potential to become a global model for cultural diplomacy based on traditional products [Nye & Power 2004; Rockower 2012].

By combining cultural narratives, adaptive promotional strategies, and national policy support, Japan has demonstrated how a traditional product can evolve into an effective soft power instrument. *Sake* not only connects Japan and Europe through trade but also through deeper cultural experiences and understanding. In the context of international relations, this demonstrates that cultural power can be a strategic asset equal to, or even surpassing, economic or military power when managed consistently and authentically [Iwabuchi 2018].

Sake in Japan’s Nation Branding Strategy through the “Cool Japan” Framework

Japan is one of the most systematic countries in building its national image through a culture-based nation branding approach. This strategy is a manifestation of Japan’s soft power, where culture is mobilized as a non-coercive influence that reaches a global audience through appealing products and narratives. The Cool Japan policy is a concrete form of this effort: a program initiated by the Japanese government in the early 2000s to present Japan as a creative, unique, and culturally rich country. While Cool Japan was previously known for promoting anime, manga, and J-pop, the strategy now encompasses traditional culture such as tea ceremonies, handicrafts, and signature beverages like *sake*. *Sake* is no longer merely viewed as a domestic product but as a strategically chosen symbol of national culture to represent Japan on the international stage of cultural diplomacy [Iwabuchi 2020].

Sake has a deep and complex cultural dimension. It is not merely an alcoholic beverage consumed at banquets but an integral part of rituals, spirituality, and aesthetic expression in Japanese society. In Shinto ceremonies, harvest celebrations, weddings, and New Year’s celebrations, *sake* serves as a medium connecting humans and the sacred. Therefore, promoting *sake* overseas is not just about selling its taste, but also marketing its narrative – a legacy that embodies the philosophy of Japanese life. The Japanese government, through institutions such as JETRO and MAFF, actively integrates *sake* into cultural and trade promotion abroad, whether in diplomatic forums, international culinary exhibitions, or Japanese cultural festivals overseas. With this approach, *sake* becomes a tool of public diplomacy that operates not through political negotiations but through sensory and symbolic experiences that build emotional connections with the international public [Snow 2016].

Furthermore, *sake* has also undergone a process of reframing through an aesthetic and symbolic approach within the framework of Cool Japan. In the highly visual world of global marketing, design and narrative

have become integral parts of how a product is communicated. In this case, *sake* is packaged with distinctive Japanese visual elements: bottles labeled with Japanese calligraphy, images of Mount Fuji, cherry blossom motifs, or geometric designs based on the wabi-sabi principle. These elements not only reinforce national identity but also provide consumers with a cultural experience. *Sake* is not sold merely as a beverage but as a consumable symbol of Japan. This aligns with the global trend among upper-middle-class consumers in Europe and America who are increasingly drawn to products with cultural value and authentic stories behind them. Such narratives reinforce *sake*'s position as part of "heritage luxury," which refers to luxury goods whose value stems from heritage and authenticity, not artificial opulence [Ma 2023].

The acceptance of *sake* in the European market reflects the success of this strategy. In France, Japan launched a large-scale cultural project called Japonismes 2018 to celebrate 160 years of diplomatic relations between the two countries. During the festival, *sake* was introduced not only through tastings and promotional booths, but also through collaborations with Michelin-starred chefs, local sommeliers, and haute cuisine restaurants. This demonstrates that Japan's cultural diplomacy targets not only the general public, but also cultural elites and the local gastronomy industry. Meanwhile, in Italy, collaborations between Japanese *sake* producers and Italian wine entrepreneurs have produced an intriguing blend of two cultures that both value fermentation and flavor. This cross-cultural approach strengthens Japan's image not only as a cultural exporter but also as an open cultural partner willing to engage in dialogue and symbiosis [Tamaki 2019].

However, the success of *sake* diplomacy is not without challenges and criticism. Some academics have pointed out that when cultural products like *sake* are promoted in global markets, there is a tendency for their original cultural values to be overshadowed by market logic. The commodification of culture turns *sake* into an exotic and aesthetic commodity, detached from its spiritual and social roots in Japanese culture. This is where the dilemma between cultural preservation

and global expansion arises. While promotional strategies require adaptation to global market preferences, there is a risk that the original meaning and context of the product may be marginalized. This commodification also carries the potential for inequality, where only large businesses can adapt to global standards, while small local producers are left behind and lose access to their own cultural heritage [Iwabuchi 2021].

Another criticism concerns cultural bias in Japan's public diplomacy. Not all types of *sake* or *sake*-producing regions are promoted equally. Regions with strong promotional infrastructure, such as Kyoto, Niigata, and Akita, receive more exposure than lesser-known rural areas. This results in a narrow representation of Japanese culture in the eyes of the international community, as only a small portion of cultural diversity is highlighted in promotions. Promotional strategies that emphasize certain aspects of Japanese culture can also reinforce stereotypes or create unrealistic expectations about Japanese society. Therefore, a more inclusive and democratic approach is needed in managing national cultural promotion, so that public diplomacy truly reflects the complexity and diversity of Japan [Boan 2022].

On the other hand, *sake* diplomacy also opens up new opportunities for more subtle yet profound non-verbal diplomacy. As a consumable medium, *sake* does not require language to establish connections: its aroma, taste, presentation, and the social experience that accompanies it are sufficient to convey symbolic messages. In modern public diplomacy theory, communication based on emotions and personal experiences is often more effective than verbal narratives or direct propaganda. This kind of fluid diplomacy works through closeness, engagement, and immersion. When someone enjoys *sake* at a Japanese restaurant in Paris or Rome, they are not just tasting a beverage but also experiencing Japan symbolically. This is the power of culture working silently: creating positive associations, shaping perceptions, and indirectly fostering affection for the country of origin [Pokarier 2018].

Conclusion

Japan's strategy in promoting *sake* as part of its Cool Japan cultural policy has demonstrated the power of cultural diplomacy in expanding national influence on the international stage. *Sake*, which was originally a local product with spiritual and communal significance, has undergone a transformation into a cultural ambassador symbolically representing Japanese values. This success is not solely due to product quality but also to the systematic narrative and aesthetic strategies designed by the Japanese government and creative industry players [Iwabuchi 2020].

In the realm of soft power, *sake* serves as a non-coercive cultural communication tool, capable of shaping positive perceptions of Japan through sensory, visual, and symbolic experiences. By relying on affective and participatory diplomacy, Japan has been able to build emotional connections with the global public without directly relying on military or economic power [Valaskivi 2013].

However, this strategy also raises debates about the authenticity and validity of the cultural representations constructed by the state. *Sake* promoted globally is no longer merely a cultural product but a branded product that has undergone curation, aestheticization, and commercialization. This raises the potential for cultural simplification and the removal of the complex social context from the original culture [Daliot-Bul 2009].

Another equally important issue is the distribution of benefits from product-based cultural diplomacy, such as *sake*. In many cases, only large producers with the capacity to adapt to the global market can do so, while small and traditional producers are left behind. This disparity highlights that cultural diplomacy can also create forms of economic and symbolic exclusion against the original cultural communities themselves [Ishizuka et al. 2024].

The commodification of culture also raises ethical dilemmas, especially when sacred elements of a culture are positioned as objects of global consumption. *Sake*, as an important element in Shinto rituals and the spiritual life of Japanese society, when promoted as a commercial

product, risks losing its transcendental meaning. This highlights that cultural diplomacy, despite its aim to build bridges between cultures, must still have moral boundaries and be sensitive to local values [Assmann 2017].

Nevertheless, *sake* promotion strategies still provide room for innovation in more empathetic and experience-based public diplomacy. In various cultural festivals in Europe and America, *sake* is positioned not only as a commercial product but as a medium for cultural exchange that touches the senses, memories, and identity. Such interactions open opportunities for the creation of more organic and two-way diplomacy [Pokarier 2018].

Beyond its role as a diplomatic tool, *sake* also plays a strategic role in strengthening Japan's image as a country that seamlessly blends tradition with modernity. *Sake* is promoted alongside advanced storage technology, futuristic bottle designs, and sustainability narratives, showcasing Japan's innovative yet culturally rooted identity. This integration demonstrates Japan's sophistication in building a balanced nation branding that harmonizes heritage and progress [Sato & Kohsaka 2017].

However, to sustain the sustainability of cultural diplomacy through *sake*, greater active involvement of local cultural communities is required. The state cannot be the sole actor in defining cultural representation. Ideal cultural diplomacy is participatory, inclusive, and provides space for minority voices and small producers so that cultural diversity is not merely celebrated symbolically but also empowered structurally [Yano 2013].

Looking ahead, Japan can expand this *sake*-centric diplomacy strategy by engaging in international collaboration based on shared values, such as environmental sustainability, ethical consumption, and cultural economic justice. In this way, promoting *sake* not only expands markets but also deepens the meaning of more human and reflective diplomacy between nations [Mazzaraco 2024].

In conclusion, Japanese *sake* diplomacy is a powerful example of how cultural products can be an effective soft power tool in building

national identity, expanding international influence, and strengthening intercultural relations. However, the long-term success of this strategy will depend heavily on the country's willingness to maintain a balance between promotion and preservation, between commercialization and respect for the original cultural meaning. Responsible cultural diplomacy demands more than just marketing strategies; it requires empathy, ethics, and openness to cultural complexity [Assmann 2017].

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