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A GROWING LOVE FOR “COOL JAPAN”

Akira Yamada

Japan may appear defensive on the economic and political fronts. Has the world lost interest in an aging Japan whose economy will fall to third largest? There is, however, a side of Japan that is the object of ever stronger and deeper affection around the globe: Japanese popular culture, particularly *anime* (Japanese animation) and *manga*.

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It will be no exaggeration to say that the world's interest in and admiration for Japanese pop culture has grown dramatically in the first decade of the 21st century, thanks partly to the global spread of the Internet. This fact, however, is not well known around the world, even in Japan. Not many of the readers of the AJISS-Commentary, either Japanese or non-Japanese, likely have a clear understanding of the whole picture.

Although the exact number is unknown, there may be well over 100 events annually organized around the world featuring Japanese pop culture, *anime* and *manga* in particular, and attracting more than 10,000 participants. If events with several hundred or thousand participants are included, the number would be countless. Events focusing on Japanese pop culture are growing continuously both in numbers and in size. The largest event of this kind, "Japan Expo" held annually in Paris since 2000, brought in a record 164,000 participants in 2009. It is said that Brazil had several events with more than 100,000 participants.

These events feature not only pop culture such as *anime*, *manga* and fashion, but almost all aspects of Japanese culture, including traditional culture. They are basically organized and attended by local people alone with no Japanese involvement. When asked, these young participants will happily tell you about their passion for and keen interest in the excellent *manga* works and unique fashion produced in Japan. They are devoted Japanophiles who express their wish to visit Japan and their passion to learn and disseminate the Japanese language and culture. Their interest in Japan goes far beyond the scope of pop culture. There is no doubt that the largest factor motivating foreigners to learn the Japanese language today is the appeal of Japanese *anime* and *manga*. It should also be added that there is an ever growing interest in Japanese girls' fashion, which revolves around the keyword *kawaii* (cute).

Such keen interest in Japanese pop culture is being exhibited not just in developed or neighboring countries, in which we can assume people have easy access to relevant information. Young people expressing their love for Japanese *anime* and *manga* are growing in number in Saudi Arabia and other countries in the Middle East as well as in the Mekong region, including Myanmar and Laos.

Why do Japanese *anime* and *manga* attract so many young people around the world? This is a difficult question, but one possible answer is their diversity and universality. Born out of long and fierce competition, the work of Japanese pop culture artists has acquired an appeal not only for children but also for full-grown adults.

The popularity of Japanese *anime* and *manga* goes far beyond what one might imagine. There was one occasion on which a Japanese expert was set aback when he gave a lecture in Italy. When he asked the audience whether they liked Japanese *anime*, a student from Rome responded in a matter-of-fact way, “Professor, we have grown up with Japanese *anime*!” In the world of the Internet, you can sense that people around the world are connected via their love and passion for Japanese pop culture. A country that moves and excites young people around the world with its continuous production of high-quality *anime*, *manga* and fashion – that is what Cool Japan is. 

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