

# Exporting the Attractions of “Cool Japan”

JAPANESE popular culture and services including *washoku* (Japanese cuisine), manga, anime, video games and *omotenashi* (Japanese hospitality) are highly acclaimed worldwide. The Japanese government has branded such cultural elements collectively as “Cool Japan” and is working to communicate their attraction overseas through the Cool Japan Strategy. We spoke with Tak Umezawa, Japan Chairman and Partner of A.T. Kearney, who serves on the government’s Cool Japan Strategy Promotion Council and as an independent director for the Cool Japan Fund.

## How did you become involved with the Cool Japan Strategy?

The global financial crisis in 2008 struck a heavy blow to the manufacturing sector, including the auto and electronics industries, which had served as the economy’s main driver for decades in Japan. Feeling a sense of crisis at the time based on my extensive experience of working as a management consultant supporting a variety of companies in Japan, I wrote an article published in 2009 arguing that Japan must develop the culture business as one of the pillars of new industries for the future. I thought that Japanese culture was not fully developed as an industry despite its high potential.

Later, my article attracted attention from one of the senior officials at the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) of the Japanese government, who asked me to help with the government initiative. At the time, METI was formulating the Industrial Structure Vision, which is

revised every ten years, listing the culture industry as one of the strategic growth areas. Since then, I became involved with the government’s Cool Japan Strategy.

## What specific aspects of Japanese culture have gained popularity abroad over the past ten years?

Manga, anime and video games have been popular aspects of Japanese culture for years. Looking back on the last ten years, it is noticeable that Japanese food has gained huge popularity. According to a survey conducted by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries of the Japanese government, the number of Japanese restaurants operating abroad was approximately 21,000 in 2006, which grew to approximately 156,000 in 2019, 6.5 times higher than thirteen years before. Today, consumers can enjoy a variety of Japanese food abroad, such as sushi, ramen, yakitori and *gyudon* [beef bowl]. Many of these Japanese restaurants operating abroad are run by non-Japanese owners. This suggests that Japanese food is highly recognized as high-potential business content even among non-Japanese.

## Are there any other aspects of Japanese culture that are growing in popularity? What initiatives are being taken by the Cool Japan Strategy to increase the popularity of Japanese culture abroad?

To name a few, well-coordinated, stylish street fashion, museums of contemporary art on the islands of Naoshima overlooking the Setouchi sea

Photo: Courtesy of A.T. Kearney

(Seto Inland Sea), and Tokyo's city landscapes of high-rise buildings with narrow alleys running below, where you can still find traditional wooden houses. People from abroad have become interested in a wider range of Japanese culture than before.

These diversities symbolize Japan's cultural characteristics and attraction. For centuries, Japan has fostered its diverse culture by mixing a variety of cultural elements from the Korean Peninsula and China in ancient times, Europe during the Meiji period [1868-1912] and the United States after World War II.

Attractive Japanese culture cannot be created by Japanese alone. I want more non-Japanese people to join in the creation of Japanese culture. Accordingly, it will be necessary to create an environment in which people from abroad can enjoy traveling, studying and working in Japan. As part of the Cool Japan Strategy, the Japanese government is striving to ease working visa requirements. For example, effective in 2017, international students studying anime, manga, video games and Japanese cuisine at schools in Japan can work in Japan after graduation in selected Special Economic Zones. I strongly encourage international students to take advantage of such opportunities.


**What will be required to publicize the attractive nature of Japanese culture, going forward?**

Given the persistent spread of COVID-19, it is important to publicize Japanese cultural content more extensively around the world using the Internet. I am encouraging selected live music venues and dance clubs to be hubs broadcasting live concerts online to the rest of the world.

While it is expected that the tourism industry will remain in a very challenging business environment due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I believe that authentic and local attractions will serve as



Tak Umezawa, Japan Chairman and Partner of A.T. Kearney and member of the Cool Japan Strategy Promotion Council

the key concepts in developing and promoting tourism. As more people from abroad have a keen understanding of Japan, they will explore even more authentic opportunities in local communities or aspects of culture that cannot be experienced without actually visiting. Although Japan is a small island country, it is blessed with a wealth of diverse regional culture. Now it is important for Japan to find its cultural content with authentic and local appeal for people from abroad and publicize these elements more extensively online in anticipation of the new environment unfolding after the pandemic. 

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Interview by SAWAJI OSAMU

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