

FT Japan

CULTURAL EXPORTS

Hello Kitty and associates are suppliers of style to the globe

The economy may have long been in the doldrums but not the national brand, as things Japanese are permeating world culture, from sushi to manga, reports Andrew Lee

In May 2002 the now famous article "Japan's Gross National Cool" appeared in Foreign Policy magazine.

Author Douglas McGray suggested that Japan's most successful export was its "cool" factor, in the form of *anime*, *manga*, video games and "cute" or *kawaii* characters such as Hello Kitty.

For years, this sub-culture had been quietly increasing its global presence. This was what he called "soft power" – the way one culture can affect another without direct intervention. Authenticity was not important; what mattered, he said, was the "whiff of Japanese cool".

Since then, Japanese popular culture has continued to mutate and spread. These days marketing Japanese "cool" is government policy.

Perhaps in response to McGray's article, the Diplomatic Blue Book produced by the foreign ministry says "contemporary Japanese culture has attracted attention around the world as 'Cool Japan'". It suggests that one path to "the revitalisation of

the economy, society and culture" is the proactive promotion of "Japan's charm" as a "brand-name... In particular, Japan's so called sub-culture, such as animation, movies, comics (*manga*) and Japanese cuisine".

One example of this proactive, if not slightly subversive, approach was the recent presentation in London by the Japanese ambassador to the UK of Hayao Miyazaki's new film *Howl's Moving Castle*. Even though the film is based on a book by an Englishwoman, the promotion of the film is all about its Japaneseness.

You can't escape the *anime* style; it has become synonymous with Japan. Those strange big eyes, set in a too-small face, are familiar from watching TV animation as children. Sixty per cent of the world's animation is now made in Japan and from Astro Boy to Sailor Moon and Pokémon those eyes have stared at us. The logo for brand Japan.

Artist Takashi Murakami is one who understands the



Cat-walk: a Hello Kitty exhibition in Hong Kong to mark 30 years of the feline icon

appeal – aesthetic and commercial – of a good logo. His work with Marc Jacobs for Louis Vuitton blended those cute manga eyes, flowers and cherries into a new LV monogram.

Murakami also recently curated the Little Boy exhibition, which brought art inspired by Japanese *otaku*, or "geek", culture to New York. During the show, the

Union Square subway station was covered in the *anime*-like art of Chiho Aoshima. Lifesize plastic – but very *kawaii* – elephants by Chinatsu Ban stood at the entrance to Central Park.

The Cool Japan phenomenon has been called the third wave of "Japonisme". The first swept through Europe in the late 1800s,

influencing artists such as Monet and Van Gogh. The second was during the 1950s and 1960s, when oriental kitsch mixed with beatnik zen. The difference this time is that it is global. From pop concerts selling out in Beijing, to Kabuki theatre in New York, "J" culture is everywhere.

On London's Charing Cross road, famous for its

bookstores, *manga* has saturated the window displays for months in pursuit of the *otaku* pound. Blackwell's, usually associated with academic titles, estimates that sales of *manga* have risen nearly 10 times in the past year and now make up 3.5 per cent of branch turnover.

An increasing number of non-graphic novels by Japanese authors are also being

translated. Where it used to be Japanese classics by Mishima, Oe and more recently Haruki Murakami, now there are many more modern Japanese novels in English, many of them by women.

In China, there are local editions of Japanese fashion magazines such as Ray, Vivi, and Oggi. Those who really want to stay ahead buy the bootleg Japanese language versions.

Tokyo, in particular Shibuya, is the epicentre for the fashion that is snapped up by style-conscious teenagers across east Asia. In Shanghai last year, two big fashion complexes opened, selling exclusively Japanese labels. Minimal Japanese brand Muji now has more than 20 stores in Europe and three in Hong Kong.

Cultural influences go further. Several of the "coolest" advertising campaigns in Britain recently have had a distinct Japanese influence. There's the white bearded, Japanese-speaking wise man for Orange mobile, and the bizarre *Yume no chikara* ad

for Honda featuring Japanese ad executives with "dream" balloons coming out of their ears.

After the success of Japanese horror films on the cult circuit, including Hideo Nakata's *Ringu*, Hollywood decided that it would cash in and remade *The Ring* (one and two), *Dark Water* and *The Grudge*.

As the recent success of *Lost in Translation*, *The Last Samurai* and *Kill Bill* proved, Japan is chic and sells movie tickets. In New York this autumn the popularity of Japanese film has prompted three Japanese film festivals.

People are even starting to speak the language. We buy *sushi* in the local supermarket and go to *karaoke* nights at the local pub. We are all currently addicted to the numbers game *sudoku*, and last year witnessed south-east Asia's *tsunami*.

Japan may not stay cool forever. But its culture will continue to mutate and survive – above or below the radar.

AP