



# “Japanese Anime Is in Decline”: Does “Cool Japan” still have currency?

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Akihabara, the mecca of subculture, is always full of young people. How much longer can Japan be proud of its subcultures?  
Photo: Discuss Japan

## Is Japanese anime now in decline?

Recently, a student I teach at Peking University submitted a graduation thesis containing the phrase “Japanese anime has entered a decline...” I was shocked. On the one hand I thought, “That’s not true.” But part of me had to accept what was written. That’s because over the last few years Japanese subcultures have been losing the kind of influence they once had in China.

But why were Japanese subcultures once popular in China?

After the Cultural Revolution came to a close, and as China started to reform and open up, the country chose Japan as its model for economic development. The reasons were that Japan had a market economy but was also devising and implementing economic plans, that it was trying to move from the closed-to-the-outside economic system of the pre-war and war period to an open economy, and that it was an Asian nation that, over a short period, had gone from the chaos of the post-war period to catching up with advanced nations.

When Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997) visited Japan to sign the 1978 Treaty of Peace and Friendship between Japan and China, pictures of Japan were broadcast to the whole of China together with the pictures of Deng himself. There is a famous story from when Deng traveled on the Tokaido Shinkansen.



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He said to reporters, “It is very fast. It’s like running and being pursued. This is appropriate for us now.” The speed visible from the window, as well as these famous words, meant the Shinkansen had a fierce impact on the Chinese people. The word “shinkansen” was used in all sorts of places, from the name of high-rise buildings to magazines for learners of Japanese. The following year, *Kimi yo fundo no kawa o watare* (You Must Cross the River of Wrath) appeared in cinemas, the first foreign film to be shown since the end of the cultural revolution, and became incredibly popular. The film didn’t garner much attention in Japan, but for a long time Chinese people hadn’t been able to experience such simple entertainment. What’s more, they were overwhelmed by the sophisticated Japanese fashions and high-rise buildings shown on screen. The actor playing the main role, Takakura Ken, and the heroine of the film, Nakano Ryoko, became huge stars in China.

Next, the first foreign anime to be broadcast on Chinese television was the black and white *Tetsuwan Atomu* (Astro Boy). When Sunday came around children were transfixed and even adults approved saying, “It is excellent teaching material to make children interested in science and technology.” The Shinkansen and Astro Boy were symbols of science and technology.

People of the time recognized Japan as a nation that had achieved economic development and that had advanced science and technology. They had a strong admiration for Japan and an impatient sense that they “must catch up with Japan.” Japanese people who visited China in the 1980s or 1990s had the almost universal experience of being asked, “Do you know Takakura Ken?” or “Do you know Mayumi?” (the role played by Nakano Ryoko).

## From Takakura Ken to otaku culture

In a similar way, a succession of Japanese media was broadcast in China—films and dramas, as well as TV anime. Although a number of programs were broadcast, a large cultural phenomenon occurred later at the end of the 1990s when Japanese animations such as *Slam Dunk* (a story of a high school basketball team) and *Sailor Moon* were shown. It was normal for Chinese middle and high school students to spend every day buried in study for the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE). Unlike in Japan where there were after-school clubs, all they did was study from morning until night, and they didn’t have the leisure of enjoying being students. These students watched *Slam Dunk*, *Sailor Moon* and other anime. They envied Japanese school life with girls who went to school in cute uniforms and boys who threw themselves into club activities after lessons. Up to that point, the main sports were table tennis and badminton, but basketball became hugely popular across China, and many students prayed that if they succeeded in getting to university they could have a full campus lifestyle like Japanese middle school and high school students.

It’s said that it was around the year 2000 when TV reached more than 90% of Chinese households. Up to that point, Chinese people could watch Japanese anime as normal, but from 2004 government rules started as part of policies to protect industry, and by 2006 Japanese anime effectively couldn’t be shown.

Yet, during the first half of the 2010s, Japanese anime sparked a third large cultural phenomenon. The craze was centered on university students, a generation that had grown up on Japanese TV anime. Just at that time, the internet was becoming popular among young people and video sharing sites

appeared one after another. Young people suddenly became able to access a vast amount of content from overseas. And so, Japanese anime became popular. What's more, using the internet as a platform, secondary content such as illustrations and novels thrived too. And people didn't only watch the content. Japan's "otaku" culture spread to China at the same time, with people actively engaging with the works and characters by "having a go at singing" or "having a go at dancing." Japanese anime become popular again, mainly among university students, who were in an internet-equipped environment, had some spare time, and had a prior grounding in Japanese media content.

As internet culture emerged in China, net slang became popular. Most of this came from Hong Kong films or Japanese anime, including a late night Japanese anime, *Gag manga biyori* (Good Day for Gag Manga), which a Chinese university student decided to dub into Chinese, and which became incredibly popular. This led to a Chinese word 给力 (*geili*), meaning "awesome," taking the world by storm. That was right at the time of the 2010 soccer World Cup, and the word "geili" entered people's everyday lives just as it became a common experience for large numbers of people to watch the same program together over the internet. It was frequently used on entertainment programs, and even in a headline of the official Communist Party newspaper, the *People's Daily*, prompting an official warning from the authorities against "using internet slang in public media."

The Japanese word "otaku" also became internet slang as Chinese characters 御宅 (*yu zhai*) and the character 宅 (*zhai*) is now firmly established as a word that means "to stay at home and not go out." It is used in various places today, such as in the news, for example 受疫情影响、去年中国人都宅在家了 (due to the Covid-19 pandemic, last year all Chinese people became shut-ins [zhai]). Japan's otaku culture borrowed the impact of the new internet media to exert huge influence.

## Anti-Japan demonstrations and subculture

Even during the first half of the 2010s, a time when Japan-China relations had decisively cooled, the influence of subculture wasn't affected by relations between the two countries. In 2012, large-scale anti-Japanese demonstrations took place (some of them out of control) due to Japan nationalizing control of the Senkaku Islands. But according to a Japan Foundation survey, there was a record number of people studying Japanese in China that year, becoming the most of any country, and China retains first place to this day.

However, it would be too simplistic to think that, thanks to subculture, the number of young people who like Japan has increased. There's a more diverse range of thinking among China's 1.4 billion individuals than in Japan. Some Chinese people might say, "I'm not interested in politics. I like Japanese anime because it's fun." Meanwhile, others might say, "But it's hard to tell my family" or "Anime is good, but I think there's a problem with Japan when it comes to politics and views of history." Some might simply say, "I like Japan because anime is fun," but there are many others who say, "Anime? That's for children," or "Aren't they falling for a cultural strategy?" Attitudes towards Japan are also greatly affected by domestic public opinion at the time.

When Japan-China relations worsen, prejudice and knowledge sourced from biased media reports cloud people's view, and it becomes difficult to see what Japan is really like. I was once interested to hear a Chinese student say, "You can tell a person's IQ by asking what they think of Japan."

On the other hand, something that can definitely be said even when Japan-China relations have worsened is that subculture is one of the few chances people have to experience a more real Japan and catch glimpses of Japan as it actually is.

For that reason, there are also many among those with no interest in subculture who know little about Japan. The instructor at the gym I went to told me, “Japan’s an island! So, where is it?” He knew that the country Japan had once invaded China, but had no actual image in his head at all. There are lots of people like that.

## **Japan: a casual travel destination**

It was also in the 2010s that this situation abruptly changed, due to a boom in overseas travel by Chinese people. Up to that point, only a small and wealthy section of society had had the financial means to travel abroad. Since it was difficult for ordinary people to acquire passports or visas, overseas travel was just an aspiration and many students aimed for regional studies because they might be able to train or study abroad. But after ordinary citizens rapidly gained economic power, the paperwork for passport applications was made much easier, and many countries relaxed their conditions for issuing tourist visas to Chinese people, tourists rushed abroad.

Among all the countries of the world it was probably Japan that profited the most. Japan was overwhelmingly popular thanks to its proximity and sense that people could hop over if they had a few days free, low travel and shopping costs, high quality goods, easy familiarity of a shared Chinese character culture, and a highly developed society. For overseas travel beginners it was “first Japan” and even for people with travel experience of Europe, the United States and other countries of the world, there seemed to be a sense that Japan was somewhere they could visit multiple times without its appeal fading.

Shown in cinemas each spring, China’s “New Year Movie” is much looked forward to over the winter, and in 2021 *Detective Chinatown 3* became a huge high-profile hit. It’s a slapstick comedy in which the main character and his detective uncle accidentally get mixed up in happenings abroad and solve a case. The first film was set in Bangkok, the second in New York, and then the third was set in Tokyo. The appearance of many popular Japanese actors was much discussed. This year, movie takings from the first day of the spring holidays in China reached a record 2.1 billion yuan (about 34 billion yen), and this film accounted for 60% of that. The main reasons for it becoming a hit were it being part of a popular series, high expectations after the original planned release during the spring holidays last year was postponed for a year due to the spread of COVID-19, and people visiting movie theaters after refraining from returning to their hometowns because of the coronavirus pandemic. But we mustn’t forget the feeling of “wanting to go to Japan but not being able to” and how it caught people’s interest because “that Japan we visited will be shown on screen.” That’s how familiar Japan has become to Chinese people now.

At times when Japan-China relations are not very good, and when people realize that I am Japanese, they come to me with arguments about past history, and somehow it’s hard to tell people I’m Japanese. But now, when they realize that I am Japanese, the conversation turns to “I have been to Japan” and “Please tell me a travel location that you recommend.” I am also often told “I love Japanese food and

Japanese sake.” Also, when I tell people I know that I am going on a trip to Japan, they say, “Would you buy this for me?” and make a request specifying the exact brand of makeup, medicine, etc. The motivations of students that want to study Japanese are becoming more and more varied, not just having gone to Japan and realized they want to speak Japanese, but liking the novels of Murakami Haruki or Higashino Keigo, Japanese detective novels, Japanese stationery, the figure skater Hanyu Yuzuru, or Japanese comedians. As well as things such as Japanese-style fashion, makeup, and hairstyles, interior design, and storage techniques, the Japanese lifestyle has become an option for people who want to enrich their daily lives. Each of these is their own special way of engaging with Japan as it is.

### **Why enthusiasm for Japanese subcultures has cooled**

Hearing such things about China, one might feel that there is still plenty of positive feeling towards Japan, but when we analyze the matter objectively, early-2010s-style enthusiasm for Japanese subculture is cooling bit by bit. There are three reasons for this.

The first is that the media environment in China has changed. Although, as I mentioned before, the influence of subcultures remained unchanged despite the anti-Japanese demonstrations, “Japanese anime” menus have disappeared from websites sharing Japanese anime. Up to that point, whatever the video sharing site, there would be a choice of menus titled “movies,” “dramas,” “entertainment shows” and, alongside those, “Japanese anime.” But after the groundswell of anti-Japanese feeling it became necessary to remove the two Chinese characters that say “Japan” from every kind of media. If someone clicked “anime” on a video sharing site there would be a mix of domestically produced and foreign anime. Unless there was some special reason, or it happened by accident, they would not be able to choose and watch Japanese anime. As well as anime, everything that was quickly recognizable as Japanese temporarily disappeared. Even now, most sites don’t have “Japan” menus and people who really want to see Japanese subculture content use a site dedicated to that.

The influence of rules on TV broadcasting was also huge. Children had already lost the chance to unintentionally come into contact with Japanese anime, and unless they accessed it on purpose they couldn’t see Japanese anime in an environment where they could use the internet freely.

The entrance to Japanese culture became dramatically narrower. For these reasons, the younger the generation, the weaker its interest in Japanese subculture has become.

The second reason is that media producers in various countries have started working hard at making inroads into China, while video sharing sites have also actively addressed user needs by including content from overseas. US and Korean dramas are each greatly increasing their share of the market, while Taiwan dramas have a well-established popularity and Thai dramas are also making steady inroads in recent years. In particular, Korean entertainers are actively appearing on Chinese TV commercials, entertainment shows and song shows. There have now even been rules placed on appearances by foreigners. Despite the close association between anime and Japan even today, there are many fans of US animation. In other words, China has gone from a time when Japanese anime was the clear stand-out among overseas content to a time when it competes alongside various media content from countries around the world.

The third possible reason is that Chinese-produced anime has become stronger. On October 18, 2011, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China adopted a statement containing the following words: “Fully understanding the importance and urgency of promoting cultural reform and development, even more aware and even more actively promoting the grand development and grand flourishing of Socialist culture.” The mainstay of this policy was the “Cultural Power Policy.” Practical policies were devised to promote China’s own culture and make China a strong cultural nation. And the focus of this was the creative industries, in particular anime and video games. The state-run business-centered industrial structure was massively reformed, private companies and state-businesses were able to compete on an equal footing, and a national policy was set to nurture industry that was both strong and competitive. Companies that produced anime were able to access tax incentives, and departments to study anime production were established in universities across China, as were large-scale production studios.

Although China’s anime production output soon became the world’s highest, there was a flood of companies seeking the incentives and at first much was not good quality. But gradually popular works emerged and now one really does sense a momentum towards the large-scale production of works that could be globally appreciated. From last year, even in Japan a number of Chinese anime films have been shown in cinemas and they have even started to appear on video sharing sites and Wowow (a satellite TV broadcaster). It has become possible to see stories made with originality and high production values, which are set in a fantastical traditional Chinese culture world, in which (as in Japanese boys’ manga) the hero grows as he suffers injuries and overcomes obstacles, and which are drawn in impressive 3D similar to US animations. Japanese anime, which had always been at the center of animation content, has lost this position to Chinese anime and is already starting to stand on the sidelines.

In particular, since the 2010s China has been changing and developing with dramatic speed. Because of this sense of speed, unless some special Japanese work appears within the next one or two years, it will be true that the decline of Japanese anime has already started—just as the student quoted at the beginning of this article wrote in their thesis. For me as someone who has lived in China for a long time, these last few years I have felt that I must update my own internal image of China or be left behind. That’s how quickly society is moving.

## **Can Japan still win?**

The time when Japanese subculture could create social phenomena in China is slipping into the past. The reason Japanese anime became popular in the first place was not because Japanese companies actively pushed forward into the Chinese market, rather in a large part it was because Japanese anime was used to compensate for a lack of content on the new media platforms appearing one after another as China’s economic development progressed.

Also, because previously there was poor understanding of market economy content industries in China, Japanese anime was often used illegally. So even though it has a lot of influence, most of it has not provided revenue for Japanese companies.

In recent years, although China has finally set up an environment where sharing sides properly acquire copyright and other permissions then distribute content, because of illegal use in the past,

Japan's content industries remain wary. It seems that Japanese companies have now come here and are finally thinking about a proper move into the market, but they appear to lag behind other countries.

And the barriers to moving into China with its ongoing policies of industrial protection are large. There are rules on TV broadcasts of overseas content, while movies and published material require permission, and their numbers are small. It is not known when rules will also be put on video sharing sites. Any amount of Chinese anime can be released in Japan's open market, but it's not so easy in China at the moment.

In Japan, it seems there are many people who think that cultural projects should be left to the private sector and are skeptical of the Cool Japan policies led by the Cabinet Office and Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. But these days most countries are promoting their contents industries to the world as a national strategy, so even Japan's world class subcultures may be forgotten if things continue as they are.

How much longer can Japan be proud of its subcultures? Their true strength is now going to be tested.

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