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From Tin Toys to Television: The Emergence of Japanese Soft Power

Introduction

On thursday nights after dinner, when math worksheets and english books are tucked away into backpacks, the children wait patiently for the newest episode. At 8pm, they are slightly hunched at the edge of their seats, quivering with excitement, as their eyes remain fixed on the television screen. The scene unfolds before them. Cell, a robot, threatens to destroy the Earth. The only person that can stop him is Goku, a member of a humanoid warrior race from a different planet (Saiyan Race). Running through their heads are a list of questions: Who will win? Will Goku survive? Will Goku ever see his son again?

Not everyone’s childhood memories will be centered specifically around Goku, but for Generation X, nostalgia of their younger years likely revolves around the TV. Before the name “anime” was even understood as distinct from other cartoons, there was a sense that these shows were different. The lure was the complex storyline, the character development, and the spin offs which gave children the opportunity to have objects like action figures or backpacks with the show’s brand. Cartoons have had a long history in the United States, whereas anime was quietly introduced in the 1960’s. It was not until the mid 90s “anime boom” that American markets became flooded with the type of animations that 90’s kids and millenials look back on with
dewy eyes: Dragon Ball Z, Sailor Moon, One Piece, and most importantly, Pokemon. However, anime did not materialize out of thin air. The end of World War II and the creation of pacifist Japan amplified a need to rebuild their image internationally. Thus began the introduction of tin toy robots into the American mainstream which paved the way for the anime boom. But, why toys? My paper seeks to answer this question by looking at how the collapse of Japanese hard power laid the foundation for the importance and necessity of strong Japanese soft/smart power.

The collapse of Japanese hard power assumes that it had once been in a position of dominance. Therefore, I discuss the rise of Japanese hard power and militarism, and attribute this reaction to being forcibly opened by the US. At the end of the second World War, fearing a remilitarization of Japan, the US proposed a constitution. Japan’s genuine adherence to the constitution was a very important decision that gave the nation the time to rebuild itself, leading to the rise of its soft power influence.\(^1\) Japan marketed toy robots because they were cheap, the domestic community could rally behind it, it was versatile enough to expand as a market, as well as, showcase their ability to participate positively in global innovation and technology. The popularization of tin toys, and the subsequent success of Pokemon/anime, was a result of Japanese smart power which combined hard power (economical materials and low labor costs) with soft power (likability).

**Hard Power**

*The Strengthening of Japan’s Economic Hard Power*

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\(^1\) I am not using soft and smart power interchangeably. Soft power influence and Smart Power are different because soft power influence relates to the way the toys are perceived by others, whereas smart power are the choices the Japanese are making that will lead to the influence.
International political theory describes hard power as “[coercing] another to act in ways in which that entity would not have acted otherwise.” Strategies for its implementation focus on military intervention, coercive diplomacy, and economic sanctions. The adoption of the hard power tactic was at first due to of a perceived lack of options at being forcibly opened, rather than a genuine desire for international dominance. It was not until the start of the Meiji Restoration and the adoption of “fukoku kyōhei” (rich country, strong military), that the ideology of global expansion became fundamental to Japanese identity. After that opening, all periods of governance attempted to strengthen both economic and military authority. However, militarism ran rampant in the Showa Era due to the Great Depression and a newfound Japanese identity which focused on East Asian imperialism as a route to supremacy. Therefore this section’s purpose is to explore how Japan used their economy and military prowess to grow their hard power.

The arrival of Commodore Perry’s “black ships” signaled the end of Japanese autarky. The nation’s participation in international trade was mandated, and the government struggled with how to remain autonomous despite a lack of technological advancement. Western presence in Japan was seen as a threat to their domestic structure, so “a strong Japanese military was essential to ward off American economic exploitation, but such a military could only be established through rapid economic growth. That growth would come from emulating the West’s technology, capitalism and democratic principles.”

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3 ibid
beat America at its own game, by first strengthening the economy and eventually creating a dominant army.

Many scholars look at this strengthened Japanese economy through the lens of economic historian Alexander Gerschenkron model of European Industrialization. Mr. Gerschenkron’s model suggests that rapid industrialization in Europe was a result of a “economic backwardness” or the proto-industrial phase.⁵ This phase is characterized by “rural, family-based production of textile and garment without modern machinery (often brokered by urban merchants).”⁶ It starts off as a small market where individuals trade with other individuals and grows to become something greater.⁷ The smaller the original market (the more “backward”) the better their industrialization. He claims that this is because these countries will borrow aggressively from the most advanced countries, and what is likely holding them back from realizing their true potential is that lack of technology and capital. If they were able to adopt new machinery, then one of the biggest hindrances, the efficiency of the labor force would be dealt with.

Japan did have a protoindustrial phase, and it revolved around the production of silk. It was a very lucrative market, because for example, almost 40% of the exports from Japan were silk, and 96.7% of the raw silk was absorbed by US markets.⁸ Additionally, the making of silk was also considered a “family based production” because it was a rural enterprise and was

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⁵ Smith, Thomas C. Native Sources of Japanese Industrialization, 1750-1920. U of California P.
⁷ ibid. Proto-industrialization starts in small communities where agricultural productivity is low. They can sell cloth and garments to nearby rich villages where agricultural productivity is high. It is a sort of specialization (or division of labor) within a relatively small geographical area: villages with fertile soil produce farm products and villages with poor soil produce manufactured goods, and they exchange output with each other (they also sell products to the outside world too).
looked after in the household. However, despite the similarities presented regarding this primitive industry, Gerschenkron’s example of Europe as a pathway of understanding why a nation industrializes is not relevant to Japan. Industry was used to further supplement the marketing of traditional Japanese values and culture, not to eclipse that culture. In simpler terms, if the model was applicable to Japan, it would have industrialized in order to expel the textile market. Instead, they sought to build a “factory system around pre-industrial values.”9 This decision was an intentional way of building the economic side of their hard power by allowing for an open market exchange between the Japanese people and the West, while staying true to Japanese traditional values.

*The Loss of Japan’s Economic Hard Power*

Overtime, the fear of being occupied by the US had dissipated. In the Taisho Era (1912-1926) there was a surge of liberal democratic sentiments. As modernity and democracy often go hand in hand, Japan’s historical fixation on modernizing and industrializing to keep their independence from the US had brought about a gradual shift in socio-political ideologies. In spite of this new shift, the economy of the 20s was very inconsistent. After World War I, leaders everywhere decided to restore the Gold Standard Act, which Japan did not want to wholly commit to. The United States had a large portion of the world’s gold holding in their possession. By 1922, the US held 40% of the gold.10 Japan had agreed to a partial Gold Standard, but

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9 Smith, *Native Sources*, 43
because of US control, they had to keep “export surpluses with the United States to maintain stable domestic currency valuations.”\textsuperscript{11} This left the economy in a very precarious position. Then, the stock market crashed, and because Japan was an export driven economy with a direct link to American markets, the Great Depression severely impacted the strength of Japan’s finances. In the context of this economic reality, it becomes evident why an increase in military hard power would provide much needed reassurance.

\textit{Japanese Aggression and the US Response}

The extreme militarism shown in the first part of the Showa Era (1922-1989) up until the end of World War II came about due to perceptions of a lack of economic self sufficiency, western style imperialism, and the flying geese paradigm.\textsuperscript{12} While it the adoption of Western style imperialism may portray the Japanese as feeling confident in their ability to take on a leading position in the international sphere, the core of these sentiments are not truly confidence, but rather vulnerability: “the limitation in the supply of raw materials and fuel, population pressure, and the depression were the economic causes of imperialistic aggression in the 1930s and 1940s. It is true that the military tried to justify the expansion based on the logic of ‘have nots’.”\textsuperscript{13} Throughout the years, and into part of World War I, continued US support allowed the Japan to bring their vision of the strong army in \textit{fukoku kyōhei} to life. By using this army to invade other East Asian countries, “Japan had succeeded in beginning its diversification away from American trade with the establishment of de facto colonies.” Japan’s intention was always

\textsuperscript{11} ibid
\textsuperscript{12} Gordon, Bill. \textit{Japan's March Toward Militarism}. wgordon.web.wesleyan.edu/papers/jhist2.html
to be self-sufficient, and with an unstable US economy, dependency on that market would be disadvantageous. Also, it was believed that a characteristic of Western imperialism was colonization. Therefore, in order to become an imperial power, Japan felt that it had to conquer other nations and that it was their destiny to be the leader of East Asia (flying geese). The choice to have increased militarism was a compensatory act which they hoped would ensure their survival for long enough to figure out their next step. On December 7, 1941, hoping to destroy important American fleet units and distract the US long enough to conquer the Dutch East Indies, Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. The ruthless conquests of countries in East Asia, as well as, this bomb pushed the US towards making Japan a pacifist nation after the second World War.

The retaliatory dropping of the Hiroshima/Nagasaki nuclear bomb made it very clear that another world war could not occur without guaranteeing global destruction. To ensure the improbability of a third World War, the US created the “Post-dam Requirements” which attempted to reconstruct Japan as a pacifist nation. In the requirements, Article XI mandates the collapse of the militarization of the economy. The article states, “Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes.”¹⁴ The US also forbade the maintenance of land, air, and sea forces purposefully making the Japanese dependent on the West, and places their focus on peaceful diplomacy.

Smart Power and Tin Robots

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The challenge for the Japanese became the crafting of their post World War, non-military, non-interventionist identity, and how they would use it to save their economy. One unchanging aspect of the Japanese national identity was its attention to technological advancement and industry, and it was this deliberate focus which allowed for the country to realize gaps of demand that were not being supplied in foreign markets. Given that they were unable to express aggression, they choose the opposite, and moved towards what is contemporarily understood to be Japan’s culture of cuteness. Therefore, this section’s purpose is to discuss the concept of soft and smart power, and how its utilization popularized the first set of Japanese toys introduced to the US: toy robots.

Soft power was a term coined by Joseph Nye in the 1970’s which describes “the ability to shape the preferences of others.”  

15  Political scientists often do not see the value in discussing soft power because hard power is a more concrete and measurable term. Japanese soft power cannot be quantified in the same way that nuclear weapons or troops can. However, to dismiss the importance of their soft power would ignore a major cause of their economic prosperity, in spite of a lack of military dominance. Nye states that hard power and soft power need not depend on each other. Countries can enjoy being political powerhouses without a strong military if what they decided their national interests to be defined differently.  

16  Particularly, if the national interest in diplomacy, then the military was less important to the overall strength of the place. Japan did not have a choice regarding their military, but there did need to be a choice on how to collectively move forward. There was a lot of guilt present in the post war period, and it was


16  Ibid. 6.
understood that US consumers were needed in order to rebuild the economy. For example, when
tin robots began to be introduced into the market the packaging could not state that the toy was
“Made in Japan.”\(^{17}\) At this point, Americans were uncertain about Japanese motivations, and
given what they had been through at Pearl harbor, it was understandable. Therefore, Japan
needed to win consumers back with a product that would make the country look as peaceful and
as non-threatening as possible. Toys were not an intentional choice, but the success of the
market proved that it would be perfect to promote their soft power image, and thus the
government began to put money into it. Smart power focuses on “diplomacy...as the vanguard of
foreign policy.”\(^{18}\) This type of power does not necessitate a strong military, and thus Japan
combined popularity and likeability of the toys along with the financial benefits to create smart
power.

*Rise of Toy Robots*

Until World War II, historically, the most popular japanese exports were “practical”
items that had “practical” uses. For example, in the 1930’s, foreign markets consumed silk,
cotton cloth, rayon cloth, sugar, and wheat in high numbers.\(^ {19}\) Although post war attitudes gave
way to a period of global unease, there was a willingness to move past the suffering the war had
created, consequently ushering in a new era of innovation in the 1950’s. At first, western nations
“could hardly take the Japanese seriously, for the recent war had reduced them to tinkerdom in

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\(^{17}\) Hix, Lisa. “Vintage Toy Robots.” *Vintage Toy Robots | Collectors Weekly*,

\(^{18}\) Hertzberg, Hendrik. “Smart Power.” *The New Yorker*, The New Yorker, 18 June 2017,
www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/01/26/smart-power

\(^{19}\) Yasuba, Yasukichi. “Natural Resources in Japanese Economic History
the basement of the industrialized world.” On the contrary, it is precisely this bias that prevented the US from witnessing the change in global spirit. Japan deftly utilized this time “in the basement” to reconfigure their values, to study foreign markets, and to consider how to best employ their resources. The result of these shifts in national principles led to the eventual rise of the toy robot. At its onset, toys were an extremely small domestic manufacturing business that was inconsistent and disorganized. For example, “...91% of toy production took place in factories smaller than 10 tsubo (approximately 360 square feet), and the majority of toy factories employed less than five workers.” Additionally, the toy robots were originally created using recycled tin cans discarded by American GI’s during the occupation. Yet, despite these humble beginnings, by the late 1950’s toy production was a serious capital venture.

*Japan’s Monopoly on the Toy Industry*

The 20th century presented a global perspective of dismissiveness regarding toys. It was not that other nations did not see the profitability of toys, rather they did not believe that it could ever expand into a greater network. Japan’s commercialization of toys occurred because of two reasons. They were able to market fantasy, and manufacturing toys had low labor costs. The United States was trapped in the confines of reality. External political situations, like the Cuban Missile Crisis and Bay of Pigs, threatened the stability of American society. Therefore, the toy industry in America was reflective of public paranoia. The Japanese appealed to the gap in the

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22 Ibid 876
23 Ibid
market which called for a coping mechanism. American toys of the 1950’s and 1960s were often replicas of rifles and six shooter rifles because the Wild West actually existed, and it was assumed that children would respond positively to something they knew about. However, “this real world bias...has become the centerpiece of current criticism level against all American business- [it was] a refusal to entertain future possibilities unless they are immediately realizable.” American business refused to even consider fantasy as a viable selling point, and in the end, it harmed them. Contrastingly, by 1958 Japan was exporting the most toys worldwide, and most importantly to US markets where “half of the $1.3 billion in American toy sales that year were sci fi related- robots, flying saucers, rayguns, and rockets.” It is evident by these statistics that the American toy manufacturers were incorrect in their presumption of the preferences of children. Japan’s persistence and willingness to transform reality into fantasy was what allowed for the success of the toy robot.

Moreover, consider the Non Stop Robot packaging below:

![Figure 1: Non Stop Robot](image)

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24 Tanner, Ron. “Toy Robots in America”, 127
25 Ibid 127. Also, $1,300,000,000.00 in 1958 has the same buying power as $11,051,464,788.73 in 2017
Ron Tanner, a writer, comments on the otherworldliness of the image on the box because both the man and boy are both wearing space suits and are standing at the doorway of a rocketship. He also notes their race and age. He describes them as Anglo-Asian, and emphasizes a cross generational bond between them. He concludes that this box is meant to say, “the future belongs to the young and old, space travel will not only be possible but comfortable, and that technology is...a good thing.”26 While his analysis of the image is relevant, it is also broad. I think it is worth it to acknowledge the subtle messages portrayed in the image. Firstly, is the Japanese play on the human need for familiarity. The boy and older man are likely members of the same family because of their pictured comfortability and the similarity of their smiles. By adding a layer of domesticity, the image does not only describe a vague cross generational relationship, but a tighter and stronger one within the family. Every kid would likely want to see themselves and a family member as the people in the cover. Moreover, it would be remiss not to discuss the implications of an Anglo Asian character. The box could have pictured people of Japanese descent, but by making the characters Anglo Asian, it shows that they were paying attention to the market. Additionally, the use of Anglo Asian characters goes back to the idea of Japanese people incorporating foreigners. It is not done in order to get rid of what is traditionally Japanese, but rather to contextualize. In the post war years, America was wary of Japan, so the use of these specific characters mitigates that hesitation, but does not allow them to let go of their identity. The packaging of this robot is created such that anyone at all is able to buy into the fantasy, and see themselves on the precipice of a great space adventure.

26 ibid 130
The second reason that toy robots were able to reach such a large audience was the low labor cost. As stated previously, the first set of toy robots had been created from scraps of tin metal left over from the American occupation. It would not be unusual to break apart a robot and see the printing from a Japanese tuna can or a type of powdered milk can.\textsuperscript{27} The materials and amount of people needed for the production of toy robots is, as mentioned, quite low. That is not to say that creating these toys was easy. To reach the level of detail shown on these toys, must have been painstaking. Yet, the overall process was neither expensive nor lengthy. Right after the end of World War II, the government began to promote toy manufacturing because they realized that “the industry was relatively easy to revive compared with others and because it suggested a peaceful, or at least non threatening image.”\textsuperscript{28} The toy industry’s ability to be “revived” illustrates its flexibility and growing economies of scale. When foreign demand increased, the Japanese were able to keep up with it because toy manufacturers would actively work together instead of in competition. By the early 1960s firms were not yet enormous, but they were starting to expand. In imitation of the American Toy fair, Japan created its own “Japan International Toy Trade Show” which featured 83 companies. These companies were able to interact with each other, which led to signed contracts cumulatively priced at upwards of $1.5 billion dollars.\textsuperscript{29} Considering the marketing of the imagination and low labor costs, what is beginning to emerge is Japanese smart power. The low labor cost and flexibility in


\textsuperscript{28} Cross, Gary, “JAPAN, THE U.S. AND THE GLOBALIZATION OF CHILDREN'S CONSUMER CULTURE.” 877

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid 878
manufacturing (hard economic power) merged with the cute and fantastical aspect of toys (soft power) gave Japan exactly what was needed to lead the toy industry globally.

*Domestic Implications of Toy Robots*

Toy robots did not only appeal to consumers abroad, but were also representative of domestic culture. Although seemingly disposable, these robots brought about a period of collective realization in society. To disband and reconstruct an identity poses the following questions: Who are we? What do we care about? The answers to these questions are tied up in “culture code words” such as, *kozaiku, konjo, and wakon yosai*, which allows for a closer analysis of the state of the Japanese society. 小細工 (*Kozaiku*) represents skilled workmanship of small, delicate objects. The size of the toy robots and the materials they were created from (tin scraps and recycled materials) made durability unlikely, but that was not initially the point. The point was the *idea* of the robot, and the many imaginative ways toy manufacturers could bring that vision to life. A focus on cute objects not only aligns with foreign desires, but also plays into traditional Japanese values. To further explain, “the Japanese developed an amazing talent for *saiku*...which was followed by a powerful impulse to reduce things down to their essence—not just as miniatures that could be viewed and marveled at, but as fully functioning accessories and utilities.” Japan could have chosen to manufacture any type of toy, but the first robots kept in line with this understanding of *saiku*. These robots were expertly crafted, and as was stated, were not just to be looked at. Even the first robots could walk!

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30 Tanne, Ron. “Toy Robots in America”, 126

Another cultural codeword that can be viewed as symbolic of Japanese society is *konjo* which some describe as “spirit of the Japanese worker” or “fighting spirit.” In this particular situation, the term signifies a desire to triumph over what had been lost in the war. This spirit can be shown through the placement of nuclear insignias on toys. (Fig. 2 and 3). One would naturally assume that after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that the Japanese would be particularly wary of all nuclear energy, however this was not the case. Ron Tanner states that the reason the Japanese readily accepted high-tech innovations, especially many uses for nuclear energy, was a public suggestion of hope. There are however, other reasons that the Japanese would choose to embrace nuclear energy, such as economic hard power. A big part of the focus on adapting new technology is because of a lack of natural resources. By the 1950’s, Japan had no oil, no liquified natural gas, and a coal shortage. To turn their back on nuclear energy, would be understandable, but would not be practical. Instead, putting the insignia on robots could be used to show that they were not afraid and were ready for the future. It would definitely make sense for this to have been the case given the types of stories that are presented along with the toy robots. Sci-Fi popularized a fear of the “unnatural,” but the enemy in the movie was often extra-terrestrial, not mechanical. Thus, when the robot was originally marketed, it was friendly figure. The previously mentioned Non Stop Robot, for example, is seen waving at the other characters. One could argue that by putting the nuclear logo on these robots they are also seeking to make a statement about their support of peaceful nuclear technology.

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32 Tanner, Ron. “Toy Robots in America” 126
33 Nuclear insignia is the image of the nucleus of an atom that is surrounded by ellipses
34 Tanner, Ron. “Toy Robots in America” 128
Lastly, わこんよさい (Wakon-yosai) directly translates to “Welcome,” but was coined by scholars to exhibit behaviors of “Japanese spirit and Western learning.” In the context of the success of Tokyo Disneyland, Mary Yoko Branne offers a relevant understanding of wakon yosai.

The process of assimilation of the West, the recontextualization of Western simulacra, demonstrates not that the Japanese are being dominated by Western ideologies but that they differentiate their identity from the West in a way that reinforces their sense of their own cultural uniqueness and superiority, or what we might call Japanese hegemony. This line of thinking seems to embody all aspects of Japanese identity. As stated multiple times before, the use of technology is never with the intention of remodeling the society to be the same as the West. The intention is and has always been to imitate Western society, but still find a way to emphasize the importance of Japanese traditionalism.

The words Kozaiku, Konjo, and Wak Yosai helps to ground the emotional state of Japan during the production of these toy robots. The nation had just surrendered to the United States after experiencing one of the most devastating events in history. Their task was to reconstruct not only their physical landscape, but their identity as well. The toy industry entertained foreign customers, but it arguably did more for the the Japanese community domestically. Soft power was able to be perfectly packaged in the tiny tin bodies of robots, further contributing to Japan’s overall hard power. Reluctancy from Americans about the people of Japan could not stay immutable, and the robots aided in bridging those cultural gaps.

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35 Tanner, Ron. “Toy Robots in America” 126


Contemporary Japan

The Rise of Pokemon

The Japanese toy industry may have started with humble beginnings, but today, it is impossible to disregard the positive effects that came about because of it. The Japanese have skillfully mastered their use of soft power by tethering themselves to innovation. Combining the use of soft power (likability) and a focus on technology results in their indispensability. It is inconceivable to go an entire day without interacting with a Japanese product. From items as large as cars, to items as small as zippers, the country’s long history of emulation is evident in daily life. Although the tin toys are no longer being produced, their presence led to the popularization of manga and anime as genres. Therefore, this section seeks to investigate the rise of Pokemon, and the implications of its presence in the US markets.

The 1990s proved to be a critical decade for Japanese-American consumer markets. Japan’s toy industry has been able to thrive due to a type of “open access” to US consumers. Before the rise of Japan’s hard power, silk was the benefactor of this access. After soft power and rapid modernization, the same was true for toys and other types of media. Pokemon was created by a young man named Satoshi Tajiri who never intended for it to leave Japan. Instead, his goal was to remind Japanese children of what play was like. In Japan, the recent millennial generation has dealt with more cases of socially anxious and solitary children than ever before. Tajiri was aiming to visually recreate a pre industrial landscape that would remind children of nature and the outdoors. He spent his childhood outside collecting and studying bugs and insects,

which influenced the design of the Pokemon.\textsuperscript{38} Ironically, this attention to the emerging group of socially awkward adolescents helped the brand flourish. The game was created to be challenging but doable, and also involve the use of a tsushin keburu (communication cable) which forces ningenkankei (human interaction) to move forward in the game.\textsuperscript{39} This allowed for children to be ambassadors to the brand in a very genuine way. They were able to learn from their friends, and also open new characters and pass levels by connecting and exchanging Pokemon. Additionally, Pokemon features sodateru of pets which directly translates to “to raise,” but has a strong connotation of raising a child.\textsuperscript{40} For this reason users are often very attached to their animals because they feel as if the pets belong to them. Pokemon created an imaginary world that cushioned the struggling Japanese youth from the pressure and monotony of everyday academic life. These two reasons contributed to the initial soar of domestic popularity of Pokemon, and it was only a matter of time before a flurry of global merchandising proposals reached Japan asking to get involved.

In early 2000s, Pokemon’s prominence had risen to meteoric levels. Nintendo in America (NOA) had chosen to buy the rights to Pokemon from Mr. Tajiri in 1996 to promote the game and cartoon in the US. The accessibility of Americans provided avenues for recognition between the Japanese and other countries. The US functions in this case as a translatory tool. In a short amount of time, the games were selling in “seventy countries, the cartoon was broadcast in fifty-one countries, the movies played in thirty three countries, and the cards had been translated into eleven languages.”\textsuperscript{41} It is clear that this game was a cross cultural phenomena. The question

\textsuperscript{38}Ibid 201
\textsuperscript{39}Ibid 199
\textsuperscript{40}Ibid 193
\textsuperscript{41}Ibid 236
is: why? Why did Americans, specifically, become Pokemonized so to speak? The history of
Pokemon’s success in the US presents a double edged sword. On one hand, it fundamentally
changed the youth of American children forever. Nothing before had captured a generation quite
like this, and the advent of new technology only meant that there were more ways to experience
Pokemon. Whether it was by playing the gameboy, collecting cards, or watching the movie,
children could enjoy the characters on any medium they chose. On the other hand, the Pokemon
that the kids were experiencing was an intentional watered down version of its traditional form.
Nintendo CEO, Awakara Makoto, fought to gain the rights of Pokemon. Yet, he believed that in
order for it to appeal to the American audience, a big portion of the game’s storyline must be
changed. However, “what Japanese toy manufacturers did willingly in an earlier period
(designing tin jeeps and robots according to American trends) they adamantly refused to do
now.”

The Japanese refused to let NOA take the game and transform it into something
unrecognizable, again going back to *sodateru* and feeling as if the animals created truly belonged
to them. Negotiations continued only after NOA agreed not to make any major alterations
without gaining approval from ShoPro (the master licensor) on changes to guarantee creative
integrity. Also, they were not allowed to change Pikachu’s name.

NOA was confident that Pokemon could become a household name, only if American
values could be worked into it. The key decision made by Nintendo that led to the
Pokemonization of the American mainstream was to “culturally neutralize” the game. Gail
Tilden, Pokemon project coordinator for NOA stated, “We have tried to prevent kids from
feeling that these are characters coming from Japan...The reason is not because we want to hide

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42 Ibid 240
43 Ibid 243
the fact that Pokemon is made in Japan, but because we want to promote the impression that Pokemon are global characters.\textsuperscript{44} This need for globalization was the general sentiment of NOA. The point of cultural neutralization was to give each child a chance to make the Pokemon universe their own regardless of their location-make Pokemon “placeless.”\textsuperscript{45} Therefore, Nintendo changed the pacing of the story, tweaked the plot to make it less complex, added human characters, added ‘American’ music, airbrushed Japanese text from each frame, and even changed rice balls to donuts. The President of 4Kids Entertainment Norman Grossfeld claims that the origin of the game and cartoon is not the bad thing, rather, “We want kids to stay rooted…and not pondering the presence of rice balls in a scene.”\textsuperscript{46} Given that Pokemon was never introduced in its original form, one can only hypothesize how the public would have reacted. Yet, there are few situations that prove that American children were far more tolerant of other cultures than the adults imagined. For example, one of the situations is that when marketing the cartoon of Pokemon, the focus was on the character of Ash, a young boy who dreams of becoming a Pokemon master. The assumption was that children would respond more to a human boy, and that the series needed more human characters, whereas in Japan human characters do not sell as well.\textsuperscript{47} Instead, it became very clear that what excited American children and Japanese children was Pikachu, an electric yellow rodent-like Pokemon.\textsuperscript{48} This occurred because they did not want to relate to Ash, they wanted to be Ash and become Pokemon trainers themselves. Additionally, though NOA worked tirelessly to remove Japanese

\textsuperscript{44} ibid 235
\textsuperscript{45} ibid 246
\textsuperscript{46} ibid 247
\textsuperscript{47} ibid 245
\textsuperscript{48} ibid 244
text from the cartoon, playing cards that had Japanese writing on it are still considered most valuable to collectors. This proves once again, that the fans are curious about the roots of the show. By removing the elements that made the show more “Japanese,” NOA and all of the Pokemon’s producers took away the chance for fans to truly understand the cultural significance of the story.

The rise of Pokemon and other anime could not have been possible without the tin toy robots that helped to soften negative feelings Americans had about Japan after World War II, and strengthen the linked economies. At first, dominant military and economic hard power felt necessary for Japan because they feared occupation and loss of control to Western powers. After World War II, when their military was taken away, soft power would help to make the economy stronger, as well as, promote a more positive image of Japan. To this day, Pikachu is still one of the most recognizable characters worldwide. The entire Pokemon enterprise speaks to how pervasive soft power influence can be, and why it should not be discounted when considering the strength of a nation. The global love of Pokemon allowed the Japanese to market more traditional anime which stayed truer to its origins contributing to the previously mentioned anime boom of the 90s. The combination of the Economic hard power and soft power influence gave Japan the tools to wield their greatest weapon, their smart power. This use of smart power provides a framework of understanding how Japan so quickly became an economic superpower on equal footing with Western nations despite being decimated by the war. The transformation of Japan after the war is nothing short of extraordinary, and to think, scraps of leftover metal and one brilliant man who wanted children to find joy in their stressful lives helped make it possible.

49 Ibid 250
Figures

Figure 1

Figure 2: The nuclear insignia is the red strip

Figure 3
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