

Animation in Motion: Political Economy Leverage of East Asia for Global Influence

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how anime and East Asian animation function as instruments of cultural diplomacy and soft power within the framework of behavioral political economy. Specifically, it investigates the mechanisms through which Japan, South Korea, and China leverage animated cultural products to project influence, shape audience behavior, and generate economic returns in global markets. Employing a qualitative approach through comparative analysis and systematic literature review, this research draws on industry reports, peer-reviewed journals, and policy documents to trace anime's historical development, international market penetration, and its role within the Cool Japan Initiative and Hallyu Wave. The findings reveal that anime operates as a dynamic form of cultural behavioral multilateralism, wherein global audiences do not passively receive Japanese cultural content but actively reinterpret and localize it, generating reciprocal flows of influence. Comparatively, South Korea has repositioned itself from subcontractor to global IP producer, while China has pursued state-backed domestic consolidation as its primary model of cultural expansion. Economically, East Asian animation diversifies national revenue through streaming, merchandising, and licensing, while politically it sustains cross-cultural dialogue and soft power leverage even in diplomatically strained bilateral contexts. These findings suggest that animation in East Asia functions simultaneously as an economic motor and a geopolitical asset whose influence is co-produced between origin states and global audiences.

Keyword: Anime, Behavioral Political Economy, Soft Power, Cultural Diplomacy, Globalization, East Asia

INTRODUCTION

Anime, as a cultural product, occupies a distinctive position at the intersection of art, commerce, and international relations. More than simply a form of entertainment, it operates as a strategic instrument in Japan's political economy, capable of influencing perceptions, shaping consumer behavior, and reinforcing national branding on a global scale (Iwabuchi, 2015). The medium's distinct visual style, thematic diversity, and capacity for emotional engagement have enabled it to transcend linguistic and cultural barriers, embedding itself in the entertainment ecosystems of countries across Asia, Europe, and the Americas (Napier, 2005).

From a behavioral political economy perspective, anime functions as a tool for what (Nye, 2011) terms “soft power,” the ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion. However, anime’s influence is not limited to the passive reception of Japanese culture. Its circulation, adaptation, and consumption generate complex feedback loops, wherein foreign audiences reinterpret and repurpose anime narratives in ways that both reinforce and transform Japan’s intended messaging (Robertson, 1995). This dynamic underscores the need to analyze anime not merely as a static export, but as part of an evolving, interactive system of meaning-making.

Economically, anime contributes significantly to Japan’s content industry, with annual revenues from domestic and international markets reaching into the billions of dollars (Aoyama, 2014). The sector’s growth has been supported by advances in digital distribution, including the proliferation of streaming services and social media platforms that facilitate near-instantaneous global dissemination (Steinberg, 2012). Politically, anime has been incorporated into the Japanese government’s *Cool Japan* Initiative, which seeks to leverage cultural products as vehicles for enhancing the country’s global image and competitiveness (METI, 2014).

At the beginning of the 2000s, Japan experienced a period of economic crisis and political stagnation known as the “Lost Decades,” caused by slow economic policies and structural weaknesses in the Japanese economy (Keiichiro, 2015). This crisis posed a significant challenge to maintaining Japan’s image on the international stage, particularly amid growing competition from other rapidly developing East Asian countries. To address this situation, the government began leveraging popular culture, particularly anime, to achieve its objectives. Anime was utilized as a tool of cultural diplomacy to revitalize Japan’s national image while enhancing its global influence (Farina, 2018).

Anime is not merely an entertainment product; it is also regarded as a strategic medium capable of conveying Japanese cultural values in an engaging and authentic manner to audiences worldwide (Pratama et al., 2020). Anime serves as a unique representation of Japanese cultural identity, fostering cross-cultural dialogue and helping to preserve both traditional and modern heritage in the midst of globalization, thanks to its profound narrative power, iconic characters, and distinctive visual aesthetics.

Yet, as this manuscript will demonstrate, anime’s role in the global arena cannot be fully understood through economic or diplomatic frameworks alone. Its capacity to generate sustained emotional connections, mobilize transnational fan communities, and inspire both collaborative and adversarial cultural interactions requires an analytical approach that accounts for behavioral drivers, cognitive framing, and the co-creation of cultural meaning (Jenkins et al., 2013). By integrating insights from political economy, cultural studies, and behavioral science, this study aims to examine how Japan, South Korea, and China leverage animated cultural products to project influence, shape audience behavior, and generate economic returns in global markets, situating these cases within a broader analytical framework of cultural behavioral multilateralism.

Understanding anime’s global influence necessitates a theoretical foundation that bridges economics, political science, and cultural studies. The behavioral political economy framework provides such a bridge, emphasizing the ways in which individual

and collective decision-making processes are shaped by psychological, social, and cultural factors (Shiraishi, 2018). Unlike classical models that assume rational actors responding to price signals and incentives, behavioral approaches recognize the role of cognitive biases, emotional attachments, and identity-driven preferences in shaping economic and political outcomes (Kahneman, 2011).

Within this framework, cultural products like anime are not simply commodities exchanged in a marketplace, they are vehicles for meaning-making that are shaped by and in turn shape the values, norms, and identities of their audiences (Hall, 1997). The concept of *cultural flows*, as articulated by Appadurai (1996), describes the multidirectional movement of media, ideas, and symbols across borders, producing hybrid forms and new cultural configurations. In the context of anime, these flows involve not only the export of Japanese narratives and aesthetics but also the incorporation of foreign influences into Japanese productions, as well as the reinterpretation of anime in diverse local contexts (Otmazgin, 2014).

A key analytical tool here is the notion of *soft power* (Nye, 2011), which highlights the strategic use of attraction and persuasion in international relations. Anime contributes to Japan's soft power by fostering positive affect toward Japanese culture, language, and social norms, even among audiences with limited direct exposure to the country (Iwabuchi, 2015). However, as Robertson (1995) notes in his discussion of *glocalization*, the reception of cultural products is never entirely determined by the producer; local audiences actively adapt and reinterpret foreign media to fit their own social and political contexts.

Behavioral economics adds further nuance by explaining how media consumption can influence preferences, beliefs, and behaviors through mechanisms such as framing effects, priming, and social proof (Thaler et al., 2008). For example, the heroic archetypes and moral dilemmas frequently depicted in anime can shape viewers' attitudes toward leadership, justice, and community, while the portrayal of Japanese cultural practices can normalize certain norms and values across borders (Napier, 2005). By integrating these theoretical perspectives, this study situates anime within a broader analytical landscape that accounts for both its economic significance and its capacity to generate behavioral and political effects. This approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how anime operates as a form of cultural behavioral multilateralism, influencing and being influenced by the global audiences it engages.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design with a comparative case study approach, examining anime and other East Asian animations as instruments of cultural diplomacy and behavioral political economy across multiple national contexts. The selection of a qualitative design reflects the nature of the research problem, which requires interpretive analysis of cultural, political, and economic phenomena that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement alone.

Methodologically, this study applies comparative discourse analysis as its primary analytical tool, examining how media representations, policy narratives, and audience

reception across Japan, South Korea, China, the United States, France, and Southeast Asia construct and reflect the soft power dynamics of East Asian animation. This approach is particularly suited to the study's objectives given that the data sources consist primarily of textual and discursive materials including industry publications, government policy documents, academic journals, and media coverage rather than numerical datasets or field-collected primary data.

The theoretical framework draws on Cultural Diplomacy from Joseph Nye's concept of soft power as the central analytical lens, supplemented by Behavioral Political Economy. These concepts collectively allow for an analysis that accounts for both the strategic intentions of origin states and the creative agency of global audiences in shaping the cultural impact of animation. Data collection follows a systematic literature review protocol, prioritizing sources published within the past decade while selectively incorporating foundational works where theoretically necessary. Sources were evaluated for relevance, credibility, and disciplinary diversity, drawing from cultural studies, international relations, and political economy scholarship. The combination of comparative analysis and systematic literature review enables this study to trace both the structural patterns of animation's global circulation and the contextual specificities of its reception across different markets.

Cultural diplomacy is a form of international relations that uses cultural exchange, artistic expression, language, values, and shared heritage as tools to build relationships, foster mutual understanding, and advance a nation's foreign policy objectives. The concept draws directly from Joseph Nye's soft power theory, introduced in his 1990 work *Bound to Lead* and elaborated in *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (2004). Nye distinguished between hard power, which relies on coercive force through military and economic pressure, and soft power, which operates through attraction rather than coercion. A country's soft power rests on three pillars that are its culture, its political values, and its foreign policies.

Cultural diplomacy operationalizes the cultural pillar of this framework. When a country exports its cinema, music, cuisine, education, or language, it shapes global perceptions favorably, making others want what it wants, which is the hallmark of soft power influence. Cultural centers like Goethe Institute, Institut Français, Korea Cultural Center, and others are institutional expressions of this logic. Unlike propaganda, cultural diplomacy functions through genuine engagement and reciprocal exchange. It builds long-term trust and legitimacy, which Nye argued are far more durable foundations of influence than compulsion, making it an indispensable instrument of modern statecraft.

Further, about Behavioral Political Economy sits at the intersection of political science, economics, and psychology. It examines how real human decision-making, shaped by cognitive biases, emotions, and social influences, affects political and economic outcomes in ways that classical rational choice theory consistently fails to predict.

Classical political economy, rooted in figures like Adam Smith and later formalized through rational choice models, assumed that individuals act as fully informed, self-interested agents who consistently maximize their utility. Behavioral political economy challenges this assumption by incorporating insights from cognitive psychology,

particularly the ground-breaking work of Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky (1979), whose prospect theory demonstrated that people evaluate gains and losses asymmetrically and are far more sensitive to potential losses than equivalent gain

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Case Study: Japan's Anime Industry and International Behavioral Influence

Japan's anime industry occupies a unique position within the global cultural economy. While anime has its roots in domestic artistic traditions, it has evolved into a transnational media form that engages audiences worldwide, often in ways that blur the lines between consumer, producer, and cultural diplomat (Iwabuchi, 2015). Its growth has been shaped by a combination of historical circumstances, technological innovation, and strategic policy interventions, each of which has contributed to its current status as one of Japan's most visible and influential exports (Aoyama, 2014).

Historical Context and Domestic Development

Anime emerged in postwar Japan during a period of rapid modernization and economic growth. Early works such as Osamu Tezuka's *Astro Boy* (1963) established foundational stylistic and narrative conventions that would come to define the medium, including large expressive eyes, dynamic action sequences, and serialized storytelling (Napier, 2005). The 1970s and 1980s saw the diversification of genres, with mecha series like *Mobile Suit Gundam* and magical girl franchises like *Sailor Moon* appealing to distinct demographic segments (Lamarre, 2009).

This period also witnessed the establishment of robust production and distribution infrastructures, including specialized animation studios, television networks, and merchandising systems that enabled anime to become a fully integrated cultural industry (Steinberg, 2012). The domestic success of anime was further bolstered by Japan's dense urban environment, where media consumption was facilitated by a high degree of connectivity between producers, broadcasters, and consumers (Aoyama, 2014).

During the 1990s and early 2000s, anime underwent significant technical and thematic transformation. In the post-war era, it served not only as entertainment but also as a medium for expressing the collective aspirations of Japanese society as it sought to rebuild its national identity. The integration of computer technology into production resulted in smoother animation and more complex visual effects. The futuristic gadgets depicted in *Doraemon*, for instance, were not merely imaginative entertainment but also symbolized a broader cultural belief that innovation could overcome everyday challenges and drive social progress (Hu, 2015).

At the industry level, increased professionalization was driven by support from industry organizations and government regulation. Funding for creative works expanded alongside improvements in human resource training, which generated new talent across animation and media production. This also encouraged closer collaboration between major animation studios and adjacent media sectors such as manga, video games, and merchandise, forming a mutually reinforcing ecosystem (Maulana, 2021).

In the last decade, the internet and digital platforms have played a decisive role in how anime spreads and how it is consumed. Streaming services allow anime to be accessed

instantly by viewers around the world, while social media has strengthened communication between creators and fan communities. These developments have also introduced persistent challenges around piracy and copyright protection, which remain ongoing concerns for the industry (Nugraha, 2019).

International Expansion and Market Penetration

Anime's first wave of international expansion in the 1970s and 1980s relied heavily on syndication deals with foreign broadcasters, often accompanied by significant localization. Series were dubbed into local languages, storylines were edited to meet cultural norms, and character names were sometimes changed to make them more relatable to local audiences (Denison, 2015). While these changes occasionally altered the original thematic content, they allowed anime to gain a foothold in markets as diverse as the United States, France, and the Middle East (Bouissou, 2010).

The 1990s marked a turning point, as anime began to achieve mainstream popularity in multiple markets simultaneously. The global success of Pokémon, Dragon Ball Z, and Sailor Moon demonstrated the commercial viability of anime as both a broadcast product and a merchandising powerhouse (Napier, 2005). This period also coincided with the rise of fan conventions, the growth of online fan communities, and the emergence of fan-subtitling networks, all of which played crucial roles in expanding anime's reach beyond the constraints of official licensing (Leonard, 2005).

Streaming Era and Global Synchronization

The advent of digital streaming platforms in the 2010s fundamentally altered the landscape of anime distribution. Services such as Crunchyroll, Netflix, and Amazon Prime Video made vast libraries of anime available to global audiences with multiple language options and near-simultaneous release schedules, enabling binge-watching patterns and fostering transnational fan discussions in real time (Denison, 2015; Jenkins et al., 2013).

This shift carries important implications for how digital media platforms function in relation to public discourse. As Gillespie (2010) argues, the label "platform" obscures the active regulatory role these services play in shaping what kinds of content circulate and how audiences engage with it. Rather than neutral distributors, streaming services function as mechanisms that structure visibility, access, and cultural exchange in ways that benefit some content producers more than others.

From a behavioral perspective, the streaming era has amplified anime's capacity for influence by creating shared temporal experiences across geographically dispersed audiences. When fans in Tokyo, Paris, and Jakarta can all watch the same episode within hours of its release, the resulting social media conversations generate a sense of global simultaneity that deepens emotional engagement with the content (Shiraishi, 2018). Viewing patterns have also shifted significantly, moving away from scheduled television broadcasts toward mobile and on-demand consumption, which has expanded the audience demographic and made anime more accessible to younger, digitally active viewers. This accessibility has in turn accelerated production cycles, with streaming-driven demand encouraging studios to experiment with higher visual quality and bolder narrative formats (Napier, 2018).

However, the global proliferation of streaming has also intensified licensing and copyright disputes. Obtaining legal broadcast rights for anime on international platforms involves complex negotiations between Japanese content producers and international distributors, often complicated by the layered structure of production committees and collective copyright arrangements (Nugraha, 2019). Japan's stricter copyright framework relative to some Western jurisdictions means that piracy and unauthorized streaming remain persistent global challenges, and while legal reforms have led to the shutdown of many illegal sites, the tension between access and protection continues to define the industry's international operating environment (Nuraeny et al., 2023).

Behavioral Impact and Soft Power Applications

Anime's global appeal is rooted in its ability to elicit strong emotional responses and foster identification with its characters and narratives (Napier, 2005). From a behavioral political economy perspective, this affective engagement is not a trivial byproduct of entertainment but a central mechanism through which preferences and perceptions are shaped over time (Kahneman, 2011). When viewers form attachments to anime protagonists, internalize moral frameworks presented in story arcs, or adopt aesthetic sensibilities inspired by the medium, these shifts can gradually influence broader cultural and political attitudes (Hall, 1997).

The Japanese government's Cool Japan Initiative explicitly recognizes this potential, channeling investment into promotional campaigns, cultural festivals, and international collaborations aimed at enhancing Japan's attractiveness as a cultural and economic partner (METI, 2014). These efforts are reinforced by public-private partnerships involving major studios, streaming platforms, and merchandise manufacturers, ensuring that anime's cultural influence is sustained by commercial incentives (Aoyama, 2014).

One particularly notable dimension of anime's behavioral impact is its role in cultural socialization. Exposure to Japanese customs, language, and social norms through anime has been shown to influence foreign viewers' interest in learning Japanese, traveling to Japan, and consuming other Japanese cultural products such as manga, music, and cuisine (Otmazgin, 2014). This process often operates implicitly, as audiences absorb values and behaviors embedded in the narratives without perceiving them as deliberate persuasion (Iwabuchi, 2015). Anime's thematic diversity further broadens its demographic reach, allowing it to function across multiple layers of society and in varied geopolitical contexts. In countries with historically strained relations with Japan, such as South Korea and China, anime can provide a shared cultural space that facilitates interpersonal connection despite broader diplomatic tensions (Shiraishi, 2018).

The participatory nature of anime fandom further amplifies its soft power potential. Fan conventions, cosplay events, and online communities create spaces where individuals engage in collaborative meaning-making, blending elements of Japanese culture with local traditions (Jenkins et al., 2013). This co-creative process not only deepens emotional investment but also generates hybrid cultural forms that sustain anime's relevance across generations and geographies (Steinberg, 2012).

Comparative Case Studies: Cultural Behavioral Dynamics in Key Markets

While Japan is the birthplace of anime, the medium's domestic role is as significant as its

global impact. Domestically, anime functions as both a reflection of and a contributor to Japanese identity, incorporating traditional aesthetics such as *ma* alongside modern storytelling structures influenced by global cinema (Lamarre, 2009; Iwabuchi, 2015). These elements serve a dual purpose, preserving cultural heritage while ensuring commercial viability in a competitive media landscape.

The domestic anime ecosystem is highly integrated, connecting manga publishing, merchandise manufacturing, and themed tourism in ways that ensure successful properties generate revenue across multiple platforms (Aoyama, 2014). This integration reinforces anime's role as a pillar of Japan's creative economy while sustaining the cultural familiarity that makes it an effective ambassador abroad (Robertson, 1995).

The digitization of distribution has further expanded accessibility for viewers previously limited by regional and language barriers. Streaming platforms providing subtitles and dubbing allow fans from diverse countries to engage with narrative context without linguistic obstacles, strengthening cross-cultural ties among fan communities worldwide (Napier, 2017). The speed of this distribution has also created new consumption dynamics, with viewers accessing episodes shortly after their Japanese premiere, which minimizes piracy risk and generates real-time viewer feedback that increasingly shapes production decisions (Cunningham et al., 2019).

Beyond individual viewing, global synchronization has given rise to multinational fan communities that are highly active across social media platforms. These communities do not only discuss and analyze content but also produce fan art, fan fiction, and memes that expand the social and cultural value of anime well beyond its original broadcast context. This phenomenon has strengthened transnational solidarity networks among fans, which in turn encourages sustained engagement with the industry and its products (Ito et al., 2020).

South Korea: Historical Tensions and Creative Convergence

Anime's reception in South Korea has been shaped by a complex interplay of historical tensions and cultural proximity (Jung, 2011). For decades, restrictions limited the import of Japanese cultural products, a legacy of Japan's colonial rule over Korea from 1910 to 1945 (Otmazgin, 2014). These restrictions began to ease in the late 1990s, gradually allowing anime to enter the Korean market more freely.

Despite lingering sensitivities, South Korea has become both a consumer and a collaborator in anime production. Korean animation studios frequently serve as subcontractors for Japanese productions, contributing to the global anime supply chain while simultaneously developing their own domestic animation sector (Jung, 2011). This has led to creative convergence, with Korean works adopting anime-influenced aesthetics and Japanese productions incorporating elements of Korean pop culture (Denison, 2015). From a behavioral standpoint, this dynamic illustrates anime's capacity to transcend political boundaries by appealing to shared cultural sensibilities, as the grassroots exchange it facilitates generates interpersonal and subcultural connections that persist independently of state-level diplomatic relations (Shiraishi, 2018).

At the same time, the acceptance of anime in South Korea is not a passive or

homogeneous process. Public perception and existing regulations continue to be shaped by protectionist policies and nationalist sentiments that periodically restrict the cultural space available to Japanese products including anime. These tensions reflect an ongoing negotiation between historical grievance, political identity, and the pull of transnational popular culture (Natanael, 2017). For South Korean youth in particular, anime consumption has become a site for exploring questions of identity and cultural hybridity, producing a contradiction between openness to foreign cultural influences and the desire to preserve a distinct domestic cultural identity (Zhou et al., 2022).

United States: Mainstream Integration and Cultural Hybridization

In the United States, anime has evolved from a niche subculture into a mainstream entertainment category (Napier, 2005). Early exposure in the 1980s and 1990s through series like *Voltron*, *Pokémon*, and *Dragon Ball Z* paved the way for broader acceptance, with cable programming blocks such as Cartoon Network's *Toonami* serving as major entry points for young audiences (Denison, 2015). Over time, the U.S. market demonstrated a high degree of cultural hybridization, with anime's visual language and narrative structures influencing domestic animation in series such as *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and *Teen Titans*. Hollywood's adaptation of anime properties, though often controversial among dedicated fans, further reflects the medium's commercial viability and cultural cachet (Napier, 2005).

From a behavioral perspective, anime in the U.S. functions as a site of identity exploration, particularly among youth and minority communities who find in its narratives alternative models of heroism, belonging, and resilience (Jenkins et al., 2013). The participatory culture surrounding anime conventions, cosplay, and fan fiction fosters a sense of community that extends beyond the screen, creating durable cultural bonds that sustain long-term engagement with the medium (Steinberg, 2012).

The presence of anime in the U.S. has also encouraged diversification in content and production formats across the broader American entertainment industry. American animation creatives increasingly draw on Japanese techniques and aesthetics, producing hybrid styles that blend the distinctive characteristics of both traditions. The positive domestic reception of this hybrid approach not only strengthens anime's position as an artistic reference point but also expands its fan base across generations and ethnic backgrounds, reflecting an active and constructive cultural dialogue between the two traditions (Versteeg, 2017). Nevertheless, some narrative and symbolic elements in anime remain difficult to translate outside their original cultural context, sparking ongoing debate between loyal fans and producers who must balance artistic integrity with market accessibility (Halsall, 2010).

France: Cultural Symbiosis

France holds a unique position in the global anime ecosystem as the largest non-Asian consumer market for Japanese animation and as a country with deep historical ties to Japanese visual culture (Bouissou, 2010). Anime began to make significant inroads into French popular culture in the late 1970s and early 1980s through programming blocks that introduced series like *Goldorak*, *Captain Harlock*, and *Dragon Ball* to millions of viewers (Denison, 2015). This openness was facilitated by France's long-standing

appreciation for visual arts and sequential storytelling, from bande dessinée to cinema, as well as by government subsidies for cultural programming and official recognition of animation as a legitimate art form (Bouissou, 2010). France now hosts some of the largest anime conventions outside Japan, including Japan Expo in Paris, which attracts hundreds of thousands of attendees annually (Pellitteri, 2018).

French audiences, already accustomed to serialized storytelling through comics, found anime's narrative structures familiar, while its thematic complexity resonated with traditions of philosophical and social discourse (Denison, 2015). This alignment of existing cultural sensibilities with anime's aesthetic and narrative qualities has produced a relationship of cultural symbiosis, where anime enriches French cultural life while benefiting from France's robust media markets and platforms for dissemination (Otmazgin, 2014). France's own internationally recognized animated productions, which frequently address social and cultural themes with distinctive visual aesthetics, further reinforce this dynamic, positioning France as a hub of mutual creative exchange within the global animation landscape (Ardiyansah, 2022).

Indonesia and Southeast Asia: Emotional Sovereignty

In Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia, anime functions as more than entertainment. It has become a symbolic resource for political expression and identity formation (Heryanto, 2014). The medium entered the region in the 1980s through series like Doraemon and Saint Seiya, broadcast in local languages and absorbed into the formative experiences of an entire urban generation (Morishita, 2015; Iwabuchi, 2015). Japanese popular culture gained broader recognition in Indonesia through the 1990s as manga translations and television broadcast licenses expanded its reach, a process later accelerated by internet access and university-based cultural events (BINUS, 2018).

What distinguishes Southeast Asian reception is the degree to which audiences localize anime's narratives to fit their own socio-political contexts. In Indonesia, the Straw Hat Pirates flag from One Piece has appeared in youth-led protests as a symbol of resistance and solidarity, illustrating what Heryanto (2014) describes as emotional sovereignty, the adaptation of foreign cultural narratives to articulate local struggles. Economically, the region functions as both a consumer market and a production hub, with Japanese studios outsourcing animation work to artists in the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia (Denison, 2015). Politically, Japan leverages anime in Southeast Asia as a tool for cultural diplomacy, linking it to educational exchanges and tourism initiatives (METI, 2014).

Fan communities across the region are neither passive nor uniform in their engagement. Through cosplay, fan fiction, and discussion forums, Southeast Asian fans construct critical narratives that express their communities' experiences and desires, often using anime's imagery to critique global cultural dominance through a local lens (Praselina, 2019). At the same time, critical scholarship has drawn attention to problematic elements within anime, including gender objectification and patriarchal representations, which require careful consideration given the distinct social structures and cultural norms of Southeast Asian societies (Avilla, 2023). These dynamics confirm that local communities do not simply consume anime as cultural content but use it as a platform for reflection, negotiation, and selective adaptation (Resphaty, 2013).

Comparative Reflection of Animated Art as Cultural Behavioral Multilateralism

Defining Cultural Behavioral Multilateralism

Cultural behavioral multilateralism refers to the process by which cultural products circulate through multiple nodes of creation, distribution, and consumption, generating reciprocal flows of influence between the origin country and global audiences (Robertson, 1995). In the case of anime, Japan serves as the initial producer of the cultural form, but its global reception involves reinterpretation, adaptation, and even political appropriation across diverse local contexts (Iwabuchi, 2015). This is not a unidirectional export model but a feedback-driven system in which Japanese cultural diplomacy interacts dynamically with the creative agency of foreign audiences (Jenkins et al., 2013).

Anime's role in this process is reinforced by its distinctive narrative complexity and aesthetic versatility, which allow it to function across multiple cultural and political environments (Napier, 2005). This adaptability makes anime an effective vehicle for building sustained transnational connections while accommodating a broad range of ideological and emotional interpretations (Denison, 2015). More broadly, the process of cultural multilateralism carried out through anime has important implications for understanding cultural globalization today. Rather than flattening cultural difference, anime has become a space where people discuss, negotiate, and recontextualize culture, helping to preserve diversity and build social cohesion amid global interconnection (Robertson, 1995).

Economic and Political Implications of Cultural Behavioral Multilateralism

From an economic standpoint, the multilateral nature of anime's global circulation creates diversified revenue streams that reduce dependency on any single market (Aoyama, 2014). Unlike traditional cultural exports that rely heavily on the purchasing power of one or two major regions, anime derives substantial income from a combination of domestic consumption, merchandise sales, licensing agreements, streaming rights, and live events spread across multiple continents (AJA, 2023). This diversification not only enhances the industry's financial resilience but also provides Japan with greater leverage in cultural trade negotiations (Otmazgin, 2014).

The political implications are equally significant. Through its role in Cool Japan and other cultural diplomacy initiatives, anime functions as a symbolic asset mobilized to foster goodwill, soften diplomatic tensions, and promote Japan's image as a technologically advanced yet culturally rich nation (METI, 2014). This is especially relevant in regions where Japan faces historical or territorial disputes, as the emotional capital generated by anime can help maintain dialogue channels even during periods of political strain (Iwabuchi, 2015).

However, the multilateral feedback loops that define anime's global presence also limit Japan's ability to exercise unilateral control over its own cultural product. As foreign creators, distributors, and fans appropriate anime for their own purposes, its narratives and symbols may be reframed in ways that diverge from Japan's intended messaging (Robertson, 1995). The use of anime imagery in Indonesian political protests illustrates how cultural imports can be reinterpreted to challenge authority rather than reinforce diplomatic ties (Heryanto, 2014). This decentralization of narrative control reflects a

broader reality of contemporary global media flows, wherein origin countries can set initial conditions but the interpretive agency of global audiences ultimately shapes the long-term trajectory of cultural products (Jenkins, 2006).

Constraints and Risks in Multilateral Cultural Exchange

While anime's multilateral cultural circulation has expanded Japan's global influence, it also exposes the industry and the state's cultural diplomacy strategy to several significant constraints and risks (Denison, 2015). One of the most pressing is the loss of narrative sovereignty. Once anime enters foreign cultural ecosystems, it becomes subject to reinterpretation, parody, and political appropriation in ways that may conflict with Japan's desired image (Iwabuchi, 2015), potentially undermining the carefully curated messaging of initiatives such as Cool Japan.

A related risk lies in market overexposure. The rapid growth of anime streaming has expanded accessibility but also intensified competition, raising concerns about audience fatigue (Steinberg, 2012). As commercial pressures mount to meet global demand, there is a risk that creative experimentation will give way to formulaic content designed to maximize short-term viewership metrics, which could weaken anime's cultural distinctiveness and diminish its long-term appeal as a unique Japanese export (Aoyama, 2014; Jenkins et al., 2013).

Legal and regulatory environments present additional challenges. The uneven enforcement of intellectual property rights across jurisdictions means that piracy remains a persistent threat, particularly in emerging markets where enforcement capacity is limited (Yu, 2011). While some level of informal circulation can function as grassroots marketing, widespread unauthorized distribution reduces revenue streams and erodes incentives for high-quality production (Sefton-Green, 2012). Finally, cultural backlash poses a risk in markets where anime content is perceived as ideologically problematic, whether due to its treatment of gender, violence, or supernatural themes that conflict with local values (Napier, 2005). Such criticisms can lead to censorship or negative media coverage, potentially undermining the very soft power benefits that anime seeks to generate (Otmazgin, 2014). Sustaining anime's role as a tool of cultural behavioral multilateralism therefore requires adaptive strategies that balance global market expansion with the preservation of creative integrity, legal protections, and sensitivity to local cultural norms (Robertson, 1995).

East Asian Animation Beyond Japan: Korea and China on the Global Stage

South Korea: From Subcontractor to Global IP Powerhouse

Building on its long role as a production partner within the Japanese anime ecosystem, South Korea has undergone a fundamental strategic reorientation, shifting from a subcontracting base into a creator of globally recognized intellectual property. This transition reflects a deliberate behavioral logic, rather than competing with Japan on anime's terms, South Korea has embedded animation within the broader Hallyu ecosystem, where it functions not as a standalone cultural product but as an entry point into a layered network of K-pop, K-drama, and digital content. Netflix-backed productions such as K-pop Demon Hunters exemplify this approach, integrating animation with idol culture and transmedia storytelling in ways that maximize parasocial

attachment and sustained consumption across multiple platforms. From a behavioral political economy perspective, this model is significant because it leverages affective investment rather than simple viewership, converting fans into long-term consumers across an entire cultural economy rather than individual media properties.

Economically, the results of this repositioning are measurable. South Korea's animation and character licensing industry generated approximately USD 12.4 billion in revenue in 2022, with exports contributing nearly 45 percent of total value, driven largely by North American and Southeast Asian markets. Character-based intellectual property generates income not only from streaming but also from merchandise, mobile games, and live events, reinforcing precisely the kind of durable affective bonds that behavioral political economy identifies as the foundation of sustained cultural influence. What distinguishes this model from Japan's is its deliberate integration of commercial and diplomatic objectives: animation lowers cultural entry barriers for younger global audiences, who are subsequently drawn into a wider ecosystem of Korean cultural consumption, strengthening South Korea's soft power leverage across demographic cohorts that are difficult to reach through conventional diplomatic instruments.

The political implications of this convergence model extend beyond individual cultural products. Unlike Japan's Cool Japan strategy, which operates primarily through the global circulation of anime as a standalone form, South Korea prioritizes the construction of an integrated emotional ecosystem in which animation serves as a gateway rather than a destination. This distinction matters analytically because it reflects different theories of how soft power operates: Japan relies on the accumulation of goodwill through repeated cultural exposure, while South Korea actively designs pathways that deepen engagement over time, converting initial emotional interest into sustained cultural and commercial loyalty. Both models ultimately rest on behavioral mechanisms, but South Korea's approach demonstrates a more architecturally deliberate application of those mechanisms at the level of cultural strategy.

China: Nezha, Mythology, and State-Backed Scale

China's animation resurgence represents a third and distinctly different model of cultural behavioral strategy, one rooted in state-supported scale, domestic market consolidation, and what might be termed civilizational storytelling. The success of *Nezha* (2019), which grossed over USD 725 million domestically, is analytically significant not merely as a commercial achievement but as evidence that a state-backed cultural model can generate the kind of mass emotional engagement typically associated with market-driven entertainment. That a mythological narrative grounded in Chinese cultural heritage could mobilize such extraordinary domestic audience response suggests that behavioral investment in animation does not require global circulation to be strategically meaningful: the cultivation of domestic affective loyalty carries its own political economy value, consolidating national identity and reinforcing state legitimacy through shared cultural experience.

China's animation industry operates within a regulated media environment in which state support through subsidies, content quotas, and cultural policy alignment shapes both what is produced and how it is received. Animation is positioned as a vehicle for cultural

confidence, drawing on mythology, historical epics, and moral narratives that reinforce contemporary Chinese national identity rather than seeking cross-cultural adaptability. This is a fundamentally different behavioral logic from Japan's glocalization model: where Japan optimizes for foreign audience reinterpretation, China optimizes for domestic emotional consolidation, using animation to strengthen the affective bonds between citizens and a state-sanctioned cultural narrative. Economically, China's animation and gaming-related cultural industries exceeded USD 220 billion in 2021, with animation contributing a growing share through box office revenue, streaming platforms, and merchandise licensing. From a behavioral political economy perspective, consumption of domestic animation in this context increasingly functions as an expression of cultural pride and emotional nationalism, blurring the boundary between entertainment choice and identity performance in ways that amplify the state's capacity to shape public sentiment at scale.

Synthesis: Animation as an East Asian Economic Motor

The trajectories of Japan, South Korea, and China reveal animation as a core economic and symbolic engine in East Asia. Japan pioneered global adaptability through anime, South Korea optimized convergence within a platform-based entertainment economy, and China scaled animation through domestic consolidation and state support. By 2023, East Asia accounted for more than 55 percent of global animation-related revenue across streaming, box office, and licensing, a dominance that reflects behavioral strategies capable of transforming emotional engagement into sustained consumption and geopolitical soft power.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how anime and East Asian animation function as instruments of cultural diplomacy and soft power within the framework of behavioral political economy, with particular attention to the mechanisms through which Japan, South Korea, and China leverage animated cultural products to project influence, shape audience behavior, and generate economic returns across global markets.

The comparative analysis across these three cases reveals that no single model of animation-based soft power dominates the East Asian landscape. Japan's approach is characterized by cultural adaptability and decentralized global circulation, wherein anime's influence is co-produced between Japanese creators and foreign audiences who reinterpret and localize its narratives. This feedback-driven dynamic is simultaneously anime's greatest strength and its most significant strategic vulnerability, as it generates sustained emotional engagement while limiting Japan's ability to control how its cultural products are ultimately received and deployed. South Korea's trajectory demonstrates that latecomer disadvantage can be converted into strategic advantage through platform integration and transmedia convergence, with animation functioning as an entry point into a broader Hallyu ecosystem rather than as a standalone cultural export. China's model, by contrast, prioritizes domestic consolidation and state-backed cultural confidence, using animation as a vehicle for civilizational storytelling that reinforces national identity rather than seeking global adaptability in the Japanese sense.

Across all three cases, what emerges consistently is that animation's soft power does not operate through direct persuasion but through the accumulation of affective attachments, shared cultural references, and participatory fan practices that gradually normalize favorable perceptions of the origin culture. This behavioral dimension is what distinguishes animation from conventional diplomatic instruments, and it is precisely this quality that makes it both effective and difficult to manage at the state level.

Economically, the diversification of revenue across streaming, licensing, merchandise, and live events has demonstrated that animation is not merely a cultural product but a structurally resilient industry capable of sustaining national creative economies over the long term. The dominance of East Asia in global animation-related revenue by 2023 reflects not coincidence but the deliberate alignment of cultural production with behavioral strategies designed to convert emotional engagement into durable consumption patterns.

These findings suggest that the future of cultural diplomacy in East Asia will be increasingly mediated through animated and digital cultural forms, and that states which invest in the creative conditions for distinctive, emotionally resonant animation will hold disproportionate influence in shaping how younger global audiences perceive their cultures, values, and geopolitical orientations.

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