

# The Enigma of Korea-Japan Relations: Why is Japan's Nation Branding Strategy not Working in Korea?\*

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## ❖ ABSTRACT

This paper examines why Japan's nation branding strategy is not working in South Korea in spite of expanding relations between Korea and Japan. Japan has successfully managed its national reputation, which altered its image around the world. However, Japan's nation-image in South Korea has not kept up with its efforts internationally. Political and economic interactions between Korea and Japan have increased throughout the past decades since the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1965. Also, the normalization of cultural-social relations emerged after the Korean government policy restricting Japanese popular culture was removed in the 1990s and overseas travel was liberalized in 1989. In spite of the improvement in politico-cultural-social relations, trust-building efforts still stagnate between the two countries. This paper discusses the reasons behind this phenomenon and provides some suggestions to solve this issue.\*\*

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Key Words

Korea, Japan, national branding, nation-image, history issues

## | . Introduction

In a globalized world, managing nation's image and reputation is becoming more and more important<sup>1)</sup> as van Ham (2001) has noted, "smart states are building their brands around reputations and attitudes in the same way smart companies do." The popular term "nation branding" was first coined by Simon Anholt, and is increasingly used to describe how a country is portrayed in the world. Japan has been actively engaged in strengthening its nation-brand and also successfully managed to do so.<sup>2)</sup> For example, according to the research of *Future brand*,<sup>3)</sup> Japan was ranked the first place in the country brand index of 2014-2015, which was conducted for 2,530 international business or leisure travelers in 17 countries (USA, Canada, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, UK, Germany, France, Russia, Turkey, South Africa, UAE, India, China, Thailand, Japan and Australia) both quantitatively and qualitatively. This clearly shows the extent to which the successful management of national reputation by Japanese government has altered its image around the world, especially since World War II.

However, Japan's national image in South Korea (hereafter Korea) is a completely different story, at least according to the information given by a brand research within Korea. For example, according to Gallup Korea daily opinion on Korean's most favorable country in 2014, Japan was ranked the ninth place out of ten countries.<sup>4)</sup> In spite of the Japanese government's efforts to promote Japan's nation image in Korea, Japan

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1) van Ham, Peter. "The Rise of the Brand State: The Postmodern Politics of Image and Reputation," *Foreign Affairs* 80.5, 2009, pp.2-6.

2) Anholt, S., "Nation-brands of the twenty-first century", *Journal of Brand Management*, 5:6, 1998, pp.395-406.

3) Futurebrand Country brand index 2014-15

4) Gallup Korea, 2014.

still remains the least favorable country among Koreans. Despite the long history of shared socio-cultural-economic relations, there were and are still immense distrust and antipathy between Koreans and Japanese. As a result, Korea and Japan have been remained “distant” neighbors psychologically although they are the closest geographically. In this paper, I will examine the nature of this apparent contradiction by analyzing economic, cultural, and human exchanges between Korea and Japan. In particular, I will investigate some thorny issues, including historical one, that have stalled the relations between two countries by using polled data as a way of getting fundamental information about the perceptions held by the general public in Korea on Japan.

## II . Korea-Japan Relations in Multiple Dimensions

Both Korean and Japanese government claimed that Korea and Japan are important neighboring countries. For example, the Japanese government claimed that “Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK) are most important neighboring countries to each other, and their good relationship is essential for peace and stability in the Asian-Oceanian region.”<sup>5)</sup> In a similar vein, the Korean government also officially acknowledged that “Korea and Japan are not only important neighbours that share similar values and interests but also partners in achieving peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia and beyond.”<sup>6)</sup> However, Korea-Japan relations are not as simple as they claimed and the realities are more complex and multilayered. The complex realities can be addressed in different spheres including economic, cultural-social and historical relations.

### 1. Economic Relations between Korea and Japan

The normalization of diplomatic relations paved the way for economic ties between Korea and Japan in 1965. Since then, economic interactions

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5) Diplomatic Bluebook, 2015, p. 28

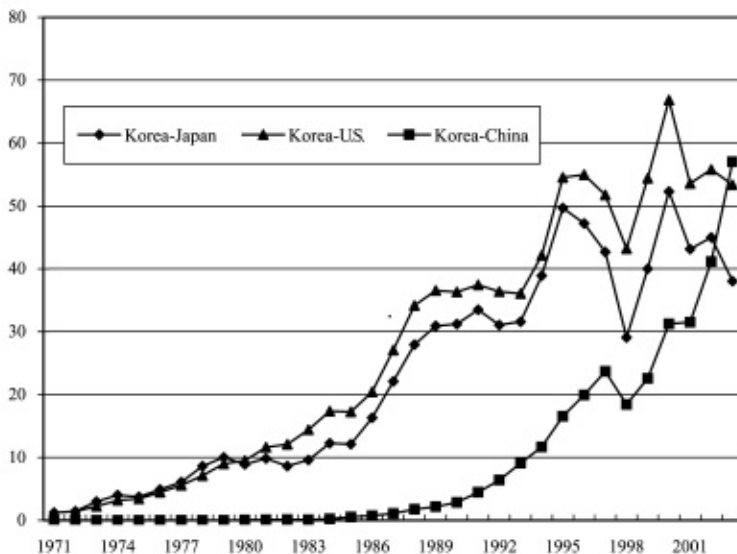
6) Diplomatic Whitepaper, 2015, p. 79.

began to emerge and increased throughout the past decades. The post 1965 economic tie between Korea and Japan was based on Japanese economic aid to Korea. The Korea-Japan settlement consisted of \$800 million economic assistance (\$300million grant, \$200 million in low-interest loans, and \$300 million in investment capital). Not only capital transfer, such as loan and direct investment, but technology transfer was made to Korea. Seth points out that Japan offered nearly 60 per cent of foreign technology to Korea between 1962 and 1979.<sup>7)</sup> Although Japan transferred “declining industries (textiles) and overcrowded ones (chemicals, steel, motors, electronics),”<sup>8)</sup> the technological transfer from Japan laid the foundation of Korea’s economic development in the following decades. Without a doubt, Japanese capital and the technology have contributed to the development of the Korean economy in the beginning. However, at the time, the general public in Korea had contradictory perceptions on Japan. Although Koreans were envious of the prosperous Japanese economy and Japan was definitely a model for Korea’s own development, Korean government also began to diversify its economic path by strengthening trading relations with the US in the early 1980s and China in the early 2000s.

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7) Seth, Michael. *A Concise History of Modern Korea: From the Late Nineteenth Century to the Present*. Landham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2009, pp.163-164.

8) Sang-young Rhyu and Seungjoo Lee, “Changing Dynamics in Korea-Japan Economic Relations: Policy Ideas and Development Strategies,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 46, No. 2, 2006, pp.198-199.

FIG 1. Changing Patterns of Korea's Trade<sup>9)</sup>

SOURCES: Bank of Korea, *Economic Statistics Annual Report* (Seoul: Bank of Korea, 1965–2003); Korean National Statistical Office, *Korean Principal Statistics Index* (Daejeon: National Statistical Office, 1965–2003); and Ministry of Finance and Economy, *Weekly Economic Trend* (Seoul: Ministry of Finance and Economy, 1965–2003).

As Figure 1 shows, in terms of Korea-Japan economic relations, Japan was the largest trading partner for Korea until US surpassed its place in early 1980s. Yet, Japan was continuously in the second place until early 2000s when China surpassed Japan as Korea's biggest trading partner. But Japan still is the third largest trading partner for Korea<sup>10)</sup> and it is not merely political rhetoric for Finance Ministers of Japan and South

9) This figure is adopted from Sang-young Rhyu and Seungjoo Lee "Changing Dynamics in Korea-Japan Economic Relations: Policy Ideas and Development Strategies" *Asian Survey*, Vol. 46, No. 2, 2006, p.196.

10) Sang-young Rhyu and Seungjoo Lee, "Changing Dynamics in Korea-Japan Economic Relations: Policy Ideas and Development Strategies" *Asian Survey*, Vol. 46, No. 2, 2006, p.196.

Korea to claim that “the finance dialogue [among the two countries] is very important to share our experiences and utilize them in future policies.”<sup>11)</sup>

## 2. Socio-Cultural Relations between Korea and Japan

The normalization of cultural-social relations is far more difficult than that of economic relations between Korea and Japan. As a result of the normalization, political and economic exchanges have significantly increased whereas cultural exchange has been limited because the Korean government banned the import of Japanese popular culture products. The main reasons for the restriction of the cultural products were expected negative effects, such as undermining Korea’s own national identity and delaying the process to overcome national sentiment from its colonial experiences.<sup>12)</sup> Thus, after the diplomatic normalization in 1965, the Japan Information and Cultural Centre (Kōhō Kunkain) was established in 1971 in order to promote Japanese culture in Korea, despite to a limited extent.<sup>13)</sup>

However, as the Korean government pursued globalization (*segaewha*) in early 1990s, the government policy on the restriction of Japanese popular culture began to relax. At the same time, the Korean government concerned that the import of Japanese popular culture may provoke abhorrence or repulsion to the general public in Korea. In particular, the milestone of cultural relations between Korea and Japan was made in President Kim Dae Jung and Prime Minister Keizō Obuchi joint declaration. The two leaders declared “A New Korea-Japan Partnership towards the twenty-first century” while President Kim paid an official visit to Japan as a state guest in 1998.<sup>14)</sup> There, they agreed on the need to improve cultural personnel

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11) Xinhua News Agency May 23, 2015

12) Iwabuchi, Koichi. “Japanese popular culture and postcolonial desire 15 for ‘Asia’” in Matthew Allen and Rumi Sakamoto eds. *Popular Culture, Globalization and Japan*. New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2006.

13) Embassy of Japan in Korea, Retrieved from [http://www.kr.emb-japan.go.jp/cult/cul\\_guide\\_hist.html](http://www.kr.emb-japan.go.jp/cult/cul_guide_hist.html)

14) Japan-Republic of Korea Joint Declaration “A New Japan-Republic of Korea Partnership towards the Twenty-first Century” on 8 October 1998, Retrieved from <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/korea/joint9810.html>

exchanges between the two countries. President Kim conveyed his policy of opening Korea to Japanese culture and Prime Minister Obuchi welcomed the policy. Since then, there were four phases of Korea's opening up to Japan: 1998, 1999, 2000, and 2003. In the first phase in 1998, the Korean government allowed the importation of movies and videos including Japan and Korea co-production film, Anime and Manga in print publication, and Japanese actors' participation in Korean film. The second phase in 1999 allowed seventy Japanese films which were awarded in international film festivals, films with no age restriction, and music concert less than 2,000 seats. In the third phase in 2000, the allowed items were as follows: films under 12-14 years, international film festival awarded anime in theatres, all size of music concerts, all game software, including PC games, and on-line games. After the joint hosting of the 2002 World Cup, which made the Korea government build better relations with Japan, the fourth or last phase in 2003 released the restrictions of all movies and videos, music, games software, TV drama under 12 years, and co-production of TV drama.<sup>15)</sup> Moreover, in order to facilitate the opening process, the Korea-Japan Cultural Exchange Council, consisted of eleven representatives from each country, was established in 1999.

In the meantime, the Japan Foundation (*Kokusaikōryūkikin*), which had been established for Japan's cultural diplomacy during the 1970s, opened the Japan Cultural Centre (*Nihon Bunka Sentā*) in Seoul in 2002 in order to promote cultural exchange between the two countries and to form human networks (social networks) between Japanese experts and leading institutes in Korea. This especially increased Japanese language education, and bolstered Japanese studies program by providing support to institution such as universities and other Japanese studies centres. For example, Japanese language learners in Korea were estimated 840,187 at 3,914 institutions in 2012, with the number ranked in the third place in the

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15) Kukga kirokwŏn (National Archives of Korea), Retrieved from <http://www.archives.go.kr/next/search/listSubjectDescription.do?id=003611/Pak,Yong-gu>. "Han'guk esŏ 'kul jaepaen' ūi hyŏnhwang kwa chŏnmang," *Ilponsasang* 21, 2011.12, pp.103-126.

world behind China (first) and Indonesia (second).<sup>16)</sup> Also, the Japan Foundation in Seoul has organized various cultural events, such as exhibitions, museum collections, concerts, and movies, to widely promote the national image of Japan in Korea. For example, since the Japan- Korea Exchanges Festival (*Han-Il Ch'ukche Hanmadang* in Korean or *Nik-kan Koryu Omatsuri* in Japanese) was first held in Seoul in 2005 to commemorate the 40th anniversary of normalization of diplomatic ties, it has been carried out every year on a regular basis.<sup>17)</sup> Moreover, the joint hosting of the world Cup in 2002 was a symbolic event to enhance the spirit of unity between two countries.<sup>18)</sup>

At the societal level, the import of Japanese pop culture already progressed in black market, satellite TV and internet for decades prior to the official opening of Korea to Japanese pop culture in 1998. Moreover, with the advent of the internet, the circulation of information, together with popular culture, across international boundaries has become inevitable, and it was no longer possible for Korean government to impede the flow of Japanese culture into Korea. For example, there were already thousands of websites dedicated to Japanese movie, popular music, anime and so forth,<sup>19)</sup> and the general publics in both Korea and Japan began to consume each country's cultural contents enormously.

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16) Japan Foundation, Survey Report on Japanese-Language Education Abroad 2012, Retrieved from [https://www.jpf.go.jp/j/project/japanese/survey/result/dl/survey\\_2012/2012\\_s\\_excerpt\\_e.pdf](https://www.jpf.go.jp/j/project/japanese/survey/result/dl/survey_2012/2012_s_excerpt_e.pdf)

17) Kyodo news service [New York] 27 Sep. 2014.  
Nikkan kōrū omatsuri(Japan-Korea Exchange Festival) website, Retrieved from <http://www.nikkan-omatsuri.jp/kr/index.html>

18) Sawada, Chiho. "Pop Culture, Public Memory, and Korean-Japanese Relations" in Gi-Wook Shin, Soon-Won Park, Daqing Yang eds. *Rethinking Historical Injustice and Reconciliation in Northeast Asia: The Korean Experience*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006, p.198.

19) Sawada, Chiho. "Pop Culture, Public Memory, and Korean-Japanese Relations" in Gi-Wook Shin, Soon-Won Park, Daqing Yang eds. *Rethinking Historical Injustice and Reconciliation in Northeast Asia: The Korean Experience*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006, p.198.



Table 1. The volume of trade (export and import) with Japan in Korea<sup>20)</sup>

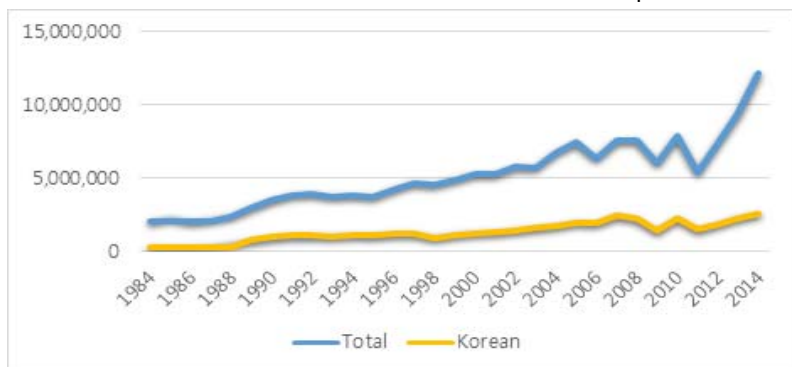
	2013		2012		2011		2010	
Cultural Contents Industry	Export	Import	Export	Import	Export	Import	Export	Import
	1,455,837	131,970	1,347,892	217,899	1,247,982.2	258,252.1	800,237.8	-

Note: Cultural contents industry consists of publishing, comics (manga), music, games, film, animation(anime), characters, knowledge information, broadcasting, and contents solutions. Sources: Munhwa cheyuk kwankwangbu and Han'guk kontenchū chinhūngwōn. 2014 Kontenchū sanōp paeksō, 2013 Kontenchū sanōp paeksō, 2012 Kontenchū sanōp paeksō, 2011 Kontenchū sanōp paeksō.

As Table 1 shows, it is remarkable that the volume of imported Japanese cultural contents was larger than that of exported Korean cultural contents to Japan until 2013. In other words, Japanese cultural contents had been widely popularized by Koreans by 2013, poised to emerge as a multi-million dollar industry in Korea in near future.<sup>21)</sup>

The cultural exchange includes not only the import and promotion of the Japanese cultural products but also human exchange via tourism. In particular, geographical closeness between Korea and Japan has enabled Koreans to travel to Japan easily.

FIG. 2. The Number of Korean Visitors to Japan



Source: Shutsunyūkoku kanri tōkei tōkei-hyō(出入国管理統計統計表).

20) Munhwa cheyuk kwankwangbu and Han'guk kontenchū chinhūngwōn. 2014 Kontenchū sanōp paeksō, 2013 Kontenchū sanōp paeksō, 2012 Kontenchū sanōp paeksō, 2011 Kontenchū sanōp paeksō.

21) Dudden, Alexis. *Troubled Apologies Among Japan, Korea, and the United States*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008, p.47.

As Figure 2 shows, the number of Korean visitors to Japan is constantly increasing, except for the years of economic recession in Korea. Moreover, the proportion of Korean visitors in Japan in total was at about 20 to 25 per cent from 1988 to 2014. The number of Korean visitors rapidly increased since the overseas travel liberalization in 1989 as part of government's globalization policy. The Japanese government agreed to give visa exemptions for the period of 90 days for Korean nationals in 2005 in order to attract more Korean tourists. For Koreans, Japan has always been one of the most popular destinations. This trend indicates that Koreans and Japanese began to know each other in more personal and direct ways, especially as grassroots exchange and interaction grew.<sup>22)</sup>

### III. The Road Less Travelled: Thorny Issues and Persisting Tensions between Korea and Japan

As discussed above, in spite of increasing political, economic, cultural, and human exchanges, ironically, there are persisting tensions in Korea-Japan relations. Also, public opinion polls ranked Japan as one of the least favorable countries in Korea.

FIG3. Korean's overall opinion of Japan (Unit: Total % favorable/unfavorable)



Note: From 1991 to 2011, the scale of the question is very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable, or very unfavorable; the scale of the question in 2015 in Source: Gallup Korea, February 2015.

22) Glosserman, Brad and Snyder, Scott A. *The Japan-South Korea Identity Clash: East Asian Security and the United States*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015, p.98.

As Figure 3 shows, Korea's polling data from 1991 to 2015 affirm that Korea's overall opinion of Japan is predominantly negative (unfavorable). About 67 per cent of Koreans stated that Japan is unfavorable while only less than 30 per cent of Korean responded positively. This survey accurately reflects Koreans' general opinions on Japan as a nation and Japanese as a people. There was modest improvement in Koreans' attitudes towards Japan from 26 per cent to 41 per cent in 2011. Yet, the proportion was soon down to 17 per cent in 2015. This statistics clearly shows not only do Korea and Japan have mutual distrust and friction, but also there are constant tensions between two countries.

FIG 4. Relative Trust between Korea and Japan (unit: percentage)



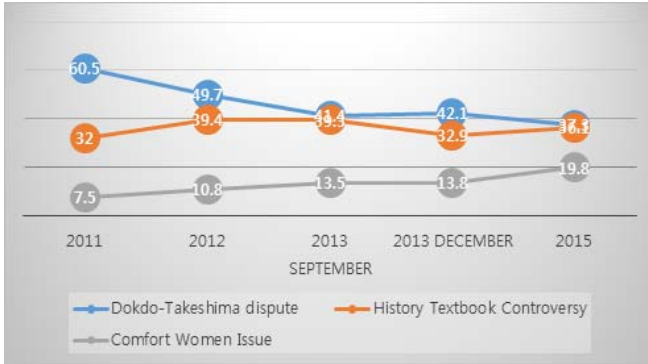
Source: A collaborative poll by Han'guk Ilbo and Yomiuri Shimbun, 2015

As figure 5 shows, the dominant feelings of Koreans toward Japan are antipathy and distrust. The proportion of Koreans' relative trust in Japanese is averaged 19 per cent from 1996 to 2015 according to the joint polls between the Hanguk Ilbo and Yomiuri Shimbun.<sup>23)</sup> The proportion of Japanese relative trust in Korean used to be averaged 40 to 50 per cent in the past; yet, it has fallen to 20 per cent in recent two years. The reason for this decline was attributed to the inflammatory dispute over

23) Han'guk Ilbo, Retrieved from <http://www.hankookilbo.com/v/03ca69a40e544d76abd8fe339634e9d4>

history between Korea and Japan.<sup>24)</sup> This recent research indicates intensifying level of relative distrust between Koreans and Japanese. In other words, over 89% of Koreans and 75% of Japanese were polled “distrust” each other.

FIG 5. Obstacles in Korea-Japan Relations (Unit: per centage)



Source: Asan report, 2015

The polling data show that the main obstacles of Korea-Japan relations are Dokdo-Takeshima dispute, history textbook controversy, and comfort women. In particular, these issues ignited suspicions and resentment for Koreans who considered them as historical issues. For example, when Shimane Prefecture in Japan decided to establish Takeshima Day in 2005, President Rho Moo-hyun delivered the special message to Japanese as follows:

Dokdo is our land. It is not only part of our territory but also our own soil of historic significance where forty years of painful history is engraved vividly...For Koreans, Dokdo is a symbol of the complete recovery of sovereignty. Along with homage by the Japanese leaders to the Yaskuni Shrine and Japanese history textbooks, Dokdo is a touchstone of Japan’s recognition of its past history as well as its

24) Han’guk Ilbo, Retrieved from <http://www.hankookilbo.com/v/03ca69a40e544d76abd8fe339634e9d4>

determination for Korea-Japan relations of future and peace in East Asia.<sup>25)</sup>

As President Rho stated, Koreans in general acknowledged that Dokdo is not merely a territorial issue, but a historical one. Moreover, whenever Japan claims sovereignty over the islets, the emotional potency of collective memory of colonial history comes back to the mind of Koreans who, in turn, choose to display their resentment and even hatred towards Japan. Moreover, the disputes over Dokdo, history textbook, comfort women have run on parallel line.<sup>26)</sup> Koreans argue that Korean's sense of distrust and animosity are due to Japan's unscrupulous statements and policies and actions on its aggressive past towards its neighbouring countries.<sup>27)</sup> Despite the widening relations in economic, cultural spheres and human exchange, the Korean perception of Japan at best can be described as 'a distant country.' No theory can explain and account for its puzzling contradiction; yet, it is clear that historical issues hinder Koreans from holding a deeper understanding of Japan. Even though the Japanese government makes every effort to create a positive image of Japan to Koreans, the road to building mutual trust seems to be still less travelled, especially if the historical issues are constantly avoided.

#### IV. Conclusion: The Enigma of Korea-Japan Relations

The aim of national branding is to establish not only the broader

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25) President Rho Moo-hyun's speech on 25 April 2006, Retrieved from <http://www.mofa.go.kr/webmodule/htsboard/template/read/korboardread.jsp?typeID=12&boardid=514&seqno=304487>

26) Lind, Jenifer M. *Sorry States: Apologies in International Politics*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2010.

27) Park, Cheol Hee. "A Whirlpool of Historical Controversies in Widening Waters of Cooperation" in Marie Soderberg ed. *Changing Power Relations in Northeast Asia: Implications for Relations between Japan and South Korea*, London and New York: Routledge, 2011, pp.39-54.

international recognition of a country, but also the trust and emotional connections of its citizens around the world.<sup>28)</sup> Japan has successfully managed its national branding, which has been attracting attention from all over the world. Yet, Japan's nation branding strategy does not seem to be working in Korea in spite of the increasing socio-economic-cultural relations between Korea and Japan. More often than not, relative trust and favor increase with familiarity, which has been strengthened between Koreans and Japanese in recent years by increasing exchanges. However, this study shows a difference story in the present state of relations between Korea and Japan. For Koreans, the perceptions of Japan as a nation and Japanese as a people have been varied and even paradoxical. Until the 1980s, Korea envied Japan's economic position, and Japan was a "model" for Korea's economic development. At present, Koreans see that they have to compete with Japanese in trade but they also have to cooperate with them as a close, regional partner in globalizing world economy. In cultural sphere, ever since the Korean government reluctantly opened Japanese popular culture, Korea has had numerous cultural exchanges with Japan and Japan has been one of the most popular tourist destinations. However, Japan is still a least popular country in Korea. It is probably due to the deeply engrained historical issues in Korean society that have strengthened the negative collective memory towards Japanese. Although the Korean government has made attempts to decouple historical issues from economic and cultural relations with Japan, Japan's national image has not been changed, often haunted by history. In other words, Japan's nation-branding challenges in Korea are not the issues to national branding *per se* but deeply rooted in historical issues. Territorial dispute over Dokdo, comfort women issue, and history textbook controversy have always overshadowed Japan's efforts to improve its nation-image in Korea. Therefore, in order to make Japan as friendly nation to Korea, Japanese government should make every effort to bridge the gap of historical perceptions between Koreans

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28) Dinnie, Keith. *Nation Branding: Concepts, Issues, Practice*. Amsterdam, Boston, Heidelberg, London, New York, Oxford, Paris, San Diego, San Francisco, Singapore, Sydney, Tokyo: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2008, p. 63.

and Japanese. Unless Japan's nation-branding efforts include attempts to understand Koreans' historical perceptions of Japan, the psychological and emotional gap that deeply separates Koreans and Japanese will not be narrowed and Japan will remain the most unfavorable nation in Korea even in the future.

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❖ 국문초록

한일관계의 수수께끼

: 왜 일본의 국가이미지 개선전략은 한국에서 작동되지 않는가?

강 성 우

본 논문은 일본의 국가이미지의 개선노력에도 불구하고 한국에서 일본의 이미지가 부정적인 이유에 대해 논한 것이다. 일본은 세계적으로 국가브랜드 관리를 긍정적으로 이끄는 데 성공하였으나 한국에서는 일본의 국가 이미지 개선 전략이 통하지 않는 것을 여러 여론조사를 통해서 알 수 있다. 일본은 한국에서도 국가 이미지 개선을 추구하였다. 1965년 한일간의 국교 정상화 이후 경제정치적인 관계가 개선되고 65년체제하에서 경제기술의 협력이 확장되었고 현재까지도 상당한 무역을 전개하고 있다. 뿐만 아니라 문화와 인적 교류도 상당하다고 할 수 있다. 1998년에 대중문화의 개방과 여행자유화조치 이후에 대중 문화와 민간교류가 확장되었으며 일본과의 지리적인 근접성은 상호간의 교류를 가능하게 했다. 뿐만 아니라, 일본공보관과 국제교류기금은 지속적으로 일본의 문화를 한국에 알리려는 노력을 하고 있다. 그럼에도 불구하고 언제나 역사의 문제가 양국간에 오해와 불신을 가중시키고 있으며 독도문제를 비롯한 여러 역사적인 인식의 차이점은 한일 상호간의 신뢰관계를 저해하는 요소로 조사되고 있다. 이를 개선하기 위해서 역사대화와 같은 상호간의 역사이해에 대한 상호간의 이해의 확장이 필요하다는 것을 제안하고 있다.

주제어 : 한국, 일본, 국가브랜드, 국가 이미지, 역사문제

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