



## Research Article

# SOFT POWER OF JAPAN IN VIETNAM: A CASE STUDY OF AEON CORPORATION

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## ABSTRACT

*The article mainly uses the typical case analysis method to analyze Japanese factors such as Aeon Corporation and examines the general implementation process of promoting Japanese culture with its soft power. The analysis clarifies the characteristics of Omotenashi culture in particular and Japanese culture in general at Aeon and events related to Japan as well as Aeon's role in meaningful activities with the community. Aeon has gained popularity by adopting the Omotenashi business culture, which emphasizes sophisticated operations and a one-stop shop with numerous amenities and community-focused activities. Research results show that Aeon Group's prospects for Vietnam are promising and Aeon will continue to invest in Vietnam in the future. This shows the attractiveness of the Vietnamese market to foreign businesses, including Japanese.*

**Keywords:** Aeon; Aeon Mall; culture; Japan; Omotenashi; soft power; Vietnam

## 1. Introduction

In the present globalization and tendency toward ever-deeper integration with the globe, cultural diplomacy is seen as a “soft power,” playing a significant role in the foreign policies of many countries, including Japan. In many nations, cultural diplomacy is even seen as “the key to state diplomacy” in the twenty-first century. McGray was the first to mockingly refer to these exports as “Japan's Gross National Cool” as early as 2002. The author went on to discuss Japan's cultural achievements as a reimagining of the conventional paradigm of the “international superpower” and in the end, he made the case that the nation's “cool” factor had kept Japan afloat despite its economic turbulence, which began in the 1990s. While these companies are undoubtedly mainstays of Japanese popular culture, the Cool Japan approach goes beyond simply fostering their renown. Rather, the tactic involves turning a country's identity into a commodity. Nonetheless, the nation's businesses and government were beginning to see the need to make use of the financial potential of Japanese

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coolness (Stellenbosch University Japan Centre, 2023). A corporation such as Aeon's commercial development is not an exception.

Just Tets Kimura's paper *Japan's Soft Power: A Case Study of Uniqlo and AKB48* has received great attention in soft power analysis in the context of business by *Japan Studies Association Journal* in 2016. This will be an ordinary analysis of the upcoming Aeon case. The word "Aeon" is derived from Latin, meaning "immortal longevity." Over hundreds of years of operation, the principle of trusting the trust and desire of customers is the focus that Aeon is considered as the core element. Aeon staff tries to satisfy the needs of customers and build a better life. The eternal mission that Aeon wants to maintain is to bring maximum satisfaction to its customers. The Three Core Values of Aeon are Peace, People, and Community (Aeon Vietnam, n.d).

## **2. Results**

### ***2.1. Theoretical and practical basis for Japan's soft power***

#### *2.1.1. The definition of "soft power"*

Power is the ability to influence a subject's behavior to achieve desired results (Hoang, 2011, pp. 32-39). The term "soft power" was first used informally in the early 1990s by American academic Joseph Nye, refers to the capacity to arouse interest in other nations so that they "voluntarily" alter their policies and behaviors in line with their desires rather than imposing them through force both military might and economic strength (Joseph, 2004, p.10). The goal of "soft power" is to evoke, entice, and freely follow in contrast to "hard power," which imposes and coerces. When integrated skillfully, soft power and hard power will enhance, complement, and reinforce each other and foster national synergy (Communist Magazine Vietnam, 2020). A country's soft power can come from three resources: its culture, political values, and foreign policies (Joseph, 2006).

#### *2.1.2. Japan's perception of soft power*

Asian and Japanese societies are strongly rooted in principles like harmony, respect, and building and strengthening relationships via love, harmony, and trust. For the Japanese and other Asian peoples, the term *Wa* (和) - which signifies harmony, harmony, peace, filial piety, harmony, and balance—expresses the fundamental principle that guides all interactions (Tran, 2021, p.1375). The 17-Article Constitution (十七条憲法, *juushichijou kenpou*), penned by reformer Shotoku Taishi (聖即太子), has been in effect since the 7th century. Article 1 in the constitution lists peace as one of the key ideals that forged the relationship: "Take harmony to be of the highest value and take cooperation to be what is most honored. All persons are partisan, and few indeed are sufficiently broad-minded. It is for this reason that some offend against lord and father, and some transgress wantonly against neighboring villagers. But when those above are harmonious and those below live congenially with each other, and when mutual accord prevails in resolving the affairs of the day, then all matters without exception will be properly and effectively dispatched" (James

et al., 2011, p.33). Like the term Wa (和), the spirit of Amae (甘え) denotes harmony, mutual affection, and respect among community members, and is highly valued in Japanese society. This philosophy is also evident in the way Japanese businesses are organized and run, which fosters harmony, cooperation, and support amongst employees in the pursuit of shared prosperity. Japan has achieved remarkable success using the Keiretsu Corporation model (系列). The spiritual value system of Japanese society meets the soft power value proposed by Joseph Nye, which is achieving cooperation through mutual trust and respect together (Tran, 2021, p.1376).

### *2.1.3. Japan's practice of using soft power since the end of World War II*

Japan's long-standing culture has been pushed by the Japanese government through cultural diplomacy since the 1950s, following World War II, in an effort to alter public perception of Japanese militarism in the direction of a modern, advanced, and enlightened Japan. Article 9 of the Japanese constitution in 1946 consist of (1) Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes; and (2) In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized” (National Diet Library of Japan, n.d). Japan enjoyed a golden age of exceptional economic, social, scientific, and technological progress between 1960 and 1970. The 1964 Tokyo Olympics served as a symbol of Japan's global openness and goodwill. With 93 participating nations, this is the first Olympics hosted in Asia, signifying Japan's advancement and comeback to the global arena. The Olympics serve as a showcase to the rest of the world for Japan's full recovery and abandonment of capitalism and militarism. Japan has formally stated its position on “from heart to heart” conquering operations in its foreign policy since the 1970s of the 20th century with the 1977 Fukuda Doctrine. The Fukuda Doctrine centers on three key tenets of Japanese foreign policy: first, that Japan is dedicated to maintaining peace and rejects the role of military power; second, that Japan will work to establish mutual trust in relationships; and third, that Japan and ASEAN are equal partners in many areas of cooperation and interdependence. As the cornerstone of Japan's current Asia-Pacific strategy, the Fukuda Doctrine is regarded as the country's long-term strategy in Southeast Asia (Tran, 2021, pp.1376-1377).

The “Japan Brand Program” has been pushed by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) since 2004 to introduce Japanese culture to other nations, particularly those in Asia. With Japanese animation (Anime), Japanese comics (Manga), educational culture, community culture, fashion, and architecture, Japan's reputation has improved as a result of its achievement in becoming one of the nations with worldwide cultural impact (Vo & Nguyen, 2022, p.90). The formal launch of Cool Japan took place in 2010 when the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry (METI) established the Cool Japan Promotion Office

(Stellenbosch University Japan Centre, 2023). In line with the Cool Japan strategy of the Japanese government, anime is seen as a tool for promoting Japanese culture abroad and serving as a component of Japan's public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy (Lao Dong Newspaper, 2023).

## **2.2. Practical implementation: a case of AEON corporation in Vietnam**

### **2.2.1. Omotenashi business culture**

Omotenashi is a Japanese term for “wholehearted customer service” and refers to a service culture. In the service sector in Japan, Omotenashi has evolved into an art form and is now a key success component for every firm. As a result, many individuals will likely be familiar with Omotenashi culture while discussing the traditional Japanese service approach. The five degrees of customer service that the Japanese distinguish are Moral (Ethical), Manner (Polite manner), Service (Professional Service), Hospitality, and Omotenashi (the highest level). One of the key elements determining how visitors and shoppers feel about Aeon Mall is the service attitude. The Aeon Mall's omotenashi culture is widely regarded and is demonstrated by the staff members' cordial and gregarious demeanor towards guests, which extends from the janitor to the security guard to the customer service representative. This is the culture that the company has consistently upheld from the start of operations to the present. Under the operational slogan “Japanese Heart, Vietnamese Smile”, all staff at Aeon Mall strive to achieve the most precious reward - that of satisfied customers who beam with delight and smiles. To make every client happy, the staff members of the company constantly work from the heart, with the utmost sincerity, devotion, and excitement by following the company's concept of “Everything we do, is for the customer.” It is believed that Aeon always adheres to this unchanging ideology despite its constant search for novel routes. It is Aeon's tradition and the company's aim to never be content with the company's existing accomplishments and to continually look for methods to better the lives of its consumers. This also confirms that Aeon is always available to fulfill the demands of new customers (Kazimierz et al., 2021, p.34)

### **2.2.2. Events relating to Japan at AEON**

Since its debut in Vietnam in 2014, Japanese cultural events have grown in popularity. Aeon Mall Tan Phu Celadon, which is located adjacent to the shopping center, staged the Japanese Colors light festival program, which recreated the four seasons in the year. The well-known animated Doraemon has come to represent a particularly Japanese summer in Vietnam on June 1, International Children's Day, The Fun with Doraemon: Nobita and the Kingdom of Clouds kicked off with a humorous tale about this cartoon film. Many patrons have expressed admiration for the Mid-Autumn Festival picture in the foyer, which is a huge light featuring the Japanese mythology of the Jade Rabbit pounding rice on the moon. November 20, 2016 saw the Asianbeat Aki Matsuri 2016 fall event held at Aeon Mall Long Bien. Some other intriguing hands-on activities are also available within the festival's

framework, including calligraphy, origami, drawing, putting on yukata, tasting Daifuku, and taking quizzes. Aeon Mall Binh Tan hosted the Fresh Fair 2016 from November 25 to November 27, 2016, with hamachi fish, madai fish, and hokkigai oysters that are prepared using fresh seafood that is brought in straight from the Sea of Japan. On January 16, 2017, the Japan Tourism Board held the Vietnam - Japan Festival 2016 at the Aeon Mall Long Bien in Hanoi with the theme “Let's talk about visiting Japan!” Even more intriguingly, the Ninja performances from Edo Wonderland and characters from the Doraemon comic series also appeared there, which was enjoyable. In addition, the photo corner with traditional kimonos and yukata helped young people take beautiful selfies. In that year, Unique pieces of Japanese culture, such as a variety of “matsuri” decorations - traditional festivals with a significant Japanese influence - were provided to customers in celebration of Aeon Mall Long Bien's second anniversary of operation. The Japanese Doll Festival, or Hina Matsuri, brings viewers to the land of cherry blossoms in springtime with an eye-catching display of screens, lanterns, and traditional dolls. Tanabata Matsuri is a summer festival that features wish confetti and vibrant bamboo branches. Furthermore, fish-shaped banners represent Children's Day in Japan. A hands-on opportunity to make Daruma is provided by Momiji Matsuri, a Japanese maple leaf celebration, and Oshogatsu Matsuri, a traditional Tet holiday is complemented with lanterns, red couplets, fortunate items, and the lucky cat Maneki Neko. From January 1st to 7th, 2018, Aeon Mall Tan Phu Celadon hosted the traditional Japanese New Year celebration, “Oshougatsu” which featured a range of events, including lively theatrical productions, traditional Japanese games like Fukuwarai, Kendama, Yuru Kyaru, and Daruma Otoshi, as well as four adorable mascots that represented four well-known Japanese cities. The Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) has organized a food festival to introduce Japanese cuisine with the Test Kitchen event at Aeon Mall Long Bien from January 25 to February 4, 2018. The event's goal was to support the promotion of Japanese culinary culture. Participants had the opportunity to sample popular Japanese dishes like tonkotsu ramen, udon noodles, gyoza, salmon rice, and rice balls on the occasion of the 45th anniversary of the Vietnam-Japan relationship. A special and free program for children from 5 to 10 years old was held by Mizuno Japan named “Mizuno’s Ninja School” at Aeon Mall Binh Tan on February 3rd, 2018. Sakuko Vietnam hosted the “Japanese Cosmetic Festival 2018” at the Aeon Mall Long Bien and learned about over 1,800 high-quality, safe beauty products from 25 of the most well-known and elite Japanese cosmetic brands on May 19 and 20, 2018 regarded as the most popular cosmetics websites worldwide, including Cosme, Rakuten. The Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) hosted the “Japan Tourism Festival 2018” at Aeon Mall Long Bien on October 27 and 28, 2018, offering activities to experience Japanese winter and the chance to “win a prize” for Japanese vacations. Furuwarai may also be experienced in sketching happy faces, performing Koma, singing Japanese karaoke, and pounding rice cakes in the traditional manner. Ten companies

and organizations from the Nara province participated in the Nara Festival – Japan on December 16, 2018. Exciting activities like “trying Nyumen noodles,” “showcasing knives cutting capabilities,” “experiencing and selling calligraphy,” “showcasing the scenery of Nara province with 4K video,” and “showcasing an exhibition promoting tourism and local specialties” were organized during the event. Furthermore, the primary purpose is to host a Goldfish Fishing Festival utilizing goldfish from Yamatokoriyama City, which is well-known for its goldfish farming. In 2019, from January 1 to January 20, 2019, Vietnamese customers had an opportunity to purchase and savor traditional Japanese cuisine at Test Kitchen Vietnam, including miso ramen noodles, Hiroshima souplless tanmen noodles, meat-filled bean soup, and Japanese-flavored grilled intestines at Aeon Mall Long Bien. On November 3, 2019, the Aeon Mall Long Bien East Court hosted the Nara Japan Festival, which gave attendees a unique chance to view and investigate sports toys and handicraft items. Crafted with distinction from Nara wood, it serves as a venue for entertaining events, such as “Try Nara's famous shaved ice,” “Try Soumen noodles,” and “Pick up goldfish” game. On April 17, 2021, “Japanese Ibaraki Specialties Introduction Week” took place at Aeon Mall Tan Phu Celadon in Ho Chi Minh City, where customers tried traditional Ibaraki items. The Japanese Mattress Festival 2022 was held in East Hall, Aeon Mall Tan Phu Celadon, Ho Chi Minh City, on September 24 and 25, by Inoac Living Vietnam Co., Ltd. (Inoac Living) as a way to market Japanese mattresses to consumers. The Aeon Mall Ha Dong hosted the Asianbeat FUKUOKA Matsuri 2022 Festival on November 6, 2022, with the introduction to Fukuoka, Miss Yukata Contest final round, NIJIGEN Vtuber live show, Fukuoka Illustration Exhibition, and Savor specialty sweets from Fukuoka and learned about Japanese culture (calligraphy, origami). Other activities include advice offered for visiting Fukuoka and studying abroad and the Fukuoka quiz. In 2023, an event was promoted by Ehime Prefecture in the new year at Aeon Mall Tan Phu Celadon and Yosakoi Festival at Aeon Mall Ha Dong. On the occasion of 10 years in Vietnam by Aeon Mall, 6 malls held the Japan Festival in the summer of 2023. Recently, in the new year of 2024, Genki Fukushima was berthed at Aeon Mall Tan Phu Celadon with the chance to savor unusual dishes like fresh seafood and well-known Kitakata noodles and discover Okiagari Koboshi, a historic artisan area in Fukushima Prefecture.

The character cosplay trend originated from manga and anime. **The Japanese coined the English term “cosplay” which is derived from the phrases “costume” and “role play”;** in Japanese, it is called that コスプレ (cosupure). At Aeon Mall Long Bien on February 20, 2016, hundreds of young Hanoi residents participated in the lively Cos Touch Hanoi 2016. Young people diligently and elegantly prepared themselves to become a variety of well-known comic book and cartoon characters at the event. The Touch Spring 2017 festival took place at Aeon Mall Tan Phu Celadon on March 25–26, 2017, and featured a lot of interesting Japanese culture to explore, including food like Takoyaki and Okonmoyaki,

music featuring Japanese celebrities like DJ Yuyoyuppe, Ceui, and Yosakoi traditional dance, and most importantly, a large number of cosplayers. In 2022, Aeon Vietnam held AEON Cosplay Expo accompanied with Ekiden Marathon, a fun haven for cosplayers who live in Ha Noi, Binh Duong, and Ho Chi Minh City. In 2023, Aeon Ekiden and Japan Cultural Festival was also held in Hai Phong Province, Binh Duong Province, and Ho Chi Minh City. On the occasion of 10 years anniversary of Aeon Mall Vietnam, a cosplay festival and contest took place on July 1st, 2023 at Aeon Mall Tan Phu Celadon, Ho Chi Minh City

### *2.2.3. Customer appreciation*

Every time Aeon has been in business for ten years, there is a present to express thanks to the consumers. Anyone with an invoice for the amount of money is eligible for a gift. Aeon Vietnam reached a significant milestone in 2022 for the anniversary of 10 years in Vietnam. The Record Lighting ceremony was held at Ho Chi Minh City's Aeon Mall Tan Phu Celadon on July 23, 2022. The Vietnam Records Organization (VIETKINGS) has formally recognized AEON Vietnam for having “The tallest lantern tower in Vietnam” and “The largest lantern painting in Vietnam” and patterns that emphasize the phrase “AEON welcomes 2,000,000 members.” Furthermore, a series of relay activities called “Aeon Ekiden 2022 - Relay Trail, Fun for the whole family” is also being held in conjunction with the Vietnam - Japan Cultural Festival in three different provinces and cities around the nation, including Hanoi, Binh Duong Province, and Ho Chi Minh City.

### *2.2.4. Activities for local communities*

Aeon Mall has always actively collaborated with partners and local authorities to arrange competitions and tournaments to establish a practical playground and support the preservation and promotion of traditional cultural and artistic values during its time in Vietnam. Vietnamese teenagers always participate in the many competitions and cultural events hosted by Aeon Mall, which serves as a helpful playground for them. More precisely, this shopping center developer has carried out several significant initiatives over the years, like starting zero waste emissions, reacting to power outages in support of Earth Hour, and offering scholarships to children, growing trees, recycling and decreasing plastic trash, and getting back to nature. Increasingly regular daily operations have shaped Aeon Mall's current position as a client favorite. “Aeon Mall works to enhance reception, disseminate the attractive lifestyle to consumers, and produce beneficial benefits for the community through business initiatives based on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations.” The representative of Aeon Mall Vietnam said that social activities are becoming more prevalent as we go toward sustainable development in the future (Dan tri Newspaper, 2022).

## **2.3. Prospects**

### *2.3.1. Strengths*

Vietnam has a stable political and economic environment. Unlike other nations, it has never seen a civil war. This is a need to persuade international investors to put money into

the Vietnamese market and employ local labor, assisting both parties in working together for their mutual gain.

Aeon has a strong base to enter the Vietnamese market because of its lengthy history as a top Japanese retail firm. This guarantees that clients may enjoy a day of enjoyable activities, dining, and shopping at a “one-stop complex mall” with their loved ones. Besides Aeon invests in state-of-the-art infrastructure and meticulous attention to detail to provide maximum customer comfort while shopping.

The quality of service has made Aeon unique. Vietnamese clients can experience shopping areas infused with Japanese culture thanks to Aeon's introduction of services in line with Japanese standards, the advantages of working with a Japanese corporation, a nation renowned for its excellent customs and services. Japanese brands can be seen as an added value added to tangible factors, helping to create a good impression in the hearts of Vietnamese customers.

Every Aeon Mall in Vietnam live streams sales for mall tenants monthly so customers can approach anything and buy its goods at a good price.

### *2.3.2. Weaknesses*

At this current time, Aeon Corporation’s vision is to open 30 shopping centers in 2030. There are only six in Vietnam and one will be open in 2024.

Furthermore, some staff may not trained in customer service, attitude, and sale skills according to Japanese standards.

Aeon's sluggish entry into the Vietnamese market might be attributed to its tiny market share, given the appearance of other international retailers. Even though Aeon has been formally investing in Vietnam since 2011, it was only until early 2014 that it opened the first retail location in Ho Chi Minh City. Besides, the pace of store chain development is slow due to its large scale, so it is not easy for Aeon to develop its stores as outlined in its vision.

Distant from the city center: Aeon's development approach places shops in large cities' suburbs that are modeled after retail centers, but most consumers still choose to concentrate on the downtown area. Consequently, this may be seen as a cap on the number of customers during the workday.

### *2.3.3. Opportunities*

Viet Nam is the second key market after Japan. First of all, Vietnam is one of the countries with very high economic growth rates in Asia and the world. Secondly, AEON’s group leaders still believe that investing in Vietnam is very favorable (VN Express, 2022).

Vietnamese people love to try new things. This is a customer psychology worth taking advantage of. In Vietnam, there are very few opportunities for customers to approach Japanese culture, except at Japanese restaurants. If it can bring new experiences to customers, it will be accepted.

Settlement value: Aeon Mall is regarded as the hub of the utilities system, it is easy to



understand why it is consistently the most popular location for settlement. It also offers exceptional benefits that give all owners a range of options for generating long-term earnings.

#### 2.3.4. Threatens

In Vietnam, there are some retailers like Lotte Mart, Vincom, Coopmart, E mart, or GO! that are still available in some areas. In urban areas like Ha Noi or Ho Chi Minh City, shopping malls are everywhere.

In the fourth industrial revolution era, e-commerce is developing rapidly, people can buy anything online without going shopping. This makes shopping mall managers work hard to change for survival. Consumer shopping habits often change is one of the threats.

The attitude of staff is also one of the factors affecting the customer's experience. If any staff behaves, customers may be upset and will not go back although the quality of goods is good and this trend will reduce revenue.

COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian-Ukrainian, and Middle East war have led to economic recession and caused people to tighten their spending. This greatly affects the purchase priority of customers as well as the revenue of the business.

### 3. Conclusion

This paper discusses Omotenashi cultural aspects in Japanese business culture generally and Japanese culture specifically, examines the Japanese culture at Aeon, and use the SWOT model to analyze the exceptionally promising prospects of Aeon Group in Vietnam. In the context of a volatile and complicated world, Aeon Group has maintained positive achievements in Vietnam, and cultural activities related to Japan include anime-related activities that people can enjoy without flying to Japan or other countries to admire the quintessential souls. This reminds us whether it can last long or not depends upon having good promotional tricks, the experiences are good, and new activities take place annually. In the past, people had little chance to experience diversity, hence, a commercial center model like Aeon meets all the needs of all individuals. The spirit of Omotenashi makes Aeon Mall different from other commercial centers in Vietnam. Therefore, it can attract customers.

Books and journals, mostly from electronic newspapers, limit the scope of this investigation on the Aeon Group. The only collaborative studies that are relevant are those that deal with marketing or business analysis. Furthermore, articles related to analysis from the perspective of business in international relations are still limited, so this will be a valuable next related article.

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**SỨC MẠNH MỀM NHẬT BẢN TẠI VIỆT NAM:  
TRƯỜNG HỢP TẬP ĐOÀN AEON**

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**TÓM TẮT**

*Bài viết phân tích những yếu tố Nhật Bản đối với trường hợp điển hình là tập đoàn Aeon. Tìm hiểu quá trình triển khai quảng bá Nhật Bản bằng chính sức mạnh mềm, từ đó làm rõ nét đặc trưng của văn hóa Omotenashi nói riêng và văn hóa Nhật Bản nói chung tại Aeon trong các sự kiện liên quan đến Nhật Bản, cũng như vai trò của Aeon trong các hoạt động cộng đồng. Thực hiện văn hóa kinh doanh Omotenashi trong vận hành bằng sự tinh tế, đồng thời là mô hình một điểm đến với nhiều tiện ích và những hoạt động ý nghĩa cho cộng đồng, Aeon đã chiếm được cảm tình của công chúng. Kết quả nghiên cứu cũng cho thấy triển vọng của tập đoàn Aeon đối với Việt Nam. Aeon vẫn sẽ tiếp tục đầu tư cho Việt Nam trong tương lai. Điều này cho thấy sức hút của thị trường Việt Nam đối với doanh nghiệp nước ngoài, trong đó có Nhật Bản.*

**Từ khóa:** Aeon; Aeon Mall; văn hóa; Nhật Bản; Omotenashi; sức mạnh mềm; Việt Nam