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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FOREIGN EXPERIENCE IN IMPLEMENTING UZBEKISTAN'S "SOFT POWER" DIPLOMACY: THE CASES OF FRANCE AND JAPAN

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Abstract: This article examines the significance of foreign experience for the development of Uzbekistan's soft power diplomacy through a comparative study of France and Japan. The purpose is to identify institutional and policy mechanisms that can be adapted to Uzbekistan rather than mechanically copied. The study applies a qualitative comparative case-study design and document analysis of scholarly literature, government strategies, diplomatic reports, and cultural-institution materials. The findings show that France derives influence from a dense and durable overseas cultural network that connects language promotion, education, artistic exchange, creative industries, and diplomatic coordination. Japan demonstrates a complementary model in which public diplomacy combines cultural exchange, Japanese-language education, popular culture, tourism, creative industries, youth networks, and data-driven policy evaluation. Uzbekistan already possesses substantial soft power resources in its Silk Road heritage, living traditions, cuisine, music, crafts, tourism assets, and reform-oriented international engagement. The most transferable lesson is therefore a hybrid approach: stronger interagency coordination, locally responsive cultural platforms abroad, expanded educational and alumni networks, public-private creative-industry partnerships, multilingual digital storytelling, and measurable audience-based evaluation. Such a strategy would help convert cultural resources into long-term international trust and cooperation.

Keywords: soft power; public diplomacy; cultural diplomacy; Uzbekistan; France; Japan

1. Introduction

In contemporary international relations, influence is increasingly produced not only through military or economic capacity but also through attraction, credibility, culture, ideas, education, and networks. Nye (2004) conceptualized this capacity as soft power: the ability to obtain preferred outcomes because others are attracted to a country's culture, values, and policies rather than compelled by coercion or payment. Public diplomacy is one of the principal mechanisms through which such resources are communicated and converted into relationships with foreign publics. Nye (2008) further emphasizes that credibility, self-criticism, and the participation of civil society are essential because communication that is perceived as propaganda can weaken, rather than strengthen, attraction.

Soft power is therefore not equivalent to cultural promotion alone. Cull (2008) identifies several interacting components of public diplomacy, including listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting. This broader understanding is important for Uzbekistan, whose international visibility has expanded alongside political, economic, tourism, and

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cultural reforms. The 2022–2026 Development Strategy links national modernization with international openness, human capital, cultural development, and the advancement of national interests in foreign relations (President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2022). At the same time, the Ministry of Culture has explicitly described cultural cooperation and soft power as instruments for strengthening friendship, mutual understanding, and international cultural relations (Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2024).

Uzbekistan also has a strong reservoir of cultural assets. UNESCO's current country profile lists eight World Heritage Sites and eighteen recognized practices and expressions of intangible cultural heritage associated with Uzbekistan (UNESCO, n.d.). These resources create significant possibilities for cultural diplomacy, heritage diplomacy, tourism promotion, academic exchange, and creative-industry development. Yet cultural resources do not automatically produce diplomatic influence. They must be connected to institutions, target audiences, professional communication, partnerships, and long-term exchange mechanisms.

France and Japan offer useful but contrasting reference cases. France represents a highly institutionalized model built around a global cultural and educational network, language policy, artistic cooperation, and state-supported cultural industries. Japan combines formal public diplomacy with cultural exchange, Japanese-language education, youth networks, popular culture, tourism, and public-private creative-economy initiatives. Both cases demonstrate that attraction becomes strategically meaningful when it is organized through durable institutions and adapted to local audiences.

Accordingly, this article addresses two research questions: (1) Which mechanisms make French and Japanese soft power diplomacy effective and sustainable? and (2) Which elements of these models are most transferable to Uzbekistan's political, cultural, and institutional context? The article argues that Uzbekistan should not reproduce either model in full. Instead, it can construct a hybrid approach that combines France's institutional continuity and network diplomacy with Japan's cross-sector cultural ecosystem, while grounding both in Uzbekistan's own historical identity, contemporary reforms, and regional priorities.

2. Materials and Methods

The research uses a qualitative comparative case-study method. France and Japan were selected through a most-different-systems logic: both are internationally influential through culture and public diplomacy, but they organize that influence differently. France relies heavily on a historically developed state-linked cultural network, whereas Japan combines governmental programs with cultural industries, popular culture, educational exchange, and public-private promotion. This contrast makes the two cases analytically useful for identifying transferable mechanisms rather than country-specific imitation.

The material base consists of fourteen sources: foundational scholarship on soft power and public diplomacy; peer-reviewed studies of Japanese cultural diplomacy; official French, Japanese, and Uzbek policy documents; institutional reports from the Institut français and the Japan Foundation; and UNESCO data on Uzbekistan's cultural assets. Documents were analyzed across five dimensions: institutional coordination; language and education; cultural and people-to-people exchange; creative industries and tourism; and digital communication and evaluation. The comparison focuses on

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mechanisms that can plausibly be adapted by a middle-sized state with distinctive historical and cultural resources.

The study is interpretive rather than causal. It does not measure changes in foreign public opinion through surveys, nor does it claim that a single cultural program directly produces foreign-policy outcomes. Instead, it identifies recurring institutional practices and policy design principles. This limitation is important because soft power effects are cumulative, context-dependent, and difficult to attribute to one instrument alone.

3. Results

3.1. France: institutional continuity and network diplomacy

The French case demonstrates the importance of institutional density and continuity. France's 2021 Roadmap for Soft Power treats influence as a strategic foreign-policy function and calls for modernization of cultural diplomacy, stronger digital capacity, adaptation to priority regions, and closer integration of cultural, academic, economic, and diplomatic tools (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2021). This approach is supported by an extensive cooperation and cultural-action network that connects embassy services with Instituts français, Alliances Françaises, educational institutions, academic mobility mechanisms, development actors, and tourism or economic-promotion bodies (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2025).

The central lesson is not simply the number of institutions but the way they form an ecosystem. Language teaching can lead to study opportunities; academic cooperation can create professional networks; artistic programs can create long-term partnerships; and cultural events can reinforce tourism and creative-economy objectives. The Institut français functions as a pivotal implementing organization for external cultural action and supports locally adapted programs rather than relying only on centralized messaging. Its 2024 activity reporting records 1,258 supported projects in more than 140 countries, alongside programs for artistic mobility, debate, cultural and creative industries, and cross-border professional cooperation (Institut français, 2025).

For Uzbekistan, the French experience highlights three transferable principles. First, soft power requires organizational continuity beyond individual events. Second, cultural diplomacy is more effective when education, language, arts, research, tourism, and economic promotion reinforce one another. Third, overseas institutions should have sufficient local knowledge and flexibility to cooperate with host-country universities, museums, media, creative professionals, and civil society.

3.2. Japan: cultural ecosystems, exchange, and strategic branding

Japan illustrates a different path. After the Second World War, Japanese cultural diplomacy in Asia was constrained by historical sensitivities; later, the international success of Japanese consumer culture and popular culture encouraged a more active search for soft power (Lam, 2007; Otmazgin, 2012). The Japanese experience therefore shows that cultural attractiveness often emerges partly outside government and can subsequently be supported, connected, and amplified by public institutions.

Contemporary Japanese public diplomacy operates through multiple channels. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs uses cultural activities, Japanese-language promotion, study and youth exchange, alumni networks, sports and tourism diplomacy, and strategic communication to deepen understanding of Japan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2025). The Japan Foundation complements this work

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through three broad pillars: arts and cultural exchange, Japanese-language education overseas, and Japanese studies and global partnerships. Its programs are designed to create relationships, dialogue, and professional or intellectual networks rather than only one-directional cultural exposure (The Japan Foundation, 2026).

A further feature is the integration of soft power with the creative economy. The New Cool Japan Strategy emphasizes creator support, international distribution, digital technologies, inbound tourism, food, content industries, cross-sector collaboration, and a faster data-driven Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle (Cabinet Office of Japan, 2024). Thus, culture is treated both as a diplomatic resource and as an ecosystem that links production, consumption, tourism, regional branding, and international networks. The main transferable lesson for Uzbekistan is that state institutions do not need to produce all attractive content themselves; they can enable creators, universities, tourism actors, museums, media companies, and private firms to carry national narratives in diverse forms.

3.3. Comparative implications for Uzbekistan

The comparison indicates that France and Japan succeed through different combinations of the same underlying functions: institutional coordination, repeated interpersonal contact, cultural credibility, educational pathways, locally adapted communication, and links between public policy and non-state actors. Uzbekistan already possesses the cultural substance required for such a strategy; the main policy challenge is conversion. Heritage, cuisine, music, crafts, architecture, scholarship, and tourism become soft power only when they generate sustained interest, trust, learning, mobility, collaboration, and favorable associations among foreign publics.

Table 1. Comparative soft power lessons for Uzbekistan

Dimension	France	Japan	Implication for Uzbekistan
Institutional model	Dense state-linked cultural and educational network	Coordinated public diplomacy plus public-private ecosystem	Create a clear interagency architecture with flexible overseas delivery
Core instruments	Language, education, arts, debate, academic mobility, cultural industries	Language, exchange, popular/traditional culture, tourism, content industries	Combine heritage with contemporary creative sectors and education
Audience relationship	Long-term presence and local partnerships	Exchange, fandom, alumni, participation, localized communication	Prioritize co-creation and repeated contact over one-off promotion
Economic linkage	Creative industries, tourism, study destination, professional networks	Content exports, tourism, food, regional brands, creator economy	Link cultural diplomacy to tourism and creative-enterprise growth
Evaluation logic	Strategic priorities and network coordination	Explicit data-driven PDCA orientation	Use country-specific indicators for reach,

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Dimension	France	Japan	Implication for Uzbekistan
			perception, exchange, and partnership outcomes

4. Discussion

The results suggest that the most appropriate model for Uzbekistan is a selective hybrid rather than institutional duplication. France shows why soft power needs durable organizations and a professional overseas network; Japan shows how a state can amplify cultural attractiveness created by artists, firms, universities, regional communities, and popular culture. For Uzbekistan, these lessons point toward a strategy centered on coordination, participation, and measurable international relationships.

First, Uzbekistan would benefit from a single national soft power or public diplomacy framework that assigns complementary roles to foreign affairs, culture, tourism, higher education, youth policy, digital communication, and the creative economy. The objective should not be excessive centralization. Rather, a shared strategy should reduce duplication, identify priority countries and audiences, and allow embassies and partner institutions to design locally relevant programs. France's networked model demonstrates the value of continuity, while Japan's recent strategy demonstrates the value of cross-sector coordination and regular policy evaluation.

Second, overseas cultural presence should be developed gradually in priority locations. Instead of immediately building a large standalone network, Uzbekistan can use embassies, universities, museums, diaspora and professional associations, tourism offices, and partner cultural institutions as modular platforms. Over time, successful locations could evolve into permanent Uzbek cultural centers or "Uzbekistan House" formats that combine exhibitions, language learning, lectures, film, design, cuisine, tourism information, and business networking. The decisive principle is local partnership: programs should be co-created with host-country institutions so that foreign audiences become participants rather than passive recipients.

Third, educational diplomacy should become a central pillar. France and Japan both show that language learning, university cooperation, scholarships, visiting scholars, youth exchange, and alumni networks generate long-term relational capital. Uzbekistan could expand short courses in Uzbek language and Central Asian studies abroad, support joint degree or research programs, invite foreign students and researchers to heritage cities, and maintain active alumni communities after participants return home. Such networks often outlast individual campaigns because personal experience can transform general curiosity into professional and emotional attachment.

Fourth, Uzbekistan should present its culture as both heritage and contemporary creativity. UNESCO recognition gives international legitimacy to important cultural assets, but soft power will be stronger when traditional forms are connected to living creators and modern formats. Multilingual digital storytelling can link Samarkand and Bukhara, Silk Road history, maqom and bakhshi traditions, ceramics, textiles, miniature art, cuisine, architecture, fashion, cinema, animation, design, and contemporary music. Japan's experience is particularly relevant here: traditional culture and popular culture can reinforce rather than exclude one another when audiences are offered multiple entry points.

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Fifth, public-private cooperation should be institutionalized. Creative enterprises, filmmakers, designers, publishers, chefs, technology firms, tour operators, airlines, universities, and media organizations can carry national narratives in ways that official diplomacy cannot. Government should therefore act as a platform-builder and quality guarantor, offering grants, translation support, mobility programs, co-production funds, international festival participation, and market access while preserving artistic credibility and cultural authenticity.

Finally, evaluation must move beyond counting events and social-media views. A useful framework would distinguish outputs from outcomes. Outputs include exhibitions, visitors, videos, language learners, exchange participants, and media reach. Outcomes include changes in familiarity or favorability, repeat engagement, applications to study or travel, new institutional partnerships, alumni activity, co-productions, earned media, and sustained professional networks. Japan's emphasis on a data-driven PDCA cycle is especially transferable because it encourages programs to learn from audience response rather than assume that visibility automatically equals influence (Cabinet Office of Japan, 2024).

The main risk is that soft power policy can become over-branded, excessively centralized, or disconnected from domestic reality. Nye (2008) stresses that credibility is fundamental: foreign audiences compare official narratives with observable policies and lived experience. Cultural diplomacy should therefore be based on openness, reciprocity, and genuine exchange. Uzbekistan's strongest international image is likely to emerge not from a single slogan but from consistent experiences of hospitality, scholarship, creativity, heritage stewardship, reform, and cooperation.

5. Conclusion

Foreign experience is significant for Uzbekistan's soft power diplomacy because it demonstrates how cultural assets can be converted into durable international relationships. France shows the advantages of a coordinated and professionally maintained cultural-educational network. Japan shows the advantages of linking public diplomacy with people-to-people exchange, popular and traditional culture, tourism, creative industries, digital communication, and public-private collaboration. Neither model should be copied mechanically.

Uzbekistan's comparative advantage lies in combining a globally recognizable Silk Road heritage with living cultural traditions, a growing tourism sector, educational openness, and contemporary creative potential. A hybrid strategy should therefore strengthen interagency coordination, expand overseas cultural and educational platforms, build alumni and youth networks, support creators and cultural enterprises, localize multilingual digital content, and evaluate results through audience-based indicators. If implemented with credibility and reciprocity, these measures can transform cultural visibility into trust, partnerships, and a more resilient international reputation.

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