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Sep 21, 2023 by *Dionysos Alexiou*

## **Case Studies in Japan's Environmental and Cultural Diplomacy** <sup>[1]</sup>

Japanese society and policymakers have turned two negatives from their history into positives worthy of emulation by applying corrective measures and developing a series of bold

initiatives. In both cases, social accountability and justice dictated the course of action.

The first example was the tragic consequences of wastewater discharge from the chemical plant of Chisso Co. Ltd in the mid twentieth century in Minamata Bay, the southwest region of Japan's Kyushu Island. What has come to be known as “Minamata disease” was poisoning that occurred in humans who consumed fish and shellfish from the area contaminated by methylmercury (MeHg). The typical symptoms of the disease included sensory disturbances, ataxia, dysarthria, constriction of the visual field, auditory disturbances and tremor. The poisoning also caused harm to fetuses in the case of pregnant women; and extensive brain lesions in newborns, some of whom were born blind and deaf. Of 2,500 patients diagnosed with “Minamata disease,” almost half died. To this day, chronic diseases associated with the toxic compound are a cause for concern.

The Japanese government  acknowledged its fault and assumed responsibility for the consequences. It took actions such as the Political Settlement of 1995 , made decisions such as the Special Relief Act of July 2009, and launched initiatives such as the Minamata Environmental Regeneration Project to tackle the pollution of the aquifer in Minamata Bay. Through its effective and comprehensive response, the Japanese government demonstrated a stance of empathy, respect and trust towards its citizens.

Through the years, the government's actions have borne fruit. In August 2001, the Niigata Learning Centre for Humans and the Environment was established. Its Niigata Prefecture Minamata Disease Museum and *Story Teller Programme* have succeeded in spreading awareness and developing exemplary, sustainable public diplomacy. In March 2009, Minamata was also chosen as “Top Eco-City” in recognition of its environmental measures.

The government's initiatives reflect a specific strategy to connect the environment to the economy and achieve energy independence via renewable sources and a circular economy. This environmental focus may gradually lead to investment in the city, making it a model of regeneration and effective public diplomacy. This is where the “Moyai Naoshi” program (in which Minamata participates) places emphasis: on the restoration of social bonds and the regeneration of society by way of environmental initiatives. The initiative's crowning achievement has been adoption of the “Minamata Convention on Mercury” (2013).

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The second example is the New Tohoku program. The program falls within the sphere of corporate cultural diplomacy, specifically how Japanese business leaders perceive and incorporate the promotion of national interests and the country's image into corporate strategy. Supported by Pasona Group, the program attracts foreign students, businesspeople and social media influencers to Tohoku, a region that has been undergoing reconstruction since the 2011 tsunami. These visitors, as part of the program, learn about Japan's economy, history, climate and culture by way of customized interactive programs.

The initiative has served to promote Japanese culture and stimulate economic growth by

creating a sustainable local industry and a progressive social model. These are the program's strategic objectives regardless of profit, which speaks to the important role of multinational corporations in cultural diplomacy as a component of public diplomacy.

Bearing in mind Ronfeldt & Arquilla's emphasis on the power of information in international relations, I consider Japan a poignant case study, demonstrating "sometimes it is the side with the best story that wins." The development of a country's sustainable public diplomacy can be based on stories told as part of its national brand.

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