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From Cultural Affinity to Political Ineffectiveness: Buffer Mechanisms and Boundary Conditions of Japanese Anime Dissemination in China—A Case Study of Doraemon and Detective Conan

Jiayan Du

School of International Relations, University of International Business and Economics, Beijing, China
202355026@uibe.edu.cn

Abstract. This study examines the formation and failure mechanisms of the "cultural buffer" —a mediated social-psychological space where transnational popular culture temporarily suspends geopolitical tensions. Focusing on Sino-Japanese relations, it constructs a dynamic theoretical framework that proposes three pillars for a stable buffer: apolitical/universal content, a depoliticized consumption ecosystem, and a macro-context of "stable strain." Its collapse is triggered by transgressions of core historical narratives. Employing a comparative case study of the divergent trajectories of Doraemon and Detective Conan in China, the analysis finds that Doraemon' s robustness stems from a reinforcing cycle of its universal narrative, commercial entrenchment, and audience practice of separating culture from politics. In contrast, Detective Conan' s buffer collapsed when a 2026 promotional link with My Hero Academia was perceived as violating a foundational historical boundary, triggering a public re-politicization chain reaction. The study concludes that the cultural buffer is a contingent, co-produced space whose stability is ultimately determined by audience reception. The primary contribution is a micro-level mechanistic framework explaining the dynamic process of buffering, moving beyond macro-level soft power descriptions.

Keywords: Cultural buffer, soft power, cross-cultural communication, Sino-Japanese relations, Japanese anime

1. Introduction

Anime is a small but essential component of the complex web that is Sino-Japanese relations. Most researchers look at this topic via the lens of soft power, and while this is a valuable perspective, there is a lack of qualitative studies that break down the cultural appeal and its role as a mechanism that absorbs the tension from diplomatic confrontations, however briefly. The reason for this remains a puzzling problem - it is the lack of comprehensive studies that do not break down their approach to the text, the industry, and the audience.

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Here, the formation and failure of the "cultural buffer" will be studied by way of a comparative analysis of the highly influential anime franchises in the Chinese market, that is, *Doraemon* and *Detective Conan*. The main focus of this paper will answer the following question: What are the features and mechanisms that govern this cultural buffer and its failure? What are the implications of these features? This paper aims to answer the aforementioned questions in the following sections of this paper: the first will be a detailed overview of these features and their mechanisms; the second will outline the methodology of this study; the third will provide a detailed analysis of the aforementioned cases; the fourth will be a summary of the findings of this study and their significance.

This study advances the field by constructing a dynamic, micro-level mechanistic framework that moves beyond static macro-level soft power descriptions. By introducing the concept of a "cultural buffer," it identifies the specific tripartite pillars required for its formation, while also specifying the precise triggers for its collapse-namely, the transgression of core historical narratives. Furthermore, it reconfigures the producer-audience power dynamic by empirically demonstrating that the audience holds the ultimate, contingent power to sustain or dismantle the buffer through processes of decoding and re-politicization, thereby shifting the analytical focus from the sender' s intent to the receiver' s socio-political context.

2. Literature review

2.1. The cultural buffer: a gap in spft power research

Soft power theory by Joseph Nye is the capacity of a nation to influence the preferences based on attraction and not coercion [1]. In this paradigm, transnational popular culture is perceived to be a major means of such influence [2]. Studies have shown that cultural products through the exploitation of universal emotional narratives can help maintain goodwill among the people even in times of political tension, hence a cultural buffer [3]. The bias however is evident in the literature. The bulk of the literature focuses on establishing the validity of this buffering effect in theoretically ideal low-friction conditions. A relatively lesser amount of systematic investigation on its boundary conditions, namely, the exact moments and causes of its breakdown is lacking. Once a popular cultural item has become controversial and lost its buffer effect, the analysis will often be descriptive or simply ascribe the reason to some commercial misjudgments. This exposes a significant theoretical vacuum: there is no framework that can explain the stability of the cultural buffer, as well as the fragility.

2.2. The crucial context: reception, affect, and geopolitics

The efficacy of cultural buffer is not an inherent characteristic of text, but it is heavily influenced by the context of reception. Affective geopolitics and identity theories emphasize the fact that the transnational culture flows are never devoid of historical mediation, mass sentiment, and politics [3]. The so-called de-territorialized or generic content, which does not deal directly with the realities of a particular receiving society, can tend to have a smoother cross-border acceptance, which is a stable buffer [4]. On the other hand, content or commercial approaches that touch on the sensitive historical or political icons of a society can trigger strong shared emotions, politicizing consumption that was previously neutral on an abrupt basis [4]. Although the importance of geopolitics and affect has been widely recognized, the discussion is still on a macro level. Detailed comparative analysis is lacking which follows the development of how at certain points in time certain events activate

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popular feeling to dismantle a buffer that was once stable. The micro-process of buffer rupture, the process of how an object of goodwill turns into an object of controversy, is not well explicated.

2.3. Fragmented perspectives: the need for an integrated model

The existing literature has broken down the elements of the cultural buffer into distinct angles: text/production, industry/dissemination and audience/reception. The literature on production analyses the de-politicized content strategies, brand management, and localization [5]. Audience-centered research validates that the recipients are active interpreters who make sense depending on their personal and social contexts [6]. The major shortcoming, however, is that these views are not integrated. This dislocation gets in the way of a process-based, holistic view of the buffer as a dynamic system [6]. Not many works could have combined studies of commercial strategies, a product, which has gained a symbolic capital, and how the audience would respond in a unanimous manner at the critical socio-emotional points. This in turn requires a dynamic model-one that can answer not only how the buffer is constructed and maintained, but also how it is destabilized and collapses, and how it is regulated to pass between the stable and fragile states.

3. Analytical framework

This part aims to provide a conceptual framework for understanding how Japanese anime serves as a conditional intermediary in the intricately complicated Sino-Japanese relationship. The focus of the study is the cultural buffer. This is a conceptual mechanism utilized to comprehend how popular culture is able to (temporarily) freeze political tensions. The outline specifies the essential conditions for the formation of a buffer, how it operates, and the distinct limits that, once surpassed, will lead to its dissolution.

3.1. Definition of cultural buffer

The cultural buffer is a mediated social-psychological space that is formed by consuming popular culture under the pressure of geopolitics. It allows viewers to engage with cultural products of a sensitive source country either mostly on aesthetic or emotional grounds, virtually putting aside the instantaneous identification with historical or political confrontation. This idea combines the top-down reasoning of soft power [7] and the bottom-up fact of active audience reception [8] and the buffer is a fragile, co-constructed space in which a strategic distance between culture and politics is enacted. Its actual existence is evidenced by little political talk about the product, consumption being non-political, and statements of the audience that explicitly differentiate the work and the politics of its country of origin.

3.2. The foundations of buffer stability

The emergence of a durable cultural buffer is not an isolated phenomenon; the process is based on three pillars which have to meet. To begin with, the content itself should be seen as something universal or apolitical, based on the universal human values and not directly questioning the very historical accounts of the receiver. Second, a supportive ecosystem of consumption must exist, sustained by commercial interests that favor depoliticization and by audience practices that treat consumption as a routine, communal activity. This aligns with research showing that fan communities act as cultural brokers and co-producers (subtitling, sharing, recommendation), often producing sustained demand that precedes or exceeds state-led promotion [9]. Finally, the broader

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macro-political context must exhibit a "stable strain." extending Merton' s notion of persistent structural tension to bilateral relations [10]. This condition entails that underlying tensions are managed and contained, not escalating into acute crisis or widespread public mobilization that would make consumption politically taboo.

3.3. The triggers of buffer failure

The stability of the cultural buffer is inherently precarious. Its failure is not gradual but triggered by the transgression of clear boundaries. The most critical boundary is the perceived violation of a core historical narrative. Any action or association interpreted as disrespecting the receiving nation' s foundational memory or sovereignty instantly triggers re-politicization, dismantling the buffer. Failure can also result from a severe downturn in macro-political relations, which reframes consumption as unpatriotic, or from a fundamental shift in the audience' s interpretive lens from cultural appreciation to ideological critique.This complex process is illustrated in Figure 1.

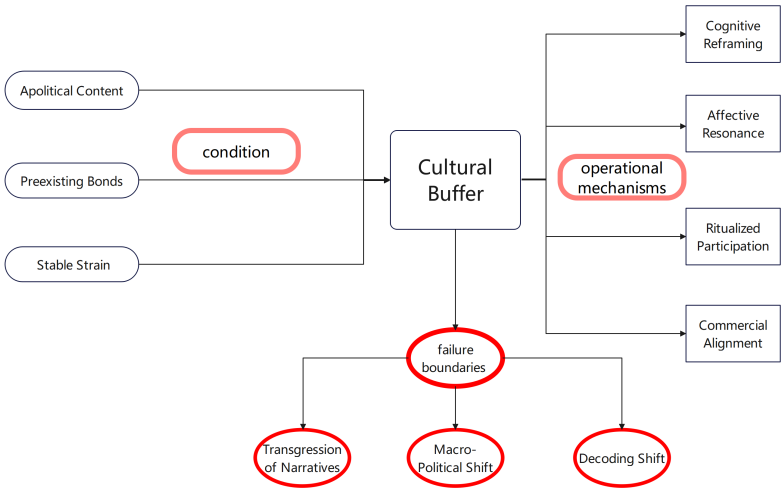

Figure 1. The formation, operational mechanisms, and failure boundaries of the cultural buffer

4. Research design and methodology

This study employs a comparative case study design to examine the formation and failure of the cultural buffer. The design adopts a "most-similar, outcome-divergent" logic [11], focusing on two highly successful Japanese anime franchises in China that share fundamental characteristics but experienced opposite outcomes in terms of their buffering capacity.

4.1. Case selection and rationale

Doraemon and *Detective Conan* are selected as primary cases. They are comparable cultural icons in China, allowing for a focused analysis on divergent buffer trajectories. Despite genre differences, both are:

(1) long-established leading Japanese IPs,

(2) franchises with cross-generational recognition

(3) properties that had retained depoliticized spaces of consumption.

Doraemon (Buffer Sustained): A positive role model that has broad and sustained acceptance. It has pacifism and anti-war as its core values and as such, it is a culturally robust intergenerational symbol.

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Detective Conan (Buffer Failed): A failure of critical cases. Though with a similar track record of success, in 2026 a crossover promotional event with My Hero Academia (a series that has previously faced criticism in China due to its sensitive content) led to extensive social criticism, illustrating how buffer erosion can happen.

4.2. Data sources and collection

The analysis is structured around publicly accessible data and commentary from Chinese news reports, social media and forums, and available marketing and academic data. These sources allow for the analysis of the public perception and trajectory of each case.

4.3. Analytical procedure

A sequenced process was implemented for the analysis. First, the history of dissemination and reception of each case in China was recorded and the *Detective Conan* conflict was examined in detail. Next, analysis of news reports and online commentary was conducted to identify emotional audience expressions and the relationship or lack thereof, between politics and culture. The last section aligned each case with the theoretical components of the content, market ecosystem, and socio-political environment. Content of the *Detective Conan* crisis was addressed to track the collapse of the promotional campaign directed at the public to provide evidence of the rupture of the buffer.

4.4. Scope and limitations

The results are limited to the case context of Mainland China. While the comparative design is robust when dealing with the eloquence of the buffer, the accurate generalization of the failure' s threshold is left to other contexts and requires further research. The public online data limits the audience' s private opinion and is likely not to include the whole extent of it.

5. Case study I – *Doraemon*: sustaining the cultural buffer

5.1. Institutional legitimacy and market entrenchment

Most people identify the anime, *Doraemon*, in the context of the long-standing policy supported presence of anime in China. Anime has been distributed by state-owned enterprises, such as China Film Group, since the 90s. This grants state-sanctioned legitimacy. This aligns with the broader pattern of Japanese popular culture' s entry into East Asian markets, historically shaped by policy adaptations [12]. Commercially, it is formidable: as of 2022, the *Doraemon* film series had released 11 theatrical editions in China, with cumulative box office exceeding 1.5 billion RMB, making it the highest-grossing Japanese animation franchise domestically [13]. The long-standing buffering function of *Doraemon* is brought about by the deep-seated position of the film and series in the market.

5.2. Textual universality and the depoliticized brand

Doraemon's buffer system's effectiveness stems from intentional non-political discourse. Instead, the *Doraemon* series addresses universal issues surrounding childhood, the spirit of friendship, and the importance of morals and character development. The emphasis of this series being from Japan is

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mostly overshadowed by the emotional, and even the aesthetic, marketing of the series. This depoliticized consumption pattern can be understood through a semiotic lens: the national signifier is transformed into a myth of universal values, effectively emptying the cultural sign of its political connotations [14, 15]. The story lines are always about family and school life. One of the central episodes is The Elephant and Uncle. In Chinese public discourse, the characters' relief at war' s termination has been interpreted most broadly to express an unambiguous anti-war position and peace ethic.

This resonates with the complex mentality of "emotional rejection, rational recognition" observed among some Chinese youth toward Japan [16]. Thus, the work fosters a space of shared sentiment where affinity for values like pacifism can momentarily suspend historical-political tensions [17]

5.3. Audience decoding: the separation of culture from politics

An active process of culture-politics forging of the buffer is visible within audience decoding. An example of this can be deciphered from the People's Daily Online report that describes the series as a container of childhood memories that promotes childhood memories and advocates universal values, thus invokes absolutely no political interpretation [18]. More importantly, that division is what regular viewers do. On Douban, comments describe it as the safe harbor of childhood or pure beautified memories. Viewers often responded on social media that they "like the story and characters themselves" without connecting this understanding to discourse about international politics. This decoding is enabled by the work's own apolitical narrative, which fosters a sense of cultural proximity, leads audiences to acquire a better understanding of Japanese culture rather than political critique [19]. The deliberate separation allows audiences to engage with the work's humanistic values while bracketing geopolitical associations, thereby sustaining the depoliticized affective space essential for the buffer's operation [12].

5.4. Synthesizing the buffering mechanism

In the case of *Doraemon,* the cultural buffer has been shown to be robust. There is a system that sustains the blend of support from Robbie's institutions, the universal-centered narratives, and the audience's ability to separate culture from politics. It creates a balance in a complex set of political relations and facilitates a cross-cultural channel of tolerance.

6. Case study II – *Detective Conan*: the exposure of the buffer' s boundary

This case demonstrates how *Detective Conan* can be viewed as a buffer failure. It showcases that a previously accepted cultural product can suddenly lose its buffer capacity if an event is interpreted as breaching a certain preliminary historical threshold. Consequently, this forces a consumer re-politicization of that cultural product.

6.1. Pre-crisis stature: mainstream success and perceived neutrality

Up until 2026, *Detective Conan* was deemed to be one of the commercially successful Japanese animations in China. An example of this would be its 2025 film, which grossed more than 154 million RMB in the opening week, demonstrating its market presence [20]. This success came alongside a popular sentiment of the franchise being politically neutral. In this case, the franchise was understood as entertainment as it focuses on themes of justice and consolation, deduction, and was thus, located within the safe haven of depoliticized entertainment in the Chinese public

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discourse [14, 21]. All in all, this public sentiment, business success, and a politically neutral franchise provided the buffer for a culturally safe space.

6.2. The 2026 crisis: boundary transgression via associative contamination

The buffer broke gallantly during the franchise's 30th-anniversary campaign in early 2026 thanks to a crossover promotion with My Hero Academia (MHA). They'd even been removed from Chinese platforms in 2020 over a character name associated with historical controversies deemed extremely offensive in China. This association acted as a powerful symbolic contaminant. The promotional link forcibly re-contextualized *Detective Conan* within a framework of unaddressed historical trauma. It proves the crisis revealed the power structure of audience readings. The natural inclination to isolate culture from politics is not immutable; it is set aside when a supposedly core historical narrative is seen as under siege. MHA's association sparked a shift: instead of being evaluated on its narrative merit, the text was subjected to a political-ethical reinterpretation. This shift overrode commercial and fan identities, prioritizing a national-historical identity. It demonstrates the limits of brand nationalism and how cultural proximity—defined as "the degree of similarity between cultures as perceived by the audiences themselves, and includes geographical position, practices, customs, living habits and so on"-can reverse into a source of potent contention [19]. What affective communities, once established, are fragile and can shatter when cultural representations trigger collective memory [17]. The incident starkly revealed the conditional nature of soft power, which becomes counterproductive upon contact with sensitive historical narratives [12].

6.3. Mechanism of failure: the override of political judgment

The crisis exposed the audience's tiered layers of interpretative hierarchy. Attempting to decouple culture from politics is a short-term construct, which resolves itself when confronted with a significant historiographical conviction. This is because, collective memory is not the memory of a collective, but that of its individual members, either as members of social groups (shared memory) or as participants in social interactions (collaborative memory) [21]. The associative tie with MHA indicated the dissolution of one specific coding paradigm.

6.4. The exposed boundary and its implications

The *Detective Conan* case delineates the limits of buffer failure: the violation of foundational historiographical narratives. The promotional link served as a catalyst, shifting the audience's perception from appreciation of culture to political and ethical critique. With the buffer reliant on the halting of such critiques, the fracture of the buffer was inevitable. The break informs about another principle; the endurance of a cultural buffer hinges on the reception by the audience. It is the audience that holds the power to interpret the buffer in a political context, and dismantle it when the historical grievances are awakened.

7. Comparative analysis and discussion

The different paths the series *Doraemon* and *Detective Conan* take give an example for the analysis of the locations defined by the stability and fragility of the cultural buffer mechanism. This analysis challenges the soft power concept to portray the buffer as a dynamically created space where the flow of the space is decided by the audience.

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7.1. Common foundations of the buffer

Both situations created a lasting cultural buffer in China, built on three common elements. First, both were able to legally achieve enduring commercial success within integrated transnational commerce. Second, their stories were viewed in an apolitical vacuum whereby a sidestepping depoliticized mode of reception was granted for narratives focusing on universal themes—childhood/friendship versus justice [14]. Third, both established a strong clientele, producing affective communities, which would momentarily eclipse geopolitical antagonism [17]. These shared elements within the triad of difference, offer the possibility of a buffer being formed, yet not the stability of the cultural buffer despite external shaking. The significant difference resides in the particulars that inform the critical buffer cultural perception shift from stabilization to declension.

7.2. Key divergence: sustained vs. collapsed buffer

The most important distinction concerns each franchise's historical context. In China, *Doraemon*'s stance against war relates to pacifism and is reasonably aligned with China' s collective historical memory; it is basically harmless and non-threatening. In contrast, *Detective Conan*' s 2026 promotional link with My Hero Academia was perceived as a direct transgression of a non-negotiable historical boundary. This demonstrates that the buffer' s integrity is vulnerable to symbolic association; even a commercially powerful brand is not immune to collapse when its actions or associations are interpreted as violating foundational narratives [17]. The buffer is, therefore, a structure within a field of symbolic meanings that is represented and governed by the audience (Figure 2).

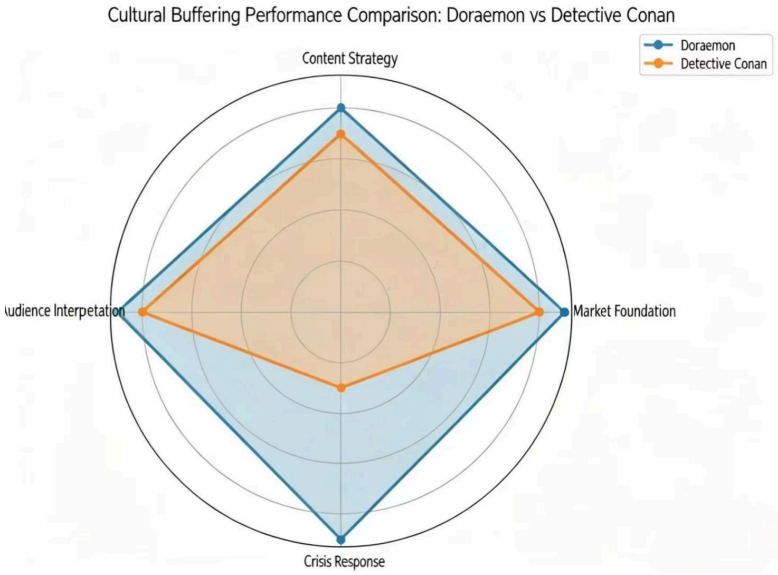

Figure 2. Cultural buffering performance comparison: *Doraemon* vs *Detective Conan*

7.3. Conditions for formation and failure

The interplay of institutional or commercial legitimacy, universally appealing content, and a culture that willingly decouples appreciation of culture and politics creates a stable cultural buffer. Instability, however, is a triggered event. The Conan case exemplifies the process: a specific promotion was interpreted as crossing a historical demarcation, public discourse even further

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politicizing the perception and reactivating the collective process, resulting in a discernable shift in the prevailing paradigm from cultural to political. The process exemplifies the visibility of pliable meaning in a transnational system; the context within which a text is perceived and the clues surrounding that text can lead to re-signification of the same text virtually on a daily basis.

7.4. The dynamic nature of cultural transmission

Cultural transmission amid geopolitical constraints is inherently fluid and negotiated. The studied cases illustrate the cultural buffer as a non-immutable characteristic of a text, instead as a relational, collaborative space. The cultural buffer remains through a temporary equilibrium of text, industry, and context, maintained by the audience for emotional reasons, and removed when political-ethical boundaries are crossed. Therefore, to explain the phenomena of cultural transmission, the emphasis should be articulated on decoding audience at a certain socio-political point, rather than on stale content or on stasis intent. Shared memory acts as a fundamental component of group identity, making any external cultural product susceptible to political reinterpretation when it challenges these pre-existing narratives [22]. The power to delineate a cultural product' s meaning in a stressed bilateral relationship is more so held by the audience than the producer.

8. Conclusion

This comparative study concludes that the cultural buffer is a contingent, co-produced space, sustained by a fragile equilibrium between universal content, a depoliticized ecosystem, and stable political strain. Its failure is a triggered process, exemplified by *Detective Conan'* s collapse following a perceived transgression of historical narrative. The analysis underscores that audience reception holds ultimate, contingent power in this dynamic.

The primary theoretical contribution is a dynamic, micro-level framework that specifies the mechanisms and sequence of buffer formation and failure, moving beyond static soft power analysis. While findings are derived from the specific Sino-Japanese context, the framework offers a lens for analyzing cultural flows in other geopolitically strained relationships. Future research could test its applicability across different media and bilateral dynamics.

However, the current study itself is inevitably bounded by its methodological constraints. While the comparative case study design provides robust insights into the buffer' s mechanics, the findings are constrained by the specific context of Mainland China and the selected high-profile anime franchises, limiting the generalizability of the failure threshold to other media formats or bilateral relationships. Additionally, the reliance on publicly available online data, such as social media comments and news reports, captures public sentiment but may not fully reflect the nuanced, private consumption motivations of individuals, nor does it account for the potential influence of state-owned distribution channels beyond the scope of this analysis.

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