

# Poland's Transition from Otaku Niche to Mainstream Culture in Shaping Japan-Europe Diplomacy

by Waka Ikeda

*A policy opinion and analysis piece informed by a visit to Warsaw, including a conversation with Jan Godwod a founder of Studio JG / Yatta.pl*

Toruń is a city that wears its history openly. It has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1997 and its medieval old town filled with Gothic brick churches, the birthplace of Nicolaus Copernicus, and the ruins of the Teutonic Knights' castle is still enclosed by the remnants of walls and towers that once formed one of the most formidable fortifications in central Europe. It is an unlikely place, perhaps, to find a thriving manga bookstore.

And yet, inside the Yatta.pl store at Przedzamcze 14, a street whose very name means “before the castle”, a young sales assistant in her early twenties told me something that has stayed with me ever since. Ten years ago, she said, loving manga was something she kept quiet about. It felt too niche, too “otaku,” too likely to invite an awkward response. Now she talks about it openly, and the people around her listen to 90s Japanese city pop without irony. She was happy. The culture she had always loved has become mainstream.

A few days later, at Castle Square in Warsaw, in the shadow of the reconstructed Royal Castle, beneath Sigismund's Column, I came across a group of young Polish women practicing K-pop choreography on the cobblestones. They were genuinely skilled, the routines were precise, the synchronization tight, and the performance delivered with the kind of unselfconscious confidence that comes from serious dedication. Tourists passed. Nobody stopped staring. The dancing was simply part of the city's texture, as unremarkable as the street musicians nearby.

These two scenes, observed within a week in Poland, capture something analytically significant, that Central and Eastern Europe is in the midst of a quiet but consequential cultural shift. Japanese and Korean pop culture have moved from subculture to mainstream, from hidden enthusiasm to public identity. For anyone thinking about the future of Japan-Europe relations, this shift represents both a remarkable opportunity and an invitation to reconsider how cultural exchange actually works in the twenty-first century.

The story of Studio JG and its retail chain Yatta.pl is one of the most instructive examples of privately driven cultural exchange in contemporary Europe. Founded in Warsaw in 2006 by Jan Godwod and Katarzyna Godwod with Jan serving as CEO and Katarzyna as Vice President for the company their unorthodox business venture began as a black-and-white manga fanzine called Otaku and grew through 20 years of patient relationship-building and commercial ingenuity, into the dominant force in Polish comics publishing and retail.

Today it controls majority of the manga market in Poland. It publishes up to 300 titles a year with 18 in-house Japanese-language translators on staff. It operates more than 30 dedicated stores across Poland, making it what may be one of the largest manga bookstore chains in the world outside Japan. Over the past five years, roughly one in four Polish teenagers has read manga.

This readership did not appear from nowhere. It traces back to a specific cultural moment in early-1990s Poland, when anime first arrived on the newly democratized television landscape. As Jan recalls: “We had this golden time of anime in Poland, where the streets were empty at 4pm because everyone was watching Dragon Ball.”

What makes this story analytically interesting is not simply the scale, but the method. Jan and Katarzyna built this ecosystem entirely through private initiative, navigating a Japanese business culture that rewards trust earned slowly over time. The philosophy that emerged from that process is perhaps best captured in Jan’s own words: “We try to be as Japanese as possible in our Polish house.”

The result is a company that functions, in practice, as a sophisticated cultural bridge between Japan and Central and Eastern Europe, one that emerged not from any policy design but from personal passion and commercial perseverance. Walking through the Yatta.pl flagship store, you see this philosophy in physical form which manifests not only the full spectrum of manga genres but Japanese children’s books, introduced deliberately to cultivate younger readers’ cultural literacy; and fan art including original works by Polish manga readers inspired by Japanese aesthetics, displayed alongside licensed merchandise. This is not passive consumption of Japanese culture. It is active, creative engagement with it, a sign that the relationship between Polish audiences and Japanese content has matured into something genuinely generative.

The conventional model of cultural diplomacy includes government-funded cultural institutes, official exchange programs, and embassy events that operate on a broadcast logic to curate a national image of itself and projects it outward. This model has genuine value, but it struggles to achieve the depth and authenticity that a commercially motivated, culturally fluent private actor can build organically.

Studio JG did not promote Japan; it fell in love with Japan and then found a way to make that love commercially sustainable and culturally transformative. The half million young Polish readers who have grown up with manga did not encounter Japanese culture through an official program. They found it through friends, through bookstores, through the simple fact that the content was available, well-translated, affordable, and part of a community. This is how culture travels, not through announcements but through enthusiasm, not through institutions but through individuals. As Jan puts it with characteristic directness: “If you make them love manga, if you showcase Japan in manga as a cool place, they will buy Toyota cars in the future.”

The sales assistant who once hid her manga collection and now listens to city pop openly represents something that no official survey quite captures: a generation whose relationship with Japan is intimate and personal rather than diplomatic and formal.

For Japan, this is an extraordinary asset, a cohort of young Europeans who feel genuine affinity for Japanese creativity, aesthetics, and values. The question is not how to create this. It already exists. The question is how to connect it to the broader architecture of the Japan-Europe relationship and to protect and invest in it so it serves as an accelerator to deepen bilateral relations in a comprehensive and deep manner.

To understand what is at stake, the Korean parallel is instructive. In November 2025, South Korea’s Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA) opened its first CEE office in Warsaw, launched at a K-Content Expo at the Palace of Culture and Science attended by 32 Korean entities and 70 European companies, generating contracts and agreements worth nearly thirty million US dollars. The head of

KOCCA in Poland, ILjoong Kim, was explicit about the strategic intent. Poland was chosen specifically because of its size, its creative industries, and its position as a gateway to the region. “We want Poland to become a hub connecting Central and Eastern Europe with East Asia,” Kim told Business Insider Polska.

Korea’s cultural moment in Poland is real and visible. K-pop dance groups practice in public spaces. Korean food has become fashionable across Warsaw. A Polish academic I spoke with during my visit noted that Korean language courses at her university had recently overtaken Japanese as the most popular Asian language option among students. This is a shift that would have seemed implausible a decade ago. She also mentioned that some Polish people think Ramen is a Korean food.

This shift is particularly ironic because the potential for a deeper creative partnership has already been proven at the highest level. The 2022 global hit *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners*, a collaboration between Warsaw’s CD Projekt Red and Tokyo’s Studio Trigger, stands as perhaps the most visible example of this creative potential. Yet, without a coordinated framework like KOCCA’s, such successes remain isolated triumphs of private passion rather than the foundation of a sustained industrial alliance.

This is not to suggest that Japan lacks institutional presence in Poland. The Japanese Embassy’s Information and Culture Department is active in Warsaw, the Manggha Museum of Japanese Art and Technology in Kraków has promoted Polish-Japanese cultural ties since 1994, and the Japan Foundation has long supported Japanese studies at Polish universities. What is absent is something more specific: a coordinated content industry strategy equivalent to KOCCA’s that connects Japan’s pop culture exports, particularly manga and anime, to the Polish and wider CEE market in a structured, commercially oriented way.

The question for Japan is not whether its cultural influence in Poland is real. It plainly is, and it runs deeper than Korea’s by virtue of decades of accumulated presence through manga and anime, but whether that depth of presence is connected to any broader strategic framework.

To bridge this gap and secure the future of Japan-Europe relations, four strategic areas of cooperation should be prioritized:

### **1. Moving from Individual Success to Institutional Frameworks**

The success of *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners* proved that Polish IP and Japanese animation are a world-beating combination. However, this was a one-off private miracle. Japan should establish a “Creative Co-production Fund” or a specialized agency much like KOCCA to actively match Polish gaming studios with Japanese anime houses, lowering the barrier for the next global hit.

### **2. Leveraging Local Experts as Cultural Ambassadors**

Entities like Studio JG/Yatta.pl have already built the infrastructure and trust. Rather than relying solely on traditional diplomacy, the Japanese government should partner with these proven private actors. They are the ones who understand the “Polish house” and can turn cultural affinity into long-term economic engagement.

### **3. Strategic Branding in the Age of "Cultural Blur"**

As Korean influence grows, the origin of Japanese culture like ramen is becoming blurred. Japan needs a “Digital Origin Strategy” that celebrates these roots through modern collaborations. This

isn't about rigid tradition, but about ensuring that when a Polish teenager eats ramen, they also know the story of its Japanese cousin.

#### **4. Poland as the “Content Hub” for Europe**

With KOCCA already positioning Warsaw as a gateway, Japan should not fall behind. Establishing a “Japan-CEE Content Hub” in Warsaw would allow Japan to use Poland’s world-class creative talent and its strategic location to radiate Japanese culture throughout the rest of Europe.

The sales assistant in Toruń and the dancers in Warsaw have already done their part: they have made Japan and Korea part of the local texture. The task for policymakers now is to ensure that this cultural love is not just consumed, but cultivated into a lasting, strategic partnership.

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#### **About the author:**

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