Proposal of Research Exchange Projects on Asian "Pop" Cultures

AZUMA Hiroki

Senior Research Fellow and Assistant Professor,

GLOCOM (Center for Global Communications International University of Japan)

As pointed out by Mr. Ichiya Nakamura, Japanese pop culture – J-Pop, Japanese television dramas, manga, anime, console games, fashion, the so-called "ke-tai" mobile phone culture, and Net culture as seen in the popular "nichanneru" (2-ch) website – is taking Asia by storm. At the same time, however, other Asian countries and regions such as South Korea and Taiwan are following fast behind. South Korean TV dramas and K-Pop singers – the former represented by "Fuyu-no Sonata" (Winter Sonata) and the latter by BoA – are rapidly increasing their presence here. Against such a backdrop, an argument is emerging in Japan that the appealing power of pop culture should be counted on as a new national strength, which is measured in terms of gross national cool (GNC), and that the government should implement effective policy measures to reinforce such strength. Indeed, the general living standards of Japanese animators and Internet artists are pretty tough and it is important to establish a social foundation that gives them the opportunity to dedicate themselves to their creative activities freed from such anxieties.

However, I have great reservations about perceiving the current cultural situation in the Asian region within the context of national competition, such as "Japanese pop culture" versus "South Korean pop culture" or "Chinese pop culture." The "pop," "cool" and "digital" culture that we, Asians, are enjoying today is the Asian version of the cultural style that originated in American consumer society in the last half of the 20th century. Pop culture, in principle, has no specific national identity and therefore it is pointless to discuss whether it is Japanese, Korean or Taiwanese. In fact, a considerable number of works – whether TV dramas or animated films – have been produced by a cross-border team of staff and they are being consumed in various countries regardless of their nationality. Conversely, it is because of this stateless nature that pop culture can go beyond the boundaries of Asia and capture the global market.

So what role should Japan play? Driven by nationalistic sentiment and the fear of being caught up by South Korea and Taiwan, the enclosing of pop culture assets is absolutely

not the answer. Instead, Japan, as a front-runner, should show and maintain generosity and openness to creators and business people sharing pop culture as their lingua franca, regardless of their nationality. Specifically, Japan should strive to earn credibility by transcending its national boundaries and becoming a country where creators – whether South Koreans, Taiwanese or Thais – can encounter high-level consumers, have a well-established working environment, and produce works of brilliance in a fair trading environment. The promotion of pop culture should be firmly based on such principles and it must not be conceived merely as a measure for industrial growth.

As groundwork for realizing such principles, I would like to put forward some ideas. As discussed earlier, seemingly homogeneous pop culture is now being consumed all across Asia and is becoming a kind of common language among young people. However, it must be noted that what is being shared today is limited to the physical substance of pop culture. The context and interpretational framework of pop culture remain unshared. The same music, animated films and console games are consumed in many different countries but it is hard to see "how" they are being consumed in each country. For instance, many Japanese animated films have war or battle as a theme. While they are nothing but fantasy for Japanese consumers, it is said that the same films are viewed in a very different light in South Korea, where a military draft system exists. However, both Japanese and South Koreans are hardly aware of this fact and no exchange is taking place between researchers in the two countries with regard to it. In this context, Asian pop culture has yet to become a full-fledged lingua franca. Although the exchange of physical substance is taking place, the exchange of ideas is not.

Japan has the prime chance to make an international contribution in this area. For instance, as a means to improving the current situation, Japan can implement a support program or set up a joint research institute to promote exchange among creators in the field of pop culture, thereby proactively inviting foreign nationals who are conducting research on manga and anime. It could also consider launching a project to translate critical commentaries published in Japan and other countries into each other's language. Japan could probably go a little bit further in providing some support to help pop culture grow into a true lingua franca among the young people of Asia. This may not lead to any concrete business in the short term, however, in the long term I do believe that this will make a substantial contribution to the peace and stability of the Asian region.