

Perspectives on the Movement of
Information, Culture, and People
in East Asia

ANEPR (January 16 – 17, 2004)

Yoshinori Yokoyama

Five of the world's ten most-traveled international air routes are within Asia. The Hong Kong – Taipei route, with 4.5 million passengers annually, is the number one in the world by the wide margin. The Bangkok – Hong Kong, Seoul – Tokyo, Hong Kong – Tokyo, and Bangkok – Tokyo routes are also among the top ten. Boeing 747's and Airbus 340's are not used for intra-European flights, but are used frequently within Asia. For many years, Asia has already been a region with great movements of people.

Thus, it is indeed a mystery why SARS never spread to Japan nor to Korea. The contagion affected many countries in Asia, but so far it has not affected Japan domestically. One only has to return from traveling to Southeast Asia to see that Japan's airline quarantines are not especially outstanding. However, the Japanese Government has been able to hold infection from other countries on the brink. The role of the nation in globalism is found in such surprising areas.

Certainly, Japanese companies' China-related business was hurt by SARS. That is because people's movements were restricted. The airline industry's earnings were also affected by the decline in numbers of passengers. However, an incident such as SARS does not necessarily cause a long-term decline in the movement of people. People take risks, whether conscious or not. People accept 'adventures of everyday life.' For example, there is about a one in 700,000 chance that a pedestrian in Tokyo will get hit by a car and killed, but most people are not so concerned with that level of probability.

Though information technology has on one hand substituted for people's movements, on the other hand, it has increased such movements. As a result, the volume of communication and people movement has increased. Only the increase in communication volume is more rapid. No matter how much the Internet develops, there will always be things we cannot do with it. For example, though one may view on the Internet a high-resolution image of the famous roast duck at Yung Kee Restaurant in

Hong Kong, one cannot enjoy the taste of the duck in its special atmosphere. We don't live our lives just by "over-consuming information."

Then, what kind future we will face? I would like to present one hypothesis on the future movement of information, culture, and people's movement in East Asia. I expect that a new dual structure will emerge; while a new concept of 'Asians' akin to 'Europeans' is formed gradually, at the same time a sub-current of strong nationalist and rival spirits will continue to persist . This will work in both good and bad ways.

It may be necessary to direct the spontaneous flow of information, culture and people with clear objectives. This cannot be achieved in the form of regulation. Further, there is no room for idealism. People will never lose their sense of parochialism. Rivalry will always exist, regardless of a scale. For this reason, the Hanshin Tigers' victory drove people to tears and the World Cup soccer tournament was so exciting.

No matter how often people move and interact, the barriers of 'inner' and 'outer' will never disappear. Outsiders will remain outsiders. Frequently, this sense of 'being an outsider' drives creativity. Rather than losing one's identity with assimilation, it may be more like a Japanese saying which goes; 'after all, vetch is a wild flower and the wilderness is where it shines.' Terms such as 'internationalist' and 'cosmopolitan' are already outdated. People's cultural identities do not so easily change whether people like it or not.

An individual should behave based on his or her natural emotions, traditions, historical backgrounds, sense of distance, etc., whether in one's country or out. It is desirable that this kind of common sense will emerge among the 'Asians.' I would like to see that it is the individual with a personal name that counts rather than Japanese vs. Korean vs. Chinese vs. Singaporean vs. Thai.

Recently, there has been a growing appreciation in the U.S. of Japanese pop culture's influence, especially of the richness of contents in the digital technology era through manga, animated cartoons, video games, etc. This phenomenon is argued through the emphasis on soft power and, for lack of a better term, Global National Cool (GNC). Fashions, character products, and pop songs geared toward young people have always been popular throughout Asia.

This trend may be the signal of the new Japanese hegemony. Douglas McGray, who coined the term GNC, calls this the 'Pokemon Hegemon.' But is this really what was brought about? This is a clear indication of the limits of 'mental set' by Americans, including Joseph Nye, who defined 'soft power.' Their understanding is that a large country equals a hegemony, evidenced by the U.S. Americans, and even we Japanese, cannot seem to understand that Japan is a 'non-hegemonic big country', first in the world history.

Because Japanese themselves cannot be fully aware of this fact, it is natural that other Asians wonder when the once-hegemonic Japan will re-awaken, and are very wary of accepting a Japan without the old intention. Certainly, we cannot forget that Japan is Asia's biggest country militarily, starting with a 5 trillion yen self-defense budget (of course, a euphemism for military budget) and technological might. However, history will not repeat itself. It is today's common wisdom that the future always differs from the past and will remain uncertain.

Japan's so-called soft power leaders, as Douglas McGray was surprised to learn when interviewing them, seemed to show no intention of developing internationally and are unaware of their international influence. Further, they don't understand that their creation is presented as, to put it crudely, 'Painted Japan,' and is appealing in this day and age without adapting to the taste of recipient countries. That's because they are not so-called big Japanese corporations. As Ms.O-Son-Fa (a noted commentator on Japanese and Korean culture) points out, they are groups of Japanese small timers who can lead their lives with a succession of one small happiness of a day, and without major objectives of achievement in their lives.

Regardless of awareness by the creators, why does Japanese pop culture hold such universality to be accepted in many other countries starting with many Asian countries? That is because Japan has absorbed without restriction the pop cultures of the world, especially the most influential American pop culture. It was indeed fortunate that the Japanese Government industrial protection policies by the Japanese Government did not include the pop culture industry. However, it is indeed strange that despite the pervasiveness of katakana words in our language, Japanese still do not speak English well.

Culture is a layered structure made up of limitless strata. One can eat Italian food as

well as conveyor-belt sushi. This has nothing to do with 'several hundred years' of tradition.' For example, 'yakitori' (skewered barbecue chicken) is not supposed to appear in the rakugo (comedic recitation) of the Edo Period. Yakitori does not even have a history of one hundred years. It was an import of the chicken satay in Southeast Asia. However, yakitori today has no resemblance with satay except skewers.

Imported objects, if they are accepted, are Japanized at an alarming speed. Japan is fortunate that there is a very large number of people in younger generation who with their considerable buying power to quickly absorb contents borne of this hodge-podge state is so thick. That is due to the high density of the Tokyo Metropolitan Region and Japan's overall affluence. Another contributing factor is the high disposable income of 'the dependent young,' who are those living with their parents. Its percentage is much greater than in many other countries and is certainly a contributing factor.

The acceptance by other Asian countries of Japanese contents borne of this structure is one of my themes. This can be seen as a 'cultural invasion' and restricted, or it can be accepted while holding on to the belief in the strength of one's own culture, and the eventual development of both-way flow. Asian countries have traditional cultures spanning many years as an undercurrent to their lifestyles, so it is difficult to believe that they are vulnerable to the inflow of foreign pop culture, as Japan was not when it was a developing country.

Things are paradoxical. In fact, if the country is more open, the latent talent of the people is triggered by the stimulation of foreign culture, and it will give birth to new things unconsciously merging their country's cultural heritage. are unconsciously merged, giving birth to new things. Moreover, making most of the borderless market brought about by the broad-band digital world, those new products will flow out from many Asian countries to eventually create multi-lateral flows. In this way, the generation brought up in the 'Asian-style hodge-podge pop culture' is the so-called 'Asians' in the real sense of the word.

However, Asian governments have not reached the psychological state of accepting that sort of future. Japan is already in the phase where it does not dwelling upon things it does not need to dwell upon, and dwelling upon things it should dwell upon. The days are over for Japan to prove that it can achieve whatever Western developed countries have achieved is past. Though it produces the best-quality basketball in the world, it

will never produce the strongest basketball team. Japan has also accepted the fact that it cannot produce the world's best wine. Other Asian countries may reach that stage faster than Japan's experiences. We need to make a conscious effort toward that direction.

As birds of a feather flock together, people seek environments with intellectual, economic, and sensuous stimuli. In particular, younger and more active age groups tend to have a high mobility. They naturally gravitate to regions where the concentration of such stimuli is high. The Tokyo Metropolitan Region is of course the most obvious candidate of this. However, Japan is quite conservative when it comes to accepting foreign people though it accepts culture and information without restriction.

The U.S. accepts both people and culture. France accepts people, but not culture. Compared with those, Japan accepts culture but it does not accept people. Accepting immigrants requires a large-scale system. Moreover, it requires a long time in the political process to decide on the acceptance of immigrants in a large number. However, between the present situation and the solution to accept immigrants there should be various solutions that would allow foreigners to stay for short and medium term. For example, I am thinking of We can design an improved version of American the Green Card by the U.S. Immigration.

Asia will be the world's biggest fashion market in the near future, and it is highly probable that the center for fashion design center may move from Paris or Milan to Tokyo. There are already signs of this. However, at this moment, Japan does not provide the freedom for young people from Asian countries to come to study fashion design in Tokyo, then, to work for a while after the study, and eventually, to move back and forth between Tokyo and their home country.

As is the case with successful suppression of SARS, if we can safely assume that national government will function well to control criminal aspects, it is not necessary to restrict the flow of people, information and culture. It is desirable to spread the 'wisdom of life' that thing are always working both ways, and not one-sided. Japanese-English words like 'anime' (animation) and 'kosupure' (costume play) have once again reverted to English. And California Roll sushi is not at all bad. Culture comes and goes with time.

Purebred Japanese monkeys are found only in part of the Shimokita Peninsula nowadays, and all other monkeys found in Japan are said to be a mixed-breed with Taiwanese monkeys. In this regard, not only were Taiwanese monkeys quite active, but so were Japanese monkeys. It works both ways.

The last issue remaining is that of a common language. Quite a large portion of people, information, and cultural exchanges do not rely on language, though there are some exceptions. In that case, what should become the common language in Asia? The history of languages tells us that many have disappeared to consolidate into a fewer number of languages. Is the future an extension of this trend? Maybe, it is not. Then, what?

It is highly probable that Asia's common language will no doubt be English. English is a language with a great deal of flexibility, as seen in the birth to Pidgin English in Southeast Asia some centuries ago. Thus, while English may be the common language, within that, an 'Asian English' may arise as well. It may start from American English but will contain characteristics specific to Asia.

Modern American English retains the pronunciation of 18th century English from England. However, American English is better than English from England in producing new words, and expressions influential to reflecting new words and people's values. than English from England. American English has a variety that encompasses ethnic expressions such as African-American expressions.

In this way, perhaps in a half-century or so, a new 'Asian English' will emerge. Each Asian country will contribute its own new words and expressions, which will be mixed together, and there would probably be wide latitude for differences in accent. Perhaps new spellings will also emerge. A very interesting issue will be how the existing Western establishment – mainly America -- will accept those Asians speaking the new Asian English.