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LEEI WONG

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wong.leei@gmail.com

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Reminiscing the popularity of Japanese television dramas outside Japan

Leei Wong

HASS, Sheridan College, Perth, Western Australia 6000

[abstract] The export of Japanese television programs overseas started in the 1970s and the rapid growth of Japanese television programs globally especially in Asia started in the early 1980s. However, in the 21st century, the glory of Japanese dramas seems to have faded and replaced by the “Korean wave”. Perhaps the younger generation nowadays has not heard of “J-Pop” and here is an examination of the past consumption of the Japanese television culture outside of Japan, especially Asia.

Introduction

ACCORDING TO COOPER-CHEN (1997), THE MAIN REASON WAS THE EXCESS PRODUCTION OF JAPANESE OF TELEVISION PROGRAMS DURING THAT PERIOD. PERHAPS, IT WAS A PERIOD WHEN THE JAPANESE YEN DECLINED DRASTICALLY IN VALUE DURING THE 80S THAT CAUSED JAPANESE EXPORTS TO BECOME GENERALLY CHEAPER OVERSEAS. IN ANY WAY, JAPANESE TELEVISION PROGRAMS HAVE SINCE THEN, GRADUALLY BECOME AN IMPORTANT EXPORT AND DRAMA PROGRAMS HAS BEEN THE BULK OF THE EXPORT, ESPECIALLY IN EAST ASIA. WE WILL EXPLORE MORE ON THE POSSIBLE REASONS WHY JAPANESE TELEVISION DRAMAS (A FORM OF JAPANESE POPULAR CULTURE), HAS FOUND SIGNIFICANT AUDIENCES OUTSIDE OF JAPAN.

Cool Japan

With Japanese popular culture gaining significant popularity in the international markets, in the late 1980's, a powerful popular cultural force swept through East Asia as well, and “Japanization”

emerged, with "J-Pop", karaoke, animated films, television shows, television dramas, manga (comics) books, magazines, video games, and others, Japanese fashion, capturing the hearts of many. The wide range of Japanese popular culture products has resulted in a high demand and consumption in East Asia and the increase in sales of Japanese popular culture creates a 'Cool Japan' (Jetro 2005) image.

With more and more young people calling themselves the “harizu” a term coined in Chinese meaning “Japanophile tribe” by “mimicking Japanese fashion and enthusiastically following Japanese anime and drama (television dramas)” (Jetro 2005), it shows that the “Japanese wave” cannot be underestimated. Therefore it is one of the reasons that makes the audience embracing the import of Japanese dramas readily and it yielded amazing results in East Asia.

Like what McGray (Jetro, 2005) has commented, Japan has indeed become a major country in terms of “gross national cool”, especially in the East Asian region through the export of its popular culture. Professor Joseph S. Nye Jr. of Harvard (1995), in his book “Bound to Lead” defines “soft power” as “the power of one country to attract the people of other countries through its culture, its values, or its diplomatic policies” (Jetro, 2005). Here we have seen Japan effectively created the “Japanese cool” effect. Although this does not mean that Japan has yielded much diplomatic and political power over the region through the soft power, nevertheless, the Japanese “soft power” has successfully established its cultural image in the region. And the watching and following the episodes of Japanese dramas has become a ‘cool’ thing to do as well. **Japan opened up**

Unlike Japanese anime or Japanese video games that have become global products, Japanese dramas are watched by Japanese residing overseas and only popular mainly in East Asia. Like “Oshin”, one of the reasons is that it retains its “Japanese-ness”, as contrary to the major exports of Japanese goods or forms of popular culture.

“Oshin” (NHK, 1983-1984), was the first television drama that was a big hit especially in East Asia. It tells the life story of the protagonist, Oshin, a girl who was born in a very poor rural family in Japan. Through the various hardships and perseverance, she managed to succeed in life overcoming the adversities. “Oshin” has since then become the best known Japanese television drama overseas. During that time, twenty-three percent of Japan’s export television programs are drama serials (Stronach, Ogawa, Tsuya, (1989) and “Oshin” was screened in more than forty nations.

“Oshin” was written and produced mainly by women and it depicts the rise in the status of women and a new type of female personality emphasizing “socchokusa” (straightforwardness); “henken no nasa” (free from prejudice) ; “jikkouryoku”(ability to make things happen) and “ikite ikuchie” (survival skills) (Paul Harvey, 1995) . In Japanese dramas that addresses issues in Japan, it makes the world look at Japan differently from another perspective, and with “Oshin”, it could have changed the stereotypical negative image of Japan associated with the Second World War.

Japan’s culturally odourless trendy dramas

With dramas featuring the “Japaneseness” in them, “culturally odourless” “trendy drama” also emerged in the 1990s. The term “trendy drama” refers to the “idol”(Japanese popular young actors starring) television series in Japan and they created a boom in the markets since then. These television dramas catered to the females in their 20s and the usual themes revolve around love.

Iwabuchi (2002) states that 'romance' and 'trendiness' are culturally "odourless". Thus, the 'trendy dramas' were well received in East Asia, as the love theme is a universal theme among young people and the youngsters in the region are also interested in the Japanese famous idols featured in the dramas.

Ota Toru, the prominent producer of many prominent dramas states in his speech that the "trendy dramas" were the output of the "bubble economy boom" in the late 80s, which was a low period for television dramas. He first created them when he was in his late twenties and wanted to "specifically target women in their 20s". The television dramas were actually produced for Japanese audiences and with regards to the popularity of his trendy dramas in Asia, it was "accidental" and they actually had "no particular interest in developing an 'Asian strategy' when they were making the dramas (Ota Toru, 2001).

Therefore, there was no intentional effort through the producers specifically aiming to capture the East Asian market when the Japanese dramas are made. The producers were overwhelmed by the well received attention the dramas have in East Asia. The "culturally odourless" television dramas seem to speak a universal language in the East Asian countries.

Japan's Cultural and geographical proximity

The term and theory of "cultural proximity" was first introduced by Straubhaar (1991) and it could explain the acceptance of Japanese television dramas in East Asia. The Asian flavors acts as a "greatest common factor" (Cooper-Chen, 1997) for most of the audiences in the Asian countries.

The Japanese scholar Iwabuchi Koichi (Iwabuchi, 1997) states that Japanese popular culture and other Asian cultures have similar and synchronous experiences. He also points out that East Asia and Japan's geographical and cultural proximity make the Japanese pop culture more accessible than European or American culture as it provides an operational realism, "mirror", as compared to the American distant culture as "dream" (Iwabuchi 2001).

The geographical proximity could also explain for the exports of the Japanese television dramas. The exports started with Taiwan and subsequently to the neighboring countries, like Hong Kong, Korea, Malaysia and Singapore, because of easier access and economic reasons. This explains the large exports of the Japanese drama DVDs in the regions as well (although some are pirated versions).

So, cultural factors are important as the audience is basically attracted to the same culture and language exchanges in cultural close areas. Moreover, the television programs are also more affordable for the small countries in the region, and export video products can also be quite successful (Straubhaar, 1997).

New genre---"Gambaru" and "pure love (jyun-ai)"

Iwabuchi(1997) mentions that cultural proximity alone does not explain about the Japanese

wave globally. Surely, cultural proximity solely also does not contribute to the success of Japanese dramas across east Asian cultures. Another possible reason for the transnational success is that the genres in the television dramas are capable of defying cultural boundaries. The originality in the romances themes, is “one of the few populist issues that tug at the hearts of the majority, yet enables the audience to take temporary flight from the ordinary” (Leung, 2004).

Genres and subgenres can exert attractions to specific audiences. The Japanese television producers have unintentionally succeeded in developing cross-culture communication through the television dramas. The proximity of genres make audiences approach foreign programs easily, making the dramas well received.

High production standards

In East Asia, Taiwanese and Hong Kong television dramas have been popular in the region. However, the Taiwanese have either rehashes of slow-pacing long serials, and the Hong Kong drama serials seem to constantly centre round police and cops. Tsutsui (2010) refers to the Japanese dramas as “insistently and unapologetically different from the familiar and often predictable products”.

The quality of production Japanese dramas is also better as compared to the local productions in the East Asian countries, making Japanese dramas a hit in those countries.

Japanese television dramas provide a fresh look on television dramas with themes on family problems or love. East Asia’s stance as generally a conservative approach can be seen in the reception of Japanese television dramas. The TV dramas selected or imported are normally with the ‘gambaru’ (to strive and to struggle hard- (Leung,2004) themes melodrama “pure love” and relatively light-hearted. Some genres themselves facilitate their ability to be shared across very diverse cultures. Wilkins, Tufte, Obregon(2014) discusses the idea of genre proximity, emphasizing the common structure of melodrama which covers many cultures. For instance, the determination shown in “Oshin” has proven to be a success in capturing audiences.

The 90s dramas focus on the modern day challenges and obstacles people face and the determination to overcome those obstacles. This theme still captures many even until today, like the drama produced in 2012 , “Priceless” starring Kimura Takuya about the unbeaten determination to overcome poverty and live with a positive outlook in life.

The themes addressed are also more realistic about problems on a personal level or addressing social problems, thus resonating with the audiences. Iwabuchi (2013) says “Japanese dramas represent favourable realism that cannot be gained from Western/American dramas as well as from Taiwan dramas.” In trying to overcome the “problems” in life, the ‘gambaru’ or fighting spirit message is engulfed and the dramas serve as life lessons for many. The determination of the protagonists to achieve their dreams acts as a positive pushing factor to survive in the harsh and competitive economical and social environments in East Asia.

In a way, the dramas serve as a ‘healing effect’ for viewers who can identify with the protagonists in the dramas. Of course, together with the favourite idols in Japanese dramas, for instance, the “Kimu-taku” (Takuya Kimura) phenomenon, and the theme songs in the dramas selling in the music industry, Japanese dramas have become a ‘new love’ in East Asia since then.

Delicate elegance

Another special aspect about Japanese television dramas is that the emotions of the characters are expressed in very delicate way and the dialogues can be poetic and somehow form a lasting impression in the audience's mind. Iwabuchi (2002) describes, "love is expressed more delicately and elegantly in Japanese dramas". Through this subtle way of presentation, it touches the hearts of many and creates a magnetic effect that attracts viewers.

Iwabuchi (2004) also describes the "intense sympathy many young East/ Southeast Asians have come to feel toward the characters in Japanese dramas, and the way they have learned to cope with the meanings of their own modern experiences through the urban lives depicted in Japanese TV dramas". A new sense of individuality surfaces (as contrast to the Western sense) making young modern city dwellers think about their own individuality and search for their own identities.

East Asian Modernity

Iwabuchi (2004) says that the "Japanese cultural industries seemed to believe that Japan can perform as cultural translators of 'the West' for 'Asia'". The reason could be that most Japanese believe that they are not part of Asia despite its geographical location. They believe that they are the "successfully Westernized non-Western country" and see themselves as superior in the region.

Although Iwabuchi thinks this kind of arrogance will deter them from "appreciating different ways of negotiating Western cultural influences in other parts of Asia", the truth could be that youngsters in the East Asia region actually do think that Japan is 'superior' in the region and that being "Japanized" equates them to being of a 'higher' class'. Thus, watching Japanese dramas and conversations about the plots of Japanese dramas will make them look "hype" as contrast to local programs.

Cultural colonization

The above feeling can be explained as most East Asian countries seem to have a lingering affection towards Japan. Countries like Taiwan, Korea and Singapore that were once colonized by Japan still have traces of Japanese culture left behind. The intricate mixed feeling towards Japan as a 'superior' Asian country and the relentless feeling contributes to what Iwabuchi (2002) calls "the colonial habit of mimicking". He also states that Taiwanese young people see Japanese television as not only culturally proximate, but also "sharing a sense of 'Asian modernity', despite the language difference between Japanese and Chinese, and the unpleasant past.

It seems that even half a decade after the second world war, "Japan's imperial legacy" still remains in the regions. The influx of Japanese popular culture can be seen as a form of "Cultural Colonization" in East Asian countries, and it seems to stay for a much longer time.

No "glocalization" (dochakuka) in Japanese television dramas

Another reason for the overwhelming positive responses of Japanese television dramas in East Asia is that Japanese television dramas were not made to "market the Japanese way of life" (Iwabuchi, 2002)", as they did not take the strategy of "glocalization" like what they do with in other areas(for

instance, Japanese Sanrio products or Japanese video games) . "Glocalization" is a business jargon, used since the 1980s and the term is modelled on the Japanese word dochakuka (Robertson, 2001) to mean “global localization”, that is, products of Japanese origin made localized to suit local tastes. For instance, Kubo (2000) talks about the failure of the launch of “Sailor Moon” movie in America but the success of “Pokemon” movie there.

It is surprising that without "glocalization", products actually sell well like the case of Japanese television dramas. This is also limited to East Asian countries as we could see that the Japanese flavours account for the success of Japanese dramas.

Challenges now and the future

Speaking from the No. 1 studio at NHK's old headquarters in Tokyo's Uchisaiwaicho district, NHK former president Furukaki Tetsuro refers to television as “ a barometer of culture”. And that television is sure to “exert a revolutionary influence on all our lives”. Indeed the television dramas that began to penetrate into the cultures of East Asian countries has brought about evident changes in various aspects of people's lives.

We have explored the various reasons that contribute to the significant audiences of Japanese dramas outside Japan, like the element of near culture that explains the merging of interests and tastes. We have also seen the interesting difference in the export of Japanese dramas as compared to other Japanese products, in that it was precisely the “nihon-rashii” (“Japaneseness”) in the productions that contributes to its success in East Asia, despite the differences in languages and other factors.

The impact of Japan's earthquake in 2011 and the radiation contamination from Fukushima nuclear power plant has left a devastating effect on Japan's economy. What is the impact of the disasters on the export of its pop culture? As Japan continue to produce Japanese television dramas, the “Korean wave” seem to be taking over the “Japan Wave” place in recent years. Audiences seem to be more engaged in the Korean television dramas nowadays in East Asia.

Will there be a comeback of more Japanese television dramas screening in East Asia in the future? Or will the Korean dramas totally replace the Japanese dramas? These are some of the questions that need to be addressed. Japanese television dramas have found significant audiences overseas and with the audience's gradual change in taste, it is interesting to find out in the future if the Japanese television dramas still have a large group of faithful audiences.

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