

Popular Culture Transcending National Borders and Genres in East Asia

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Abstract: Using highly advanced media technology, Asian cultural exchanges became very active since the latter half of the 1990s. Firstly, Japanese “trendy dramas” were favorably welcomed in Asia because they could show young people’s problems in an Asian context against the background of a modernized city. These dramas have projected an image of Japan as an idealistically westernized country. Due to the popularity of Japanese culture such as manga, TV dramas, and movies, there seems to have risen a fear that it might be too influential in Asia. However, Japan is based on Western-style modernization, and originally Japanese media companies had the intention of exporting program-making formats to Asian countries rather than the cultural products themselves. A Taiwanese TV drama, *Meteor Garden*, based on a Japanese manga story was imported back to Japan and soon created a boom here. Also, Korean dramas have been received with enthusiasm in Japan as well as in other Asian countries. Because of “familiarity with Confucianism and ethnicity” in this area, cultural products go beyond the borders of nations and genres, contributing toward Asians seeking for identity in the “diasporic public sphere,” which media has been creating worldwide.

1. Introduction

Since the latter half of the 1990s a great amount of popular cultural artifacts have been exchanged transcending national borders and genres through Taiwan, Korea, China and Japan, which might cause several changes in each culture and psychology of people. Japanese animation films had already advanced to Asian and world markets as early as in the seventies. In the eighties a TV drama “Oshin” was welcomed enthusiastically, and in the nineties, so-called trendy dramas of Japan became popular in East Asia. Moreover, in the reverse direction Korean dramas have aroused the enthusiasm of Japanese audiences since 2003. In Taiwan, Japanese comics for girls were dramatized on TV and were brought back in that form to Japan. Again, due to their publicity, the story was also made into a series of TV drama in Japan. Thus, popular culture is crossing borders of nations and genres in East Asia and as a result, they are often fused into new styles. The days are already over when only Western cultures represented by

Hollywood movies, Disneyland, and pop music were in the centre of the media industry.

Although these phenomena are being favorably received, some questions arise:

- (1) what kinds of influence do these transcending cultures have on Asians especially young people?
- (2) do they indicate a hope that a bond of common backgrounds in culture is being set up gradually in spite of tragic relationship in history around the World War II?

By focusing on popular Asian TV dramas, we would like to derive insights to these issues.

In this paper, the backgrounds of the prosperous Asian cultural exchanges will be discussed, and what the spread of the transnational culture in East Asia brings about will be pondered through studying mainly three TV dramas, *Tokyo Love Story* (Japan, 1991), *Meteor Garden* (Taiwan, 2001), and *Winter Sonata* (Korea, 2002). East Asia, when mentioned in this essay, is limited to mainly Japan, Korea, and Taiwan.

However, before discussing Asian situation, cultural globalization which is still in progress in our daily life should be examined in the first place. Popular culture adorned with fun is a mirror that

Received 7 June 2006

Accepted 13 September 2006

reflects mentality of contemporaries. Their narrative power which appeals to our imagination is attracting attention of many researchers. The global, local, and individual functions and influences of popular culture need critical examination and analysis to understand our present cultural environment, that is, cultural aspects of globalization.

2. Globalization, Identity, and Story Consumption

During the 1990s, technology of media communication took marvelous steps toward further advancement, and consequently it became possible that images, text, and sound could be transmitted, passing over borders with unprecedented scale and speed. Using DVDs, internet, videos, and CDs, multinational corporations spread mainly Western popular cultures throughout the world.

According as their development, advanced media have gradually changed our cultural environments and also mentality. As early as in 1985 Meyrowitz analyzed newly created sentiment caused by new media, and called it “no sense of place”, and he argued that the importance of physical sides of human experiences had been greatly decreased. Instead, the virtual world in a global scale has come into existence by media and Appadurai called it “diasporic public sphere.” While having access to the sphere, or by receiving information automatically or unconsciously through media, we are influenced by its fictitious power.

As globalization is in progress, cultures grown up from certain places are floating away from their original “habitats.” Cultural products which lost their bond to the places would be unexpectedly born again at some other areas, repeating another cycle of development, naturalization, and fusions. Transcending popular cultures imply that cultural production, distribution, and consumption will not complete its cycle in a single society. It would be a new direction in research to illuminate these complicated and dynamic processes called “glocalization,” “cultural hybridism,” and “diasporization,” by doing some case studies. (Tosa and Aoyagi 2005:9)

Globalization was partly caused by a large scale of migration such as working, studying,

traveling abroad, and immigration. Because of people’s move away from home, the tie between culture and place is becoming loose. Therefore, it is assumed that each culture is floating in the diasporic sphere, escaping from the hand of nation and nationalism. In the meantime, for individuals the lost sense of place may cause the question of identity, that is, where they should belong and what their role is as a member of a community.

Under these circumstances, cultural products play more important roles than ever for individuals who enjoy making an access to the “diasporic public sphere.” In everyday life people are usually seeking for fun in movies, dramas, and TV games for relaxation, and they offer various types of entertainment with narratives. Otsuka pointed out that one of the characteristics of modern society is consuming stories (Otsuka 2001: 21) as amusement. Nowadays, stories used in game software, movies, and dramas have vastly increased in number.

Generally, the reason why people need stories is that through its framework, their world can be understood as a meaningful, unified representation of reality with order. By way of stories, human ethics and behaviors in a particular culture can be shown to people in the community, and narratives help them to set up their identities and strengthen their awareness repeatedly. Nowadays, detached from the sense of place and identity based on being a community member, individuals are experiencing a kind of spiritual vacuum, which seems to be the soil for narratives to infiltrate into.

As a result, the function of “imagination” in “imaginative sphere,” which is mentioned in Anderson on nationalism and Appadurai cultural globalization, is coming to the foreground. In the “diasporic public sphere” stories give influences through the four processes of “sympathizing, empathizing, recalling and envisioning.” (Hirano 25) With these effects audiences could find identifications somewhere in the characters of stories instead of making up solid identity in the real world where they actually live.

As Hall pointed out, identification is made possible through three functions: imagination, projection, and idealization. Furthermore, the identification process is considered to have multi-layered phases mingled with both longing for its ideal and hostility toward it although it might be

an illusory effort to connect with others. (Hall 2001: 11) This hypothesis can explain exactly what is happening in East Asia through popular culture transcending national borders.

3. "Glocalization"

Concerning globalization, a new coinage, "glocalization" was made up from "global" and "localization." As Appadurai pointed, "[t]he central problem of today's global interactions is the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization." (Appadurai 1996: 32) In our focal area of East Asia, this process of assimilation and differentiation is in progress. But originally it has been a tactics of Japanese enterprises.

It is well known that as early as in 1950s Sony corporation aimed their strategy at becoming a global enterprise, differentiating themselves from ordinary Japanese companies which aimed only at the domestic market. They proposed the idea of "global localization" in their world marketing planning, that is, a global outlook adapted to local conditions.

Before long, "Western companies had observed the success of Japanese firms in making a global product fit the local market." As a result, a new business jargon, "glocalization" was formed in the eighties by "telescoping global and local to make a blend. The idea is modeled on Japanese 'dochakuka' (naturalize, or living on one's own land), but also adopted in Japanese business for global localization" (Tulloch 1991: 134).

In the field of TV production in Japan, programs are developed by imitating or rehashing American movies or TV programs. After skillfully localized and naturalized for the Japanese market, Western programs became more favorably accepted in Japan. Thus, the Japanese TV industry has learned how to make popular dramas, shows, and programs using Japanese context.

Experiencing this process of assimilation of Western culture, Japanese media companies assumed that in the near future Asian countries would also localize American or Japanese popular culture even if Japan could export their cultural products to those countries at the moment. They thought that popularity of Japanese programs

cannot last in the long run. Instead, they tried to export program-making formats based on the concept of familiarizing Japanese or Western dramas by using local characters and scenery. They came confident about their experiences of localization and naturalization of American culture (Iwabuchi 2001: 147).

4. "Trendy Drama" of Japan: *Tokyo Love Story*

Active cultural exchanges through media in East Asia are partly based on "cultural similarity" in this area. Cultural familiarities of Confucianism and ethnic resemblances as Asians are contributing factors of transcending cultures. As a pioneer Japanese culture could reorganize and modernize it to fit its Asian context, under the influence of Western culture. Especially, so-called Japanese "trendy dramas" which represent modern, stylish, urban life in its Asian background are well received by Asian young people.

One of the reasons for their popularity is that youths are facing a kind of identity crisis, that is, how to live in a modern, westernized society although they were brought up in the Asian tradition. Because their reality is mainly in a "diasporic public sphere," their model or scenario in life may be absorbed unconsciously through representations of popular culture while it is entertaining people. Traditional human relationships based on a place such as a community and family are becoming weak with the advancement of technology. Young people live in a society abundant in products and therefore, in a quite different environment from their parents'. Instead, cultural products may be fascinating and persuading them with new models of lifestyle and adulthood including love, marriage, and work. It is up to the audience to adopt the world view of TV dramas, so they are not so cautious for brainwashing. However, in addition to four processes of a story above mentioned, if dramas are shown with pleasing images and music, they greatly appeal to viewers' emotion with their strong penetrating power to the mind.

Tokyo Love Story, a series of TV drama based on a "manga" scenario by Fumi Saimon, gives a good example for thinking about the transnational cultural phenomenon. The drama series broadcast

by Fuji Television for three months from January to March, 1991 described love, friendship, and work of young people against the setting of a modern city, Tokyo. It received a very good reaction mainly from young women in Japan. When it was exported to Taiwan, Korea, and China, it won immense popularity as a "Japanese Idol Drama."

Trendy dramas in the latter half of the 1980s were clear representations of the consumerism reflecting the bubble economy. Rather than the plot itself, trends in consumption, for example, elegant mansions with their interior design, fashionable dress, and posh restaurants were focused in a very stylish way.

In addition to this tendency, *Tokyo Love Story* picked up more serious and contemporary problems, that is, whether a working, independent young woman could be a desirable wife, or from the women's side a career woman could manage to play a role of a life-long partner while pursuing her professional job. In the past, love stories used to have different kinds of conflicts between protagonists and their families, or dilemmas over tradition or standards of society. Different from those conventional themes, the problem here is women's independent life style.

There are two contrasting women, Rika and Satomi, and the hero, Kanchi, wavers between them. Satomi is a conventional woman character, and also her job, a nursery school teacher, reflects woman's role in the family. She was Kanchi's classmate in high school in Ehime. Kanchi and Satomi always look back to their high school days, cherishing their memories of good old days, which means they are a symbol of a good old-fashioned couple.

Meanwhile, Rika, Kanchi's senior in his company, is more active and decisive, for perhaps she spent some years in the States. She is quite Americanized in her way of communicating and in her style of life. After Rika is transferred to the Los Angeles branch, Kanchi and Satomi get married. They seem rather an idealized traditional Japanese couple from the scene where Satomi takes the trouble to tie Kanchi's shoe lace on the street.

After working in Los Angeles for half a year, Rika leaves the company and her former colleagues lose touch with her. Three years later, Kanchi and Satomi happen to meet Rika in town. Rika is in Tokyo now, but she does not tell what she is doing

now. She is a quite mysterious character because her parents, hometown, and family are not mentioned at all, even when she was missing due to a broken love affair with Kanchi. Perhaps, this means that her progressive attitude and life style do not seem to be rooted in Japanese society yet, and it is pretty difficult to characterize such a person in a real situation. Compared with its original "manga" story, it seems that the heroine in drama needs more concrete characterization.

As a woman, it seems hard to give up her love by pursuing her career since she wants both love and work as men usually have. In spite of her loneliness, she tries to be cheerful as much as possible, for she wants people around to remember her smile after they part. Her efforts to keep a lively attitude despite many difficulties, makes the audience sympathetic toward her.

She is very serious and single-minded in her love, and male characters mention that her love is sometimes too heavy. In the drama, her family or friends outside the company do not appear and her loneliness is emphasized; therefore, it cannot be helped that she has an inclination to set up strong emotional relationships with her boyfriends: first her boss and now Kanchi.

From this drama, the viewers can feel that although women's life style is changing rapidly, men seem quite at a loss to understand and follow the change. Kanchi impresses us with his indecisive and perplexed expression all the time, and finally chooses a conservative, stereotypical woman. Rika is free and natural in her behavior, and attracts young female audience. Meanwhile, womanly Satomi looks timid and not relaxed in her style, but instead she can catch attention of young men as an ideal girl. Man's conservatism which requires self-restraint in woman's side is shown as gender differentiation in the beginning of the nineties. Contemporary working women's dilemma under the Confucian civilization comes to be a main focal point in this drama.

In addition to the theme, the drama's keyword is being "fashionable." Not only clothes, but new consumer goods, interior design, or even jobs are shown or laid out in a sophisticated way. Also, the image effects of stylish scenes in a modern city by advanced camera techniques stand out and attract Asian young people who do not know the reality of

Tokyo. It may seem to heal people's oppressed feelings by illusionary, beautiful images together with fanciful music and the story shows an experimental model for young love and marriage. Thus, this drama could truly forge a new life style for women in modern days with a Japanese situation, representing urban life and consumption.

5. Korean Drama Boom: *Winter Sonata*

In April, 2003, more than ten years after *Tokyo Love Story*, NHK BS channel televised *Winter Sonata*, and since then Korean dramas have been received with enthusiasm in Japan as well as in other Asian countries. *Winter Sonata* was telecast once again from the end of 2003 to 2004, and unexpectedly caught much attention of mainly middle-aged or rather elderly women.

The drama contributed much to the business of NHK, and the income related to it occupies 3.5 billion yen out of their total business income of 105.4 billion yen. The sale of DVDs and videos reached to 330,000 sets, and 1,220,000 copies of the novelized version were sold by the end of June, 2004. In addition to viewing the drama, the audiences widened their interest by action, joining Korean tours and studying the Korean language; as a result, they had great influence in terms of culture and economy for both countries (Mouri 2004: 22). So-called Kanryu boom reveals the noteworthy economical power of cultural products nowadays.

One of the reasons why the Korean drama boom happened might be that middle-aged women were discovered as a leading audience of TV programs. They used to be marginalized as viewers of prime time at night. Although they are very active in cultural activities such as theater going, Kabuki viewing, and tea ceremony, etc., their economic power in consuming culture cannot be neglected. For example, Fukuoka Hakata-za has 30,000 regular members and about 70 per cent of them are middle-aged women, and Nagasaki Citizens' Theatre is supported by about 4,200 members, and ladies occupy around 80 per cent. In spite of their hidden influence, their image as consumers of TV programs is rather traditional, reflecting a hierarchy of family where children or men have priorities. The age group from 18 to 36 is usually in the key position in audience ratings.

As modernization goes further, it is natural that nostalgic attitudes for the lost family and community bonds are born among people. A retrospective and slow pace of life and rather old-fashioned family relations in Korean dramas might have healing effects on the older generation in Japan. In addition, consumers' "desire for the new that smacks of the old" (Appadurai 30) and longing for nostalgia is pointed out. In the drama, characteristics peculiar to Korean culture were avoided for neutralization to appeal to the international audience. As indicated in the title, winter scenery and pleasant music are highlighted as in *Tokyo Love Story*, where images and music were made fit for young tastes as important elements.

The drama's old-time melodramatic elements such as secrets of birth, loss of memory, serious car accidents, and mortal diseases, perhaps give the audiences opportunities to vent their emotional energy. In Japan from 1974 to 1980 a TV drama series called the "Red Series" was famous for its popularity with similar story lines. It is said that the "Red Series" is the original of *Winter Sonata* as the catchphrase of the DVDs of the series claims. Because Korean dramas became very popular, TBS remade the "Red Series" starring young Japanese actors and actresses, however, unfortunately the remake of the "Red Series" could not gain high audience ratings. It is difficult to imagine for the younger generation in Japan to overcome such severe difficulties to attain love, while for the older audience popular actors among the youth are not so agreeable. In order to appeal to the Japanese viewers, a new style, exoticism in this case, was necessary to revive their nostalgia.

One more thing to point out is that the dramatic plots of *Winter Sonata* were often used in Japanese "manga" for girls from the sixties to eighties. (Yamano and O 2006: 166) It is argued that this might a kind of plagiarism and another reason why Japanese middle-aged audience feel nostalgic about *Winter Sonata*. However, the drama's melodramatic elements may be considered to be universal specimens of difficult problems for the hero and heroine to overcome in the course of its story.

KBS articulates five characteristics of *Winter Sonata*: First Love, Friendship, Family,

Mystery, and Winter Scenery in their home page. With these catchy concepts, KBS could make a success in attracting Japanese viewers' nostalgic feelings. The Japanese audiences could share a "common experience" watching the same drama with other Asians, appreciating the Korean way of life, and deepening their understanding of its culture.

6. Japanese TV program in Taiwan: *Meteor Garden*

Finally, let us turn our attention to the situation in Taiwan. "Star Chinese Channel," one of the most popular channels in Hong Kong Satellite Broadcasting, televised some Japanese "trendy dramas" for the first time in Asia, and they enjoyed great popularity. Especially, since the merger with and acquisition of that broadcasting company by Rupert Murdoch in 1993, many Japanese dramas have been telecast, thereby setting the stage for Asian audiences including Taiwanese to enjoy Japanese popular culture.

In Taiwan, cable TV was available to a wide viewership, and its coverage reached up to 79 per cent of all the families in 1999. Since it had many channels, cable TV relied on programs from abroad as well as domestic ones. Japanese TV programs were being watched most often among all foreign ones because of common Asian ethnicity.

Since *Tokyo Love Story* was televised in 1991, similar kinds of Japanese TV dramas called "Idol Drama" became popular, gaining much influence on youth culture in Taiwan. A "Harlie Set," or patrons of things Japanese, became a phenomenon, and Japanese culture is playing a part as a leader of the new consumerism. "Idol Dramas" have projected an image of Japan as idealistically modernized and westernized among Asian countries.

Along with a romantic title song and the visual impact of glorified images of an urban environment, the story impresses young women especially to empathize with the heroine's search for more independent lifestyle and her character. They feel identified with Rika, longing for her free and active attitude. At the same time, images that show glamorous materialism in Tokyo has influenced them, and driven them to desires to lead

the same kind of life.

Meanwhile, the manga industry is very prosperous in Japan and it is divided into many sub-genres, though, in Taiwan it is said that they do not have comics aimed at girls. When one Japanese manga called "Hana yori dango" ("To prefer boys to flowers," which implies that practical conditions are more important in choosing one's husband) was televised as a TV drama, *Meteor Garden*, it caught young women's attention immediately and became popular there. Imported back to Japan, a Taiwanese version of the same story created a boom here soon. Watching this drama, originated in Japan and then dramatized in Taiwan, Japanese people pay more attention particularly to the Taiwanese culture and lifestyle including fashion, food, family relationships, and customs, since they already know the story quite well. Their attitude is similar to the Asian audiences' of *Tokyo Love Story*. In this case too, the viewers were attracted more to cultural differences. One Japanese student said that the TV drama gave her a fresh impression of the uniqueness of Taiwanese culture even though there are many similarities among other Asian cultures. Assimilation and differentiation is exquisitely balanced.

At the same time, light-heartedness and flatness are pointed out as its characteristics. This might be due to the adaptation of a manga story into a TV drama. The light mood and exaggeration of manga perhaps intruded into the realism of a drama. (Iwabuchi 2001: 219) It is said that narratives are changing their main medium from written texts (literature) to TV, movies, and manga. Its problem is that mass media are basically controlled by commercialism. The popularity of a Cinderella story of the *Meteor Garden* even in a democratic society may be one of the symptoms that youngsters are deeply affected by materialism.

In analyzing musicals, Dyer discusses that entertainment should show something glamorous which we cannot enjoy in our everyday life. With non-verbal communication, entertainment should make audiences feel how marvelous its utopian world is. Dyer picks up the importance of using music effectively, and simplifying human relationships and intensifying characters' emotion to enhance the utopian image. According to him,

dramas based on manga stories could certainly fit Dyer’s hypothesis. (Dyer 1992) However, if audiences would get used to manga stories as everyday entertainment, it is likely to happen that they might lose track of their reality.

7. Discussion

After perusing the TV dramas, let us focus on their three aspects: transcending genres between manga and drama, different generations which consist of Japanese audience, and interactions among each nation in the area. As stated above, manga plots were introduced into each drama, therefore, unrealistic and fantasy factors were added to the stories. Their dramatic elements may give the audience’s emotion appropriate chances for catharsis, which is observed especially in *Winter Sonata*.

In manga characters sometimes adopt bold and fearless actions, and they seem innovative like Rika in *Tokyo Love Story*. She is Americanized in her character and behaviors, and very open-minded in her attitude toward sex. This is another example of giving catharsis to a morally oppressed audience because women are usually forced to be polite and modest in Japanese society.

Concerning the audience, the three dramas are considered to be targeted for:

- Tokyo Love Story* – young adults
 mainly women
- Winter Sonata* – middle-aged women
- Meteor Garden* – very young women
 as teenagers

The atmosphere of the age when each generation was brought up seems to be quite different. Middle-aged women have experienced “Great Development Period” making great efforts to overcome difficulties, therefore, in a sense they are used to tackle hardship. For them adversity seems challenging, even though they sometimes look fateful.

For young women in the nineties it is a matter of great importance to find a way to reach accommodation between career and marriage. After the World War II equal rights and opportunities for both men and women have been promoted at least in school based on the Constitution. Therefore, Rika’s hardship has

represented the contemporary problem which young women should face in real life.

However, much younger generation who were born in the days of plenty, tend to look for easier ways in a Cinderella story. Good-looking young men from wealthy families are unquestionably well qualified to be a good husband, even if they do not behave well using their power to other people abusively. The drama’s popularity might reveal the fact that the society has created the big differences of property among its members, and it seems difficult to go over the difference except by a marriage like Cinderella. Or it means that the younger generation came to give priority to wealth under the influence of commercialism. These discussions should be proved by making questionnaires to each audience as the next step.

By viewing these dramas the audience could enjoy cultural similarities and differences of each country in the “diasporic public sphere.” Nevertheless, as mentioned above, there is always some kind of tension between cultural homogenization and heterogenization.

According to Oh (2006), Chinese younger generation who were born after the eighties show quite ambivalent attitudes to politics, even though they are used to popular culture and cultural products. He surveyed the opinions of 730 Chinese graduates and undergraduates in Beijing, Nanjing, and Choushun. Sixty-three per cent of them feel familiar to Japanese manga and animation and sixty-eight per cent want to go to Japan if they have a chance. However, fifty-three per cent think Japanese people are not reliable, and thirty-nine per cent of them are not willing to go closer to them.

A part of the survey by Oh, March, 2006

63%	feel familiar to Japanese manga and animaion
68%	want to go to Japan
53%	think Japanese are unreliable
39%	feel difficult to be friendly to Japanese

(Out of 730 Chinese graduates and undergraduates)

Thus, even though Chinese younger generation has been consuming the same kind of popular culture, it is difficult to assume that they might sympathize with Japanese because of it.

Between cultures, it is said that there are ambivalent feelings including enmity and longing. Oh said that anti-Japan history education has been least popular among students, therefore, the factors outside the classroom are more influential. At least we can say that enthusiastic movement of nationalism does not have enough power to stop active cultural interaction which is now in progress in East Asia.

8. Conclusion

Using highly advanced technology, Asian cultural interaction through media has become very active since the latter half of the 1990s. While Japanese popular culture attracts mainly young people's attention, the Korean drama boom started among Japanese middle-aged women. People are more and more interested in Asian cultures including their own.

As Japanese culture such as manga, TV dramas, and movies are getting more popular, a fear is looming up that it might become too influential and finally control other countries' culture. However, to gain popularity and to have cultural hegemony in Asia seems quite different because the process of identification through viewing dramas involves two different elements; longing for its ideal and hostility toward it.

At least, it is certain that developing media environment changes users' behaviors and psychology. In a "diasporic public sphere" young people are looking for identification by consuming stories in popular culture. It would be a new direction in research to illuminate the dynamic processes called "glocalization," "cultural hybridism," by doing further case studies. As the educational function which literature used to have is transmitting from written texts to popular culture, its effects would be another important theme.

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