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The Impacts of Japanese Television Programs : Worldwide “Oshin Phenomena”

by Kazuo TAKAHASHI*

Introduction

On October 26th, 1993, an Egyptian Newspaper reported a story about an Egyptian family whose new-born baby was named “Oshin.” Japanese newspapers and magazines also carried this news. Several years after this Japanese TV program (series), was broadcast in Japan, the stories and impressions it created became popular among the Japanese people once again.

Another memorable episode about the series reported in the foreign media came in 1988 in Iran. One Iranian radio program aired interviews with the people on the street, who were asked to name a woman who they thought was the most symbolic of the Islamic woman. An expected answer to that question was, of course, “Fatima”, the name of the Prophet Mohammed’s daughter. However, one person uttered “Oshin” as “the most typical Arab woman,” and this sent a shockwave across Iran.

The day after the program went on the air in Iran, the Ayatollah Khomeini (supreme leader for the nation), sent a letter to the Iranian Broadcasting Station (IRIB) saying that those involved in the broadcast should be punished and banished from their office. The Ayatollah was reported to have said, “If an intentional wish to insult the Islamic religion is proven, who should be put to death.” This led to the arrest of four people. To everyone’s relief, the Ayatollah later exonerated the accused. This incident created a stir over the world as soon as it was reported in the media. It was a rare incident in which a Japanese TV drama was the cause of a “trouble,” which worried some concerned people in Japan.

The TV series Oshin, which was at the center of this furor abroad, was aired in Japan by NHK (Nippon Hoso Kyokai or Japan Broadcasting Corporation) every morning for one year, starting in April, 1983. At one time, it achieved a maximum

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viewing rating of 62.9%, according to a public rating company. The name Oshin became synonymous with qualities such as “perseverance” and “patience,” which characterized the drama. Some people coined a new phrase “Oshin Yokozuna,” or Oshin, the Grand Sumo Champion.

When the airing of the drama Oshin was completed in Japan, it began a new life: overseas broadcasts starting in 1984. In September, 1984, the broadcast of Oshin began in Singapore, followed by other Asian countries like Thailand, China, Hong Kong, Macao, Malaysia and Indonesia. Eventually, the Oshin boom spread to still other countries. In August, 1992, a re-run of Oshin started in Indonesia. By June, 1995, the series had been aired in 44 countries.

No other Japanese TV drama has ever become popular enough to be re-run in foreign countries. This paper aims to analyze how Oshin was broadcast and viewed abroad. It further looks into the reasons for Oshin’s strong appeal to millions of viewers abroad, while comparing the results of studies which were conducted in Iran and Indonesia. Another purpose of this paper is to analyze the cause of the Oshin Boom, which sometimes escalated into the Oshin Phenomena.

Oshin Boom in Japan

The Table 1 “Countries where Oshin was Broadcast” shows that the series was first aired in Singapore in 1984. By June, 1995, the drama has been viewed in a total of 44 countries, inspiring millions of viewers. The program was shown mostly in Asia, and from there it gradually spread to Central and South America and Africa. Oshin was more readily embraced in developing countries, rather than in advanced industrial countries, and also in countries with a large population of Japanese ancestry. In some cases, Oshin was broadcast via state-run TV stations as part of their “national educational program.” The Oshin phenomena occurred more often in the countries where the media were under state control. In actuality, however, the eternal subjects this drama addresses, such as family, work and life appealed to viewers, Japanese and non-Japanese alike, transcending national, ethnic and cultural barriers, and traveled into those areas where the state power did not wield control.

Before going any further, it is important to see how the Oshin series was viewed in Japan and examine the original intentions of the writer who created the script. The script was written by Sugako Hashida. She had been fascinated by the old values which permeated the lives of women in her mother’s generation. These are

the values which modern Japanese have completely left behind in their quest for achieving fast economic growth. Ms. Hashida wanted to use images of the past to show the plight of women in previous times and then ask modern-day viewers if traditional values should be shoved aside so quickly in the name of development. How was the writer's message received by the audience? What were the ingredients in the drama which attracted such a large number of viewers?

Browsing through the mass media reports about the Oshin boom in Japan, the keywords one can find are adjectives such as "perseverant" or "resilient." The very realistic hardships suffered by Japanese women who were born during the Meiji and Taisho periods seem to have directly appealed to the audience. How did younger generation view the sudden, new Oshin Phenomena?

Originally, no one concerned with the production of the drama intended it to be educational, even though some say they wanted to convey the spirit of "learning from old wisdom." The drama triggered thoughts of how the older generation could and should convey to the younger generations the difficult times they went through. Viewers regarded Oshin to be a good opportunity to learn about bygone days by sharing the poverty and the rags-to-riches story of Japanese women.

The writer, Ms. Hashida, focused on the themes of the preservation of family lineage, working women, and the relationship between the bride (who marries into a family) and her mother-in-law (who is the woman of the house). The story of millions and millions of Japanese women who overcame or simply persevered through the physical and mental torments associated with the preservation of the family lineage had much to tell. The "great heritage from our mother" was the central element which struck home with Oshin viewers.

Table 1. Countries where Oshin was Broadcast

	Countries	Year	TV Stations	Episodes
1.	Japan	1983	NHK	297
2.	Singapore	1984	SBC (TCS)	297
3.	Thailand	1984	Ch.5	297
4.	U.S.A.	1984	L.A., S.F., N.Y.	297
5.	Australia	1984	SBC	297
6.	China	1985	CCTV	297
7.	Poland	1985	Polish TV	48
8.	Hong Kong	1985	HKTVB	297
9.	Macao	1985	TDM	48
10.	Brazil	1985	Sao Paulo	297

Countries	Year	TV Stations	Episodes
11. Belgium	1985	BRT	297
12. Canada	1985	Tronto, Vancouver	297
13. Malaysia	1986	TV3	297
14. Indonesia	1986	TVRI	297
15. Iran	1986	IRIB	297
16. Sri Lanka	1987	SLRC	297
17. Saudi Arabia	1987	SATV	297
18. Brunei	1988	RTV	297
19. Mexico	1988	Imevision	297
20. Qatar	1988	QTS	48
21. Bahrain	1989	Bahrain TV	48
22. Syria	1990	Syrian TV	48
23. Philippines	1990	Ch. 9	48
24. Dominican Republic	1990	RTD	297
25. Bangladesh	1990	BTV	297
26. Peru	1990	RTP	297
27. Pakistan	1991	PTV	48
28. Bolivia	1991	Ch. 9	297
29. Panama	1991	Ch. 11	297
30. Nepal	1992	Nepal TV	297
31. Guatemala	1992	Ch. 3	297
32. Nicaragua	1992	SNTV	297
33. Egypt	1992	Egypt TV	297
34. India	1992	DDI	96
35. Romania	1993	TVR	48
36. Chile	1993	Ch. 9	297
37. Uruguay	1993	Ch. 4	297
38. Jamaica	1993	JBC	297
39. Ghana	1993	GBC	297
40. Honduras	1993	Ch. 5	297
41. Cuba	1993	ICRT	297
42. Vietnam	1993	VTV	297
43. Taiwan	1994	China TV	297
44. Myanmar	1995	MBS	96
45. Costa Rica	1995	Ch. 2	96
46. Paraguay	1995	SNT	297
47. Cambodia	1995	TVK	297
48. Laos	1996	RTNL	297
49. Mongolia	1996	MRTV	297
50. Sudan	1996	SNBC	297
51. Turkey	1996	KANAL 7	297
52. Bulgaria	1996	BNT	96

Source : NHK International, Inc., December 1997

From a boom to a phenomenon

The scriptwriter, Ms. Hashida, never imagined that these subjects, some of which were regarded as being typically Japanese, would be understood in so many foreign countries. She was not aware that many foreign residents in Japan were watching the drama and were being deeply impressed when an Oshin boom was in the offing in Japan. They were mostly foreign businessmen and the members of the diplomatic corps. They watched Oshin, talked about it, and some of them, upon returning home, wanted to show the drama to their fellow countrymen. It was in Singapore that Oshin was first broadcast outside of Japan. Let us now see how this all came into reality.

Singapore

The ambassador from Singapore to Japan in 1983 was one of the foreign diplomats who watched Oshin on TV and later became an avid fan. Before he left Japan at the expiration of his diplomatic mission, he paid a courtesy visit to NHK. He had been given a new assignment to become chairman of the Steering Committee of the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC). During his visit to NHK, he asked if Oshin could be broadcast in Singapore. Positive steps were taken following this request. The selected parts featuring a young and later adolescent Oshin were revised and a sponsor was located by a Japan-affiliated ad agency in Singapore. The dialog was dubbed into Chinese and the broadcast began in September, 1984.

Oshin was an instant hit, and eventually, all 297 episodes went on the air. The Oshin boom in Singapore, which immediately followed the broadcasts, was reported by the media to all parts of the world. The airing began in Thailand in November, 1984, followed by China in March, 1985. A fire has been set.

Thailand

Thailand's recorded staggering world trade deficit of 380 million Bhats in 1993, 60% of which was accounted for by imports from Japan. It led to a very strong anti-Japanese sentiment. However, one Japanese businessman dared to embark on a mission: to broadcast a Japanese TV program in Thailand over Thailand's broadcasting system. He represented an advertising agency affiliated to Japan. As soon as the popularity of Oshin broadcasts in Singapore had been reported, he immediately thought a similar response would occur in Thailand. The northeast-

ern part of Thailand, suffering from underdeveloped agricultural technology and repeated natural disasters, had a large number of impoverished farmers. Just like Oshin, the main female character of the drama, many local farmers had to send their young female children to cities to find work and support the family. Another group to which the drama appealed was a large number of Chinese immigrants and their descendants in Thailand, who had achieved economic success in one generation. Many of these people identified themselves with "the success story," another ingredient which characterized the drama.

Thailand's Channel 5 showed interest and offered the program an airing, but under severe conditions: the advertising agency which first promoted the idea of Oshin airing had to undertake the spot ads, and absorb the entire sponsoring fees if no program sponsor was to be found. Channel 5 agreed to broadcast the Oshin series for 30 minutes every night between 9:20 and 9:50, Monday through Thursday, starting in November, 1984. The dialog was dubbed into Thai and the entire 297 episodes were aired.

Oshin proved to be instantly successful, exceeding in popularity the already widely-viewed Japanese animated cartoons such as *Doraemon* and *Ikkyusan*. The anti-Japanese sentiment quickly dissipated in Thailand with the rapidly spreading popularity of the Oshin TV series.

China

At the beginning of the 1980s, China started broadcasting Japanese movies such as "The Red Suspicion (Akai Giwaku)," starring Momoe Yamaguchi, then a very popular young Japanese singer/actress. Interest in Japanese movies grew. In 1983, General Secretary of Communist Party of China saw a video tape of Oshin during his visit to Japan. He later contributed to the forming of a project to air Oshin in China. With help from the Japan Foundation, new broadcast tapes were readied, and a Japanese home electric manufacturer offered to sponsor the broadcast. Oshin was aired under the new Chinese title of "Ashin" starting in March, 1985. The Chinese Broadcasting station served as the key station, which broadcast Ashin over the 27 stations in its network. The *Young and Adolescence* of the series as well as the *First Love* were dubbed into Chinese, and re-edited into 90-minute installments. The program was aired 8 times (or for 2 months) on Sunday evenings at 8.

Although TV viewing rating is not commonly measured in China, the TV

Station estimates that the average viewing rate in Beijing to have been 75.9%, while the maximum rating of 89.9% was also recorded. It was reported that the average nationwide rating was 63.4%.

Ashin was viewed far and wide, and somebody was reported to have said, "When Ashin starts, people disappear from city streets." In August of the following year (1986), the airing of the sequels was decided, and all 297 episodes eventually went on the air. According to the TV Station's analysis, about 200 million people all over China viewed the Ashin series, with the viewers ranging widely in age, occupation and sex, but predominantly women and elderly people.

Belgium and Holland

In Belgium, the Belgian TV Station (BRT) aired all of the 297 episodes on Channel 2 between March, 1986 and October, 1988. The dialog was in Japanese, but subtitles appeared in Frisian. Since this language is closely related to Dutch, BRT's Channel 2 aired via cable television was also viewed and enjoyed by the people living in Holland. It was reported that the viewing ratings were 8.1% in Belgium in 1986, 14.4% in 1987, and 17.7% in 1988. The rating increased each year. A 1% viewing rating is equivalent to 50,000 viewers aged 12 years or older. Since cable TV is not very widely available in Holland, the average viewing rating of Oshin was 0.6%. A 1% rate in Holland is equivalent to about 130,000 people. The viewers in both Belgium and Holland were mostly elderly women, those aged 55 or over.

Peru

In Peru, after First name Fujimori, who is of Japanese descent, was inaugurated as President, the 48 installments of the Oshin series were aired beginning in January, 1991. These were the parts in which the character of child Oshin, thus far played by First name Kobayashi, was replaced by the adolescent Oshin, portrayed by First name Tanaka. At the end of this series, Oshin made up her mind to go up to Tokyo to try her fortune.

"Hard work" was the political slogan of the Fujimori Administration, which was trying hard to salvage the economy under a tight economic grip. Oshin's central theme of repeated hardships suffered by a girl born into a poor peasant family and her eventual success in business were just the right ingredients for Peru. The TV drama's popularity was used by the government for promoting their

political goal. The Peruvian Broadcasting Corporation, which was the key station, determined that the Oshin series had to be viewed as an educational opportunity, and even issued a comment that the government expected the philosophy of perseverance and hard work to permeate far and wide among its people.

Since no accurate viewer ratings or response was measured in Peru, it is difficult to judge whether their governmental policy was achieved or whether Oshin's success story really struck home with Peruvian viewers. However, the Oshin boom soon caught on. The viewers wanted TV stations to carry other installments and eventually, all the remaining episodes were aired.

The United States

Oshin was broadcast in the U.S. over the Japanese-language TV station (UTB) and its affiliated stations covering four areas in the United States: Los Angeles, Hawaii, New York and San Francisco. In Los Angeles, Oshin broadcasts began on October 2, 1983 over the UTB-LA station. At the beginning, the program was aired as once-a-week 30-minute episodes, but starting in 1984, it was aired as 15-minute installments between 7:15am and 7:30am. In Hawaii, the KIKU Station started Oshin broadcasts on October 29, 1983 as 30-minute episodes every Saturday. The broadcast began on November 26, 1983 in New York with 30-minute installments every Saturday night at 10. In San Francisco, the broadcast began in January, 1984, airing 30-minute installments every Sunday at 11am.

This paper reported that the first overseas broadcasting of Oshin began in 1984 in Singapore, since this program was aired with the original dialog in Japanese in the United States. Because of the Japanese dialog, viewers were mostly limited to Japanese-Americans or Japanese residents in the U.S. The airing in the United States, therefore, was not considered the first broadcast of Oshin abroad, since the dialog was not translated into the local dialog and since the majority of the audience was non-Japanese.

As has been seen, a boom in one country spread to other countries until there was an Oshin Phenomenon on an international scale.

Two International-scale Researches on Oshin

We have seen how the Oshin Boom developed into a phenomenon. Let us now look at the actual viewer ratings of this program and viewer responses based on the results of two international research efforts.

Research Conducted in Iran

The survey in Iran was conducted by Prof. Hamid Mowlana of the American University (Washington, D.C., U.S.A.) and Prof. Mehdi Mohsenian Rad of the Imam-Sadegh University (Teheran, Iran). The title of their survey is "Japanese Programs on Iranian TV - A Study in the International Flow of Information -"

The study was conducted in 1989 in Teheran as well as in 16 local cities by interviewing 500 people from 184 families. Oshin was broadcast in Iran with the Iranian Broadcasting Station (IRIB) acting as the key station, and was aired on Channel 2 starting in November, 1987. All of the 297 episodes were dubbed into Persian. The ratings survey conducted by IRIB showed that they were 82% and 79% in the two quarters of 1988, which were the highest ratings ever recorded in this country. Another independent survey showed that about 67% of Iranian people watched Oshin.

Let us now summarize the actual development of Oshin airing and viewing, based on the results of the study. The researchers had set up four hypotheses.

First, the researchers wanted to answer their question : what part of the program attracted the viewers so much? The study reports that the viewers were more attracted to the stories than to the country which produced them. Many viewers had responded that they were attracted to the very human nature of the characters, and especially that of the main character.

Secondly, some researchers pointed out that the national and social backgrounds in Iran at the time of survey taking were similar to Japan at the time of her development into a modern society. When the broadcasts began, Iran was suffering from economic difficulties and material shortages as a result of the Iran-Iraq War. Many viewers identified their plight with Oshin's hardships.

Thirdly, one of the central themes which underlay the Oshin episodes was the concept of the family and the home. The researchers concluded that there were similarities between Iran and Japan in their understanding of the family and the home, and concluded that this similarity made Oshin readily acceptable to Iranian viewers. For example, the names of the main characters were similar to Iranian names so that the viewers were able to recognize them easily, as well as the relationships between them.

Fourthly, the researchers point out that while the very high ratings indicate the popularity of the Oshin series, it is also important to note the fact that only a few programs were broadcast in Iran so that viewers did not have much choice in

selecting what to see on TV.

In addition to reaching the above conclusions, the researchers also analyzed their viewers by categorizing them according to their basic attributes. For example, women showed greater interest in the ideas conveyed by the program than men, regardless of their age, academic background and occupation. The researchers concluded that *Oshin* was a story which appealed directly to Iranian women.

Research Conducted in Indonesia

The study in Indonesia was conducted by the writer in September, 1990. The survey was taken in the seven cities of Jakarta, Palembang (Sumatra), Yogyakarta (Java), Surabaya (Java), Ujungpandang (Sulawesi), Manado (Sulawesi) and Denpasar (Bali) using the questionnaire. Survey responses were collected from 164 men and women who were 20 years old or older.

Oshin was broadcast in Indonesia between November, 1986 and 1989 over the Indonesian National TV station (Televisi Republik Indonesia or TVRI). There was a national broadcast. They aired the English version with superimposed dialog in Indonesian. Each episode was aired as a 30-minute installment. As described at the very beginning of this paper, *Oshin* was dubbed into Indonesian and re-broadcast in August, 1992 over the Indonesian Educational Broadcasting Corporation (Televisi Pendidikan Indonesia or TPI). Since no media surveys or ratings surveys are conducted in Indonesia, accurate data regarding the availability of TV and viewer ratings are not available.

The suggestions obtained by the Indonesia research can be summarized as follows. The main attraction of the *Oshin* series is the life of perseverance repeatedly shown by the main character, in the face of all the kinds of hardships with which she deals. Women viewers, especially, were reported to be tearful when they were watching *Oshin*. In terms of family and the home, the traditional Japanese concepts and those existing in Indonesia were similar, and this seems to be one of the reasons why the viewers so readily identified themselves with the characters..

Next, when one analyzes the actual *Oshin* Boom that developed in Indonesia, one notices that it offered topics for discussion such as education at home. *Oshin* played a role in showing the hardships suffered by the parents' generation to the younger generation. Moreover, many women viewers identified the potential for growth in their country with the history of modernization of Japan, especially, in the lives of the many woman who lived through these changing times and gained

eventual success.

The "legacy of our mothers" which the original scriptwriter wanted to convey to her viewers is very dramatically represented in the Oshin episodes. In addition to having an excellent script and fine production, Oshin was viewed by many Indonesians who shared the same values. This proves how internationally appealing the program was. Oshin was produced to be a series of stories which unfolded slowly, and therefore, was not difficult for peoples of different cultures to follow. This is another reason why Oshin could leap over national and cultural borders.

In the research, respondents were asked to write how their impressions of Japan changed, if at all, before and after viewing Oshin. They were asked to write their comments freely. Some of the interesting responses are listed below.

1) (Before viewing Oshin) It is a historical fact that Japanese people are cruel and inhumane. The people of Indonesia suffered under Japan's rule for three and a half years.

--> (After the viewing) As far as Oshin is concerned, Japanese people are hard-working and law-abiding.

2) Japanese people seemed to show no interest in each other, and it was felt that they were not sympathetic to other people.

--> Actually, Japanese people, especially women, were obedient and loyal to their parents and husbands.

3) Japanese are considered as egotistic, ill at ease, and are not patient.

--> Some Japanese are patient and hard-working.

4) Japanese are sadistic, retaining many bad habits and customs. Japanese people had no manners.

--> Actually, their culture is good and so different from Indonesia's own.

5) I only imagined what it was like to live in Japan.

--> Japan is an advanced country in terms of industry and economy, which I have learned while watching this program.

The responses quoted above are only a part of the data obtained in the research. They clearly show that their impressions of Japan and the Japanese changed by viewing Oshin. The potential power of the media is quite apparent here.

Visual Media and International Cultural Exchange

As shown by the way Oshin was broadcast in many foreign countries and by the results of the two international research studies, the Oshin Boom developed into the

Oshin Phenomenon, impressing many women viewers through the broadcast. There is a tendency that this phenomenon will further spread to other countries. It has already reached Central and South America and Africa and the phenomenon still has much to show us.

The research in Indonesia suggests that an image a certain people have about another people can be changed. By using the conception of "pseudo-environment" by actively promoting the airing of Japanese broadcast programs abroad, it is possible can create an environment, actually it is just pseudo-environment, which can foster understanding about Japan.

The "real environment" which one can actually feel and experience is, in reality, quite limited, and can be located remotely. However, the artificial environments created by the mass media, in other words, the pseudo-environment forces us to adopt to them. For example, when we leave home in the morning, we debate whether we should take an umbrella along. We look up at the sky for judgment, but also use the weather forecast relayed by TV or the radio. So, even when the sky is clear and blue, we take our umbrella along when rain is forecast for the day. It means that we read from our pseudo-environment the information that is meaningful to us and imagine a new environment. This imagined image is known as "environmental image." There are as many environmental images as the number of people living on earth. The middle-age and elderly populations in Japan once watched U.S. made TV home dramas and Hollywood movies to catch a glimpse of American society through their homes, schools and workplaces. The "American image" thus portrayed is what is called the "environmental image" here.

By offering Japanese programs abroad, we let people of different cultures read from them some significant meaning which is used to formulate an environmental image. Thus, a communication process is completed.

In the satellite broadcast age of today, we have to live with many channels to choose from with a shortage of software relayed by them. Star TV, which started broadcasting in Hong Kong in 1991, triggered BBC, CNN and the three major U. S. networks to develop their borderless broadcasts in Asia, centered around Singapore.

Faced with this new age of television, it is desirable that cultural exchange and international exchange be promoted by offering visual software. However, this exchange should be promoted without triggering "cultural invasion." Fortunately, in the nations where the Oshin Phenomena developed, the Japanese TV program

was taken favorably, without ever being viewed as a cultural invasion. In the future, there is much to be expected that actual exchange be promoted between Japan and the countries which accepted Oshin so readily. In addition, the organizations which promote the exchange of visual images are expected to further friendly exchange with North America and European countries as well as other places where the Oshin Phenomenon has not occurred.

One thing that should be kept in mind is that international cultural exchange through the visual images goes both ways. The Japanese people should not be ignorant of the products of the visual media which other countries have. Keeping in mind a "well-balanced flow of information," policy makers should maintain it is desirable that a good order be maintained in the flow of information, without tipping heavily to selected countries. If the image media keeps flowing from "information advanced" societies to the less developed countries, the offering of the images would merely be termed as the "international direct flow of information" without achieving international exchange.

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