

Prepared for the IIPS Symposium on

Upcoming Changes in Japanese Society and the Future Shape of the Nation

Wednesday , 7 December 2005
Tokyo

Session 3

Cultural Reverberations—A Culture That Transcends Borders and a Deeper Mutual Understanding

Wang Min
Professor, Center of International–Japan Studies
Hosei University

Cultural Reverberations—A Culture That Transcends Borders and a Deeper Mutual Understanding

Wang Min
Professor, Center of International–Japan Studies
Hosei University

1. What We Would Like to Discover and What We Have Seen So Far

On 21 March 2005, in a town at the foot of China’s famous Yellow Mountain, the author happened to meet a university student named Zhang Weiwei. Zhang was a third-year student at a local private university, the Sanlien Vocational and Technical Institute, and related that she was currently studying Japanese. She described how she was motivated to do so after watching soccer’s Asian Cup, which took place in the summer of 2004. In Japan, the clamorous booing was reported and there was talk of an “outpouring of anti-Japanese sentiment”; for Ms. Zhang, however, it marked the start of her fascination with Japan. Watching on television, she marveled at the skill and teamwork displayed by the Japanese team, which had become the top side in Asia. She described to the author how this had made her want to learn more about Japan and the Japanese, and to find out for herself how Japan (although a relatively small nation) had grown so strong.

As we talked, the author was reminded of an extract from “Clouds above the Hill” by Ryotaro Shiba.

Although Japan was never more than a small oriental country, its strenuous efforts to build a nation that could rival the nations of the West has yielded impressive results.

Despite the fact that Mr. Shiba and Ms. Zhang are of different nationalities and come from different backgrounds, they share the same impression—namely, that Japan is a model of modernization. This would seem to underscore just how successful this modernization has been.

In particular, Mr. Shiba represented Japan’s success at the cultural level. Ms. Zhang also undoubtedly wished to unearth the cultural differences between China and Japan. This trend is evident in China’s younger generation.

2. A Revolution in Japanese Culture (Popular Culture, Lifestyle, and Contemporary Culture)

Shortly after soccer’s Asian Cup concluded, the author participated in China’s Ninth Research Convention on Japanese Literature. This four-day event was staged at Xian Foreign Language University and commenced on 20 August 2004. With more than 800 students, the Japanese department is the largest in the faculty. Reputedly, all its graduates find employment. When asked their reasons for electing to major in Japanese, most of the students replied that they had a liking for Japanese culture, although a few did offer the more pragmatic response that the prospects of finding a job were good.

On the evening of the opening day of the convention, the assembled company of invited speakers (including the author) gathered at a Japanese restaurant in downtown Xian. The spacious interior was decked out with red Japanese lanterns that lent a surreal ambience to this bustling 800-square-meter restaurant. Employees clad in patterned kimono rushed to and fro. An elderly couple seated at the reserved table next to ours were effusing over the service: “The staff here are so attentive. Japanese service is just the best!” We were greeted by the head chef, 32-year-old Mr. Tsai, who told us that he had trained for two years at a famous hotel in Japan. “The most important thing that I learned in Japan was the ethos of service,” he related. The husband, who was tucking into his dinner, is the owner and a veteran of the war with Japan. “Eating Japanese food has nothing to do with politics. Politics is politics, and people are people. I want to enjoy my old age,” he said, echoing the pragmatism of the younger generation.

Gathered at the research convention were approximately 80 researchers in Japanese literature who had come from all over China. Almost all had studied in Japan, and eight of them had received doctorates from Japanese universities. A total of 49 presentations were given. Innovative research into the novels that won the Akutagawa Prize for the latter half of the 2003, “Kick Me” by Risa Wataya and “Snakes and Earrings” by Hitomi Kanehara, attracted particular attention.

Professor Lin Shao Hua of the Ocean University of China, who is renowned for his translation of the complete works of Haruki Murakami, introduced research into Murakami that has been conducted at Harvard University and used this as the basis for his assertion that the works of Murakami now occupy an important place in world post-modernist literature.

All the participants who delivered research presentations said that they were neither especially anti-Japanese nor pro-Japanese, adding that Japanese literature was outstanding and well worthy of an exalted position in the pantheon of world literature, and that continued research on Japanese literature was essential. They felt sure that intense and dispassionate research on Japan and Japanese literature is thriving.

3. A Cultural Revolution Inspired by Japanese Culture

As exposure to Japanese literature and culture in China increased, China broke free from the fetters of a dogmatic ideology in December 1978 and embarked on a path of reform and openness. As the emphasis of state policy shifted drastically from politics to the economy, the process of urbanization moved forward. Richer lifestyles, which had hitherto been shunned, made a comeback. Nowadays, 85.5% of city dwellers regard themselves as middle-class, according to a “Survey of the Chinese Middle Class” published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in September 2005. Japanese popular culture and the culture of the Japanese lifestyle, which has permeated every nook and cranny of everyday life, are indivisible from this phenomenon and have had a profound influence on the younger generation—that is, on Chinese aged up to 30. As they come to grips with traditional values at home and form links with the outside world, they are developing a hybrid culture.

Many Chinese who come into contact with Japanese culture are influenced by it. They can be classified as follows:

(1) Those who have discovered a universality possessed by people who are different from them. In 1963 “The Roof Tiles of Tempyo” by Yasushi Inoue was published in translation. Subsequently, this group developed an awareness of other people and of Japan. As well as depicting images of other people, this outstanding work also reflects a self-portrait of the reader. These people are aware that knowledge of Japan also confers a rudimentary knowledge of the wider world, and they simply perceive Japan as an intermediary that can provide a direct link to the wider world.

(2) The Japanese movie week in the latter half of the 1970s was a major factor in altering Japan’s image as a war-like nation. For example, the “Sachiko hairstyle” became highly fashionable.

An opportunity arose to rectify the fixed notions held by ordinary people. Not only the established image of Japan but also the awareness that an image of Japan exists were destined to be re-evaluated. Although the historical experiences of China and Japan are different, a genre known as “scarred literature,” influenced by post-war Japanese literature, came into being. “Proof of the Man” by Seiichi Morimura, a socially aware detective story, evokes the importance of humanity.

(3) Those who are drawn to the refinement of the Japanese lifestyle. These people are able to adopt “Japanese aesthetics,” which are characterized by an attention to detail that turns day-to-day life into a work of art. The well-to-do pose for souvenir photographs wearing kimono or yukata, and Japanese words and expressions such as those for “cute,” “popular,” “in a meeting,” “debut,” “karaoke,” and “bride” have passed into the Chinese language.

As well as Japanese sushi restaurants, noodle restaurants are all the rage in Shanghai and elsewhere. People love conveyor-belt noodles, a Chinese innovation modeled on conveyor-belt sushi. In Shenzhen a Japanese restaurant named Nakamori Meisai opened in the fall of 2004. The Chinese word “meisai” signifies renowned cuisine, but this is also a pun on the name of the famous Japanese singer and actress Akina Nakamori, which in Chinese would be pronounced identically with the restaurant’s name. With a floor area of 16,000 square meters, it is the largest Japanese restaurant in the world and can reputedly seat 1000 customers.

(4) People who are starting to learn about the wonders of Japanese culture. In the present climate of conflict and antagonism, this is probably the most desirable category. In February “The Chrysanthemum and the Sword” was released in translation by two publishers. Now it is apparently being published by four different companies.

4. The Hidden Possibilities of Japanese Culture

On 30 September 2004, the awards ceremony for the Ig Nobel Peace Prize was held at Harvard University in the USA. The winner of the award was Daisuke Inoue, from Nishinomiya in Hyogo Prefecture, the award citation reading, “for inventing karaoke, thereby providing an entirely new way for people to learn to tolerate each other.”

Two weeks after the award ceremony, the author participated in an international symposium entitled “Japanese Culture around the World—Friction and Harmony with the Culture of the Host Nation.” This event was staged at the Japanese Research Center of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing and lasted from 15 to 18 October. Leaders and specialists in the field of Japanese research gathered from Japan and eight other countries (including South Korea, the USA, France, Russia, India, and Vietnam) and conducted wide-ranging debates in Japanese. Research topics relating

to the enormous influence of Japanese culture included karaoke as well as anime and comic books.

Given this state of affairs, the following two points can be made.

First, different countries seem to share the same perception of the power of Japanese culture (or soft power). The unique position enjoyed by Japanese culture within the cultures of the world also means that it can exert a positive influence and smooth the way to better mutual understanding.

Second, it is difficult to ignore the role that is played by Japanese culture in international relations. Above all, with frequent political discord arising between Japan and China, as well as between other Asian nations, there is surely an urgent need to establish a shared culture that can serve as a basis for potential dialog.

Practical in-depth analysis is probably required of the love-hate ambivalence that is spreading among the general population and which complicates views of Japan. A probe that ties together specialist research across a wide range of fields ought naturally to lead to better mutual understanding between China and Japan.

For example, every year a Japanese speech contest for university freshmen is held in Beijing. This year the sponsors were said to be worrying about whether they would be able to stage the event, in light of the anti-Japanese demonstrations that had taken place. In fact, however, the number of universities registering to compete shot up to 20, a four-fold increase over the previous year. Today's younger generation in China seems to be embroiled in anxiety and turmoil occasioned by the gulf between the in-coming tide of foreign culture and goods, and the precepts of China's own culture and traditions.

There are approximately half a million Chinese living in Japan at present. The Chinese Review Weekly, a newspaper for Chinese residents of Japan, recently published a special edition featuring a round-table discussion on the anti-Japanese demonstrations. Flexibility was evident in the younger generation that spans the two cultures, all of whom pragmatically asserted that political problems and personal problems constitute separate issues.

Japanese culture is inherently capable of identifying and empathizing with foreign cultures. As well as embracing diverse values, it can also swiftly adapt to other distinct cultures. It is also capable of fostering openness as well as mutual understanding and intellectual expansion. It is up to Japan to improve the way in which it responds, in light of the research being done on Japan in a turbulent China.

After its defeat in the war, Japan engaged in a self-examination that led it to re-invent itself as a great cultural nation. At some point, however, it veered off this track and instead devoted its efforts to becoming an economic powerhouse. This was followed by the "lost decade," and Japan has still not regained sight of its essence. Now would seem to be just the right time for Japan to look outwards and broaden its horizons. The growing boom in Japanese culture seems to indicate the way to peace in an Asia that was once ravaged by war.