

Cultural Creation Is All in the Mix

As a center for cultural creation in East Asia, writes **Tamotsu Aoki**, commissioner of the Agency for Cultural Affairs, Japan should promote the acceptance of foreign cultural influence while maintaining cultural identity and develop “a great cultural base in the world.”

The principle feature of Japanese culture is that it is a mixed culture. A mixed culture means an orderly culture consisting of various factors that have become integrated. Japan has established its own culture from ancient times, having been affected by different cultures, from China and India. Japan’s ancient culture along with cultures from the Asian continent and modern Western Europe are the basic characteristics of contemporary Japanese culture.

Japanese people have created the contemporary Japanese culture by digesting and assimilating foreign cultures having characteristics completely different from those of Japanese culture into the framework of Japanese culture. For example, Japanese people

absorbed Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism from China and India in addition to Shinto, the indigenous religion of Japan, and in the meantime, introduced Chinese characters, political systems based on legal codes, city plans and so on. In the modernization process, Japan adopted techniques and political systems from Western Europe. One of the features of Japanese culture is that it incorporates different elements, instead of rejecting them, without losing what is unique to Japan. For example, modern Japanese people freely use four writing systems—Chinese characters, hiragana and katakana, which represent the Japanese syllabary, and Roman characters. An example like this is hardly found in any other culture.

Of course, countries other than Japan have been affected by foreign cultures, too. The indigenous, traditional cultures of Asian countries also have been influenced by great civilizations, based on Buddhism and Confucianism and modern Western European cultures. However, there are

hardly any examples where countries have mixed different cultures as successfully as Japan has done. In the upper echelons of society in former colonies, there are people who were truly internationalized and more westernized in terms of language and lifestyle than Japanese people. But in these countries, most people are not internationalized or westernized like that. It can be said that Japan is the only country in Asia where western cultures are shared by members of the public irrespective of class. In some countries, the traditional culture and foreign cultures do not fuse together, and there are very difficult religious conflicts and friction in some countries and regions.

Such conflict is a very serious problem in today’s globalized world. Unless a country has a culture that absorbs foreign cultures and combines them with its own culture, or if a country fails to create a stable mixed culture, the country itself is at risk of becoming culturally divided. Considering this issue, the Japanese mixed culture can be a cultural model in the globalizing world.

Characteristics of Japanese Culture

It is paradoxical, but the Japanese



TEISUO SAKUMA

Japan needs to explain that the contemporary Japanese culture that is attracting attention around the world is not a phenomenon or fashion that is suddenly emerging. Instead, Japanese culture is a mixed culture that always accepts the influences of foreign culture.

—Tamotsu Aoki

mixed culture was formed in the Edo period (1603–1867), when Japan was isolated from other nations. In fact, Japan did not completely close its doors to the outside world, and there was some cultural exchange. In any case, the entire country cultivated a mixed culture in the period of national isolation.

Japanese culture flowered based on foreign cultures, including Chinese culture, in the Heian period (794–1185). In this period, Japanese poems called *waka* and stories written mainly in the imperial court laid the foundation for Japanese culture and the characteristics of Japanese culture. The base of common knowledge and cultural accomplishments of the period was Chinese culture and classics. In the Edo period, warriors who dominated other social classes developed their own ethics and morals, which generated unique common knowledge and cultural accomplishments. The knowledge and accomplishments were rooted in the ground prepared in the Heian period but were different from Chinese culture and classics. In short, different factors blended to form Japan's own culture in this era. Japanese culture created an imperturbable identity when it absorbed foreign cultures afterward. After the period of isolation, when Western cultures and technologies entered the country, Japan accepted them and blended them with its own culture without losing what was unique to Japan.

Against this backdrop of having formed a mixed culture, there is a characteristic of the Japanese that they are not bound by principles. There is hardly any fundamentalism in Japan. Vagueness and ambiguity in its cultural consciousness can be said to be characteristic of Japan. When the Japanese come in contact with different cultures, they leave room for compromise, respect vagueness near borderlines, and enable different cultures to co-exist instead of setting them against each other. The syncretization of Shinto with Buddhism is a symbolic example for this. This Japanese attitude may have both positive and negative aspects, but I believe it should be taken as a positive aspect for the future of our global society.

East Asian Cultural Sphere

An “East Asian contemporary cultural sphere” is now being formed, and Japan should play a role as the base for creating a new culture in East Asia.


I first visited Asia and Southeast Asia in 1965 when Japanese companies were making inroads there. Many leaders in the area were from the wealthy class or the aristocracy and educated in Europe or the United States. Society was completely divided into classes, and there were large disparities among the classes. The impression of Japan that people in Southeast Asia had was represented as war in the 1960s, economy in the 1970s, and culture thereafter. Particularly in the past ten to fifteen years, there has been a very strong interest in the new contemporary culture in Japan through animations, cartoons and so on. Behind the acceptance of contemporary Japanese culture in this area is the fact that corporate employees increased because Japanese companies made inroads into the area in the 1990s, and these people constituted the middle class in the urban regions. They liked Japanese animations, cartoons, pop music and fashion. These things were originally introduced to Japan via European and United States cultures and became Japanized in the Japanese mixed culture.

This trend then generated the Korean boom, with TV dramas made in Korea in particular becoming very popular. In the twenty-first century, present-day Japanese pop culture caught on as being “cool” and fashionable. Another boom followed in the shape of contemporary culture transmitted from China in various forms. *Red Cliff*, which was screened at the Tokyo International Film Festival in 2008, clearly exhibited this trend. This movie is an epic drama directed by John Woo, a film director from Hong Kong who is active in Hollywood. The film was completed thanks to the support of the capital, actors, and filmmaking technologies of Japan, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Korea. I was impressed by John Woo when he said with confidence before the premier screening that they had come to create a spectacle like this in East Asia that is comparable to Hollywood. The

movie symbolizes the existence of the East Asian Cultural Sphere. Now, the various cultural potentialities and methods being created and combining in the East Asian Cultural Sphere are becoming more prominent.

Japan is an East Asian country that completely ensures freedom of thought and expression. Now is the time that Japan, as a country with rich accumulated modern culture and science and technology, and as a base for creating culture and exchanging culture in East Asia, should develop a great cultural base in the world.

The base is founded on media art that is capturing attention around the world. Japan, which took the initiative in this field, needs to establish in Japan a platform that shows not only Japanese media art but also artworks produced in Asia and the world. Japan also needs to establish bases where artists will get together from Japan and abroad and create artworks. What is important is that Japan needs to explain that the contemporary Japanese culture that is attracting attention around the world is not a phenomenon or fashion that is suddenly emerging. Instead, Japanese culture is a mixed culture, one that always accepts the influences of foreign culture. At the same time, through the base, Japan should demonstrate its unique experience of building contemporary culture by mixing today's culture even with its own traditional culture. For example, contemporary Japanese cartoons have developed from picture scrolls in medieval times and ukiyo-e woodblock prints in the Edo period, one of the features of which is that words are attached to pictures. In this way ukiyo-e could communicate their message.

As there is the Louvre Museum in Paris and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, there should also be a notable cultural venue called the Media Art Center in Japan. It must become a center recognized both in Asia and around the world, a place that men and women, young and old, would eagerly hope to visit. I believe that establishing such a cultural center in Japan is Japan's cultural responsibility. 

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