

Japan's Openness: Multilayered & Flexible

By Naofumi KANEKO

The West seems to believe that Japan is a culturally secluded country. Is that true? There is no question that the West and East have some gaps between their cultures. In my observation, however, over 140 years after the “Quit Asia, Join Europe” drive in the Meiji era (1868-1912), and 65 years after the end of the last war, Japan appears to have had a rich experience with foreign culture, thus obtaining a kind of openness to the outside world that can be best described as multilayered and flexible. Let me elaborate on what I mean by looking at two recent incidents. I will talk about the controversial American documentary film “*The Cove*” and issues surrounding its release in Japan as well as the prestigious Akutagawa Prize, the top award in contemporary Japanese literature.

“*The Cove*” is a movie taken with spy cameras and other sneak methods on the fishing of dolphins traditionally performed in Taiji, Wakayama Prefecture, in western Japan. Ric O’Barry, a dolphin conservation activist who appeared in the movie, gave an interview to a colleague of mine during his visit to Japan in June 2010, saying to the effect that dolphin killing is so cruel that somebody ought to stand up against it. The movie climaxes with fishermen herding dolphins into a cove and spearing them with sticks, causing the seawater to turn red with the dolphins’ blood. The movie shows an agent entrusted with a special mission revealing the secrets of an exclusive fishery village in much the same way as a Hollywood suspense movie does. The movie captivated audiences, winning the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature in March 2010. In Japan, however, rightwing groups moved to block screenings of the movie, branding it as anti-Japanese content that stamped on the nation’s food culture and forcing some theaters to give up on planned screenings.

This, however, prompted local movie producers, writers and other expressionist organizations to raise their voices, calling for the screenings to go ahead, a move that resulted in its showings at six theatres across Japan in July 2010. Their claim may be worded into a call for the protection of freedom of expression. What they really had on mind, however, must have been the feeling – a straightforward and very healthy one – that they wanted to see for themselves what was depicted how and that they had to see it before they said anything about it.

So, how did they feel? “It may be an American sense of justice or pro-dolphin evangelism,” said director Kazuo Hara, known for his movie pointing the finger at Japan’s imperial system. “The movie employed a method consisting of video images most suitable for condemning the evil.” He lost no time to point out the technique of “superb dramatization” at the same time. By “pro-dolphin evangelism,” Hara probably meant to say that Western people



A spectator walks to the entrance of a movie theater as scores of reporters gather to cover developments on the first day of screening of the controversial film “*The Cove*.”

had a nearly religious dogma that dolphins are a mammal species close to humankind and surpassing other animals. There is a world of difference between such a Western dogma and the Asian dogma that all beings – humans and wildlife, including trees and weed – are created equal, hard to give them any relative merits. That explains the 400-year-old religious rite performed in Taiji in appreciation of “receiving life” from cetaceans. I am not talking about one dogma being superior to the other, however. What I am talking about is the Japanese culture with a “flexible openness” that absorbs all differences.

Let’s turn to the other topic. Akiko Akazome won the coveted Akutagawa Prize in July for her novel “*The Anonymous Tip of a Virgin*,” set at a foreign-language college in Kyoto. The motif of the novel is “*The Diary of Anne Frank*.” Anne is remembered as an adorable red rose broken under the Nazi regime, but Akazome puts her in an entirely different light. The author puts a woman’s soul-searching among “maidens,” a homogeneous group of girls at college, together with Anne whose identity as a Jew is split under Nazi persecution. In the novel, Anne is not a historical fact but an important clue to soul-searching. There may be pros and cons of doing so. Many may not like Anne being grafted onto a soft, soul-searching story. Think twice, however. The novel may have a sort of “flexibility” hidden in it, one that goes beyond such a mundane judgment. Doesn’t it show that Anne’s story is no longer a tale of a foreign land from a distant past but has penetrated deep into Japanese culture?

Dolphin activist O’Barry was quoted as saying that the movie loomed large as *gaiatsu* (foreign pressure) against Japan. This seems to be a somewhat naive observation to me, however. Japanese culture may be much better than that – more flexible and mature. Japan no longer considers the impact of foreign culture as *gaiatsu*, not becoming withdrawn in its shell. Nor does Japan accept foreign culture at random and give up on its own culture. Japan, it seems to me, is beginning to see a healthy, multi-cultural society take root in it, grappling squarely with foreign culture, incorporating it into itself, digesting it well, and eventually making it its own.

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