

Hard Times for Soft Power in Asia



Author Roland Kelts

By Roland Kelts

Three days after former Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiro Noda announced that his administration had purchased the disputed Senkaku/Daiyou Islands, municipal authorities in Beijing ordered a prohibition of Japanese imports – not of cars or electronics, but of books. Chinese publishers were asked not to release books by Japanese authors and those related to Japan by authors of any nationality, and also to cancel cross-cultural promotional events.

The economic damage to the automotive and manufacturing sectors stemming from Japan's territorial disputes with Asian neighbors China, South Korea and Taiwan has been widely analyzed and measured for months, with some pointing to Japanese makers losing out on sales and others noting losses to Chinese workers employed by Japanese firms. News reports here in Japan repeat the meme of Japanese corporations fleeing China for the more stable environs of nearby Southeast Asian nations.

With China undergoing its biggest leadership transition in 40 years, the impact on the region's cultural markets, its so-called "soft power" interchange of ideas, entertainment and imagery, is both harder to quantify and, potentially, more meaningful and deeply felt.

"When political disputes with other countries arise, the entertainment business is always one of the first industries to feel the negative effects," said Yuji Nunokawa, founder and former president of anime studio Pierrot, producer of such global mega-hits as *Naruto* and *Bleach*, and chairman of the Association of Japanese Animation. "The AJA was invited to a recent ceremony celebrating the 40th anniversary of the restoration of diplomatic relations between Japan and China, but it was rescinded at the last moment. We have been working on building trust and good relationships with China on a non-governmental level. It was all ruined very quickly when politics came into play.

"We also had a Chinese company interested in making a film based on one of our titles," he added, "but the discussions have come to a halt since the island dispute."

Stalled Engagements

The conflict between Japan and China has been the most visible and vociferous of the Asian arguments. International television broadcasts showed venomous protestors hurling bottles, eggs and other items at Japanese embassies in several Chinese cities. "Enough is enough," said one Chinese agitator on CCTV. "We're not going to take this from Japan anymore."

Samuel Pinansky, chief of the International Media Strategy Division of Yomiuri Television Enterprise in Tokyo and a former staffer of Tezuka Productions, Osamu Tezuka's posthumous company, says that the timing of Japan's latest rift with China is particularly troubling. After years of rampant piracy, he said, "Direct sales to China were just barely starting to happen in a serious way. Legal media licensing is still in its infancy in many respects, and this is a major setback, but there wasn't as much progress to reset as, for example, the automotive industry where Japan had made huge progress. Manga and animation from Japan were already highly restricted by the government before this flare-up."

The dustup is ongoing, Pinansky noted, and doesn't look to be restrained any time soon. Last year, the Tokyo International Film

Festival was notable for China's absence. Chinese films were pulled, and "the booth space usually reserved for their delegation was completely empty, and changed to an awkward 'meeting space'," added Pinansky. "I would also expect the Chinese area for this year's Tokyo Anime Fair to be gone, especially if [right-wing former Tokyo Governor] Shintaro Ishihara continues to be involved."

As usual, the filaments of cultural transactions are slippery. Books about Japan, and by Japanese authors, are not being shelved in China's cultural centers, but that doesn't mean they are outlawed.

"The ban on Japanese books in China was more of a direction than a command," said one Japanese publishing agent who specializes in transactions with China and, understandably, wants to remain anonymous. "There was never any document that could be traced or verified. But some publishing houses in Beijing said they got the news that the ban should be put into practice. Many national book stores won't sell books translated from Japanese, some publishing houses won't buy Japanese books' translation rights, and some won't publish translated books, or are delaying their release dates.

"The decision on whether to publish editions of Japanese books seems more dependent on the publishing houses' policies than the kinds of books in question. Even with bestsellers like Haruki

Murakami, they may remain loyal to the government,” she said.

Self-Restraint

The self-restraint on behalf of culture purveyors in the Asian region at odds with one another politically seems to be at the heart of the collateral damage. People working in Japanese media are “made aware” of a trend to ignore Chinese and Korean artists and themes. Chinese and Korean factions are quietly feeling the same pressures.

“It’s little spiteful stuff right now,” said Leo Lewis, Beijing bureau chief of *The Times*. “Performance cancellations, no Japanese books on the bookshelves, stuff like that. But if we’re having this conversation in three months’ time, it will become substantial.”

Lewis notes that the ardent consumers of culture in the Asian region are Internet savvy — even if the books and DVDs and broadcasts are not available officially, educated fans will find them online. China’s recent censorship activities bear him out. Twitter and Facebook are blocked, as are stories from media stalwarts like *The New York Times* if they run afoul of government sensitivities. But popular culture on domestic sites like *youku.com* is largely left alone.

The South Korean angle is more complicated. One veteran music journalist in Tokyo tells of stories of Japanese DJs being pressured to reduce South Korean stars on their playlists. Global sensation Psy’s “Gangnam Style” song and video have barely dented Japanese charts, and some theorize that it’s due to Japan’s national rejection of Korean soft power. The president of the Korean Wave Research Institute, Kan Hoo-Hyun, recently labeled Japan’s inability to embrace the hit “a primary school kid’s jealousy and envy.”

Envy aside — it’s clear that Korean pop music in Japan is not nearly as welcome as it was just a year ago.

“I’ve heard that spots to promote new singles by K-pop stars on the various song and variety shows have been canceled because the Japanese TV networks get complaints from viewers saying they don’t want to see Koreans on TV,” said a features editor at one of Japan’s major fashion magazines, based in New York. “It seems to be coinciding with a wane in the K-pop boom in general, so it’s really hard to say. Many star acts will remain, but I think it’s tougher for newer stars to break into the market.”

Pop music industry insiders tell the same story — the island dispute has cast a pall over Asian cultural exchange, motivated by top-down hierarchies.

“A lot of the South Korean media are blaming the drop in sales on the island issue,” one Japanese music producer said. “But the fact is sales were dropping before this happened. Still, there’s clearly a reaction to the disputes. It’s not like the United States, where Internet sales can make or break you. Here in Asia, you need TV to market your product. And if TV decides they won’t feature you, you don’t have a platform. That’s a big deal.”

Vague Disputes

The cultural effect of Japan’s territorial disputes with its Asian

Photo: Cain and Todd Benson's Art from <http://cainandtodbenson.com>



The current territorial dispute between Japan and China is partly the result of US dominance in Asia since World War II.

neighbors will remain vague — who knows why nationals like a song or video from another country, let alone why they might re-tweet it to thousands of followers? Still, the latest conflagrations between Asian nations provide a revealing keyhole view on how culture and politics become personal, and history is never far away.

“If I go to the countryside in China, I don’t have to look too far to find people over a certain age with vivid memories of being tortured by Japanese soldiers,” said Lewis. “They were held down while a vehicle rode over their stomachs, for example. And there’s no proper valve or outlet for that rage and humiliation.”

Perhaps the most depressing result of these island arguments is the multilateral costs they are exacting in an otherwise vibrant region. As in a playground brawl, indifferent players are being asked to take sides even when they don’t want to, and all are paying the price for it.

“The Taiwanese National Symphony Orchestra was set to play in Beijing,” added Lewis, “when three or four of the instrumentalists in the orchestra were identified by officials as Japanese: their visas weren’t approved. The concert will go on, but without three key musicians who have nothing to do with this pathetic political mess.”

The current argument is deeply cultural. For centuries, Japan, China and Korea have had radically different cultures, partly the result of age-old continent versus island nation conflicts, but also rooted in more local antagonisms. Japan’s failed attempt to create an Asian empire in the mid-20th century still stings throughout the Asian region. But there is plenty to be gained if all regional countries can align in the 21st century.

Curiously, one of the problems is local passion. A lot of outside viewers, like the US and Europe, think of Asia as a largely dispassionate region, but that’s a misreading of the people who live here. Asians tend to be intimately passionate, which reads as irrational in the West. Japan’s future is wedded to its ability to rationally partner with its Asian neighbors. As simple as that sounds to a Westerner, Japan is not keen to do this.

“As Professor Yabuki Susumu — one of a small group of academic dissidents — laments in his newest book on the Senkaku/Diaoyu crisis,” wrote Stephen Harner of *Forbes* magazine. “Japan’s government, political parties (even, bizarrely, the Japanese Communist Party), academy, and media have been as one in effectively suppressing popular dissemination within Japan of Chinese/Taiwanese claims and positions on the dispute.”

What to make of this? Many of my friends in Japan, professors and politicians alike, bemoan the current state of Japan’s relations with its rising neighbors. At the same time, there is a distinct lack of trust and respect for new contenders for commercial expansiveness.

“Why do we have to deal with China and South Korea,” asked one corporate managerial Japanese friend, “when they still think we are the enemy?”

New Horizons

The year 2013 will be a big one for all three countries. The excitement surrounding Asian pop music in the West is being tested by the failure of Asia to get along. For Americans and Europeans, the conflicts seem silly — why would anyone lose sleep over a few barren islands? But for Asians, the conflict hints at further fractures in the region’s sense of self-reliance.

“Abe is doing something special for Japan,” said Japanese envoy Yasuhira Kawamura over lunch in midtown New York. “He’s making it possible for Japan to be a peacemaker in Asia. That may be Japan’s future role for the region. Noda wanted to make that happen, but he couldn’t. Abe, as an old-school member of the LDP, may be the one who can do it.”

Several Chinese companies that withdrew from last year’s Tokyo International Film Festival and the Tokyo International Anime Festival were on hand this year, partly, they said, because former Tokyo Governor Ishihara was not presiding over the festivities.

Still, this is a minor concession to a major market. Many transcultural successes have been snubbed in both countries.

The “Gangnam style” pop culture phenomenon from South Korea was a massive hit everywhere except for Japan. This was partly because Japan is less about beats and more about melody, and “Gangnam Style” remains a US-centric pop hit. But it’s also a petty response to political tensions that threaten to split two Asian cultural powerhouses.

In a recent story for *The Atlantic*, Patrick St. Michel addressed the splintering nature of the Asian juggernaut. “The renewed tension comes at a time when the region’s balance of power is in flux,” St. Michel wrote. “Japan used to be top dog both politically and culturally; now, China’s a bigger player on the world stage and Korean entertainment draws more hype internationally. It also comes at a time of fierce competition for developing music markets in Asia. Southeast Asia has become a common tour stop for most of the big acts from all three East Asian nations, with Japanese pop act AKB48 going as far as to establish a sister group in Jakarta.

“Countries like Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines are

growing economically, and the East Asian music industry sees opportunities for more money beyond what domestic markets provide.”

Japan as Asian Arbiter

For most writers who cover Japanese pop culture, the future is bright. Japan, as the most developed and culturally sophisticated country in Asia, and perhaps in the world, has an inventory of superior content that needs to be promoted. There are no equal works of art coming from Asia on the scale of *Totoro* or *Grave of the Fireflies*, but that is not the whole story.

“Japan’s relationships with China and South Korea have long been strained, with many grievances stemming from World War II,” added St. Michel. “But entertainers from all three countries have long been welcomed across Asia. Japan, boasting the world’s second-largest music industry behind the United States, historically has held the most sway in the region.”

Japan is now dealing with aggression from its Asian neighbors, selling its unprecedented pop culture abroad, cinching its appeal at home. It’s a tricky tightrope walk.

“I don’t think this has simply been tactical diplomatic myth-making or myth-maintaining,” said Stephen Harner, a longtime Japan-watcher. “It has been something more visceral and ‘nationalist’ in the racial/human sense of the term ‘nations’ that creates naturalistic and essentially antagonistic feelings of ‘us’ versus ‘them.’”

“If I sound like I am getting back to the elemental discussion of Japanese national culture and psyche in Ruth Benedict’s *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, I suppose I am. And I will say that the same kind of national culture and psyche motivate much of what we see from China.”

Japan will persist in its dominance of popular culture for years. That much is obvious. But can Japan lure a Western audience, and Hollywood, before its Asian neighbors steal its thunder?

“Image plays a critical role in separating the two countries’ pop music,” added St. Michel. “A crass way of summing it up is this: K-pop stars out-sex their J-pop counterparts. The members of Girls’ Generation show a fair amount of skin in their music videos, while many fans were drawn to KARA by a chunk of choreography Wikipedia dubs ‘the butt dance’. Beyond straight-up sex appeal, K-pop groups look and act like real adults, whereas J-pop outfits often emphasize adolescent cuteness.”

South Korean and Chinese pop culture today is often a pale imitation of the West. But after 60 years of postwar development, Japanese pop culture remains unique. As a writer watching both, I can only ponder whether Japan will take advantage of its cultural inventory, or cede the stage to its burgeoning creatives next door.

JS

Roland Kelts is the author of Japanamerica: How Japanese Pop Culture Has Invaded the US (2007), a visiting scholar at the University of Tokyo and an editor of Monkey Business International, the English edition of the Japanese literary magazine. He is also a columnist for The Japan Times.