

An Interview with Chu Wen-Ching, Advisor & Director, Taipei Cultural Center,
Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in Japan

Valuable Cultural Exchanges with a Neighbor

By Japan SPOTLIGHT Editorial Section

The last issue highlighted Japanese soft power. Soft power is in particular important in consolidating close diplomatic relations with a neighboring country. In this issue *Japan SPOTLIGHT* highlights Taiwan and Taiwan-Japan cultural exchanges in an interview with a senior Taiwanese expert on culture, Chu Wen-Ching, advisor and director at the Taipei Cultural Center.

Q: How do you assess the current status of cultural exchanges between Taiwan and Japan?

Chu: We have a very close relationship in terms of trade and human exchanges. Our bilateral trade totaled \$62 billion last year and the number of tourists coming and going between us will soon reach 4 million. I have recently heard that there were a number of Taiwanese tourists who could not reserve air tickets to Japan to see the cherry blossoms in April this year because there were not enough vacancies. As this episode shows, human exchanges between us have recently been significantly increasing.

In Taiwan, we have a group of people practicing Japanese tea ceremony, traditional flower arrangement, traditional Japanese dances and swordsmanship. There are also people in Taiwan writing short Japanese poems such as *tanka* or *haiku*. A Taiwanese *haiku* group once published a book titled *Manyo-shu — Taiwan Version* and also there is a monument to a well-known Taiwanese *haiku* poet in Yamaguchi. There are many other examples that show traditional Japanese culture is loved by Taiwanese and still has an influence on people in Taiwan. Sumo is one such example. When a sumo tournament was organized in Taiwan in 2006, many people went to see it.

But we can also see that the Taiwanese love contemporary Japanese culture too. Among the foreign films corresponding to 80% of the 500 films shown in movie theaters all over Taiwan every year, there are on average 20 Japanese films. This is not a small number, assuming that each year 50-60 Taiwanese films are made, and its market share in the Taiwanese film market is around 10%. Japanese TV dramas like *Hanzawa Naoki* or *Amachan* are also very popular in Taiwan.



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Japanese NHK programs can always be seen in Taiwan, as Taiwanese Cable TV has a contract with NHK. Japanese folk singers like Sachiko Kobayashi, Shinichi Mori, Sayuri Ishikawa, and Hiroshi Itsuki are also very popular. Masaharu Fukuyama, another famous Japanese singer, was recently appointed by the Taiwanese Tourism Bureau as an ambassador of tourism for Taiwan and he is expected to volunteer to introduce in his Japanese radio program Taiwanese cuisine and culture to his audience.

Taiwanese rock group Mayday and Japanese pop-rock band flumpool are good friends, and often visit each other, while Taiwanese heavy metal band ChthoniC is invited to Japan every year to perform in big cities like Tokyo and Osaka.

Exchanges in the publishing business are also frequent. Taiwanese publishers come to Japan every year to the Tokyo Book Fair while Japanese publishers come to book

fairs in Taipei. The books of most well-known Japanese writers, like Haruki Murakami, Shusaku Endo, and Ryotaro Shiba, have been translated into Chinese and published in Taiwan, and our Culture Minister Lung Ying-tai's book has been translated into Japanese and published in Japan under the title *Taiwan Strait, 1949*. This book describes the misery of wars and how people remain affected by them long afterwards, just like the books written by Toyoko Yamazaki, a famous Japanese writer on war.

The best opera ensemble in Taiwan, Ming Hwa Yuan, came to Japan in 2012 to give a free performance in Tohoku, the area most seriously hit by the disaster in 2011, and the Lee Tsai-Er dance troupe, a renowned troupe of modern dancers from Taiwan, has also performed in Japan. This year is a remarkable one for films from Taiwan in Japan, with 11 Taiwanese films having been screened at the Osaka Asian Film

Festival in March. Among them is one titled *Kano* telling the story of a Taiwanese high school baseball team that joined a Japanese baseball tournament at Koshien ballpark during the Japanese occupation of Taiwan, and this movie seems to be very popular in Japan.

We are planning to hold an exhibition of calligraphy in Tokyo in April and to organize another exhibition of treasures from the Taipei National Palace Museum in June.

Also, a performance of a modern Taiwanese opera *The Firmiana Rain* will be organized in Yokohama in June. When it was performed in New York, it included participation by American actors, and this time in Japan it will be organized by Japanese and Taiwanese actors together.

So now you can see how our cultural exchanges have been getting closer and deeper.

Q: Korean TV dramas are as popular as Taiwanese ones here in Japan. The historical exchanges of culture between the three has been tight against the background of our common culture, which is Confucianism. Is the close cultural intercourse between us today a reflection of such a background?

Chu: There are many cultural commonalities between us and they are useful for our communication in business, for example. Korean dramas are very successful here in Japan. We have also tried to make TV dramas in collaboration with Japanese broadcasting companies or production firms. Last year, we made a drama about a love story set in Hokkaido with Japanese actors and Taiwanese actors titled *White Love*. This was very well received in Taiwan partly because Hokkaido is a favorite tourist spot for Taiwanese.

The deep and close cultural interrelations between us since the old days are thus leading to such dramas highlighting contemporary themes, and this is truly a desirable direction for the development of our relations. There was another drama made by Taiwan and Japan highlighting the story of Taiwanese athletes who participated in the Winter Olympics Games in Sapporo in 1972 even though they had never seen snow at all, and tried to do their best with the help of the Japanese athletes.

We should select many other themes and episodes between Taiwan and Japan and try to make high-quality dramas together.

Q: Are there any other examples of good and smooth communication between Taiwan and Japan due to these cultural commonalities?

Chu: According to an opinion poll by Interchange Association, Japan, the favorite nation for Taiwanese is Japan. The percentage of respondents who gave Japan as their answer to the question "Which country do you like?" was 43%, far higher than the other countries like the United States, Singapore and China. In responding to the question "Which country do you like to travel to?" 38% said Japan, followed by 34% for Europe. This favorable image of Japan for Taiwanese can contribute to consolidation of business communication or collaboration.

Taiwan is also a place which has accepted most Japanese cuisine,



A scene from *The Firmiana Rain*

such as *sashimi* or *ramen* noodles or *udon*. It is also noteworthy that most of the Japanese architecture, such as administrative offices or parliamentary buildings, during the period of Japanese occupation in Taiwan is still well preserved. Taiwan and Japan are cooperating with each other in preserving such old buildings and classical arts as a valuable cultural heritage.

Q: What do you think about the Taiwanese people's view of their history as a Japanese colony?

Chu: There is certainly a difference in views on history between Japanese and Taiwanese. For example, under Japanese rule only Japanese children were accepted by elementary schools, since they could speak Japanese, while Taiwanese children, who could not speak Japanese, were obliged to go to different schools.

For the Japanese, this might have been considered a reasonable education system based upon language capacity, but for the Taiwanese it could be considered racial discrimination. Nevertheless, most Taiwanese greatly appreciated the education system and infrastructure that the Japanese established during their rule. For example, a dam constructed by a Japanese named Yoichi Hatta was instrumental in turning 100,000 hectares of sugar cane fields into rice fields, which was greatly appreciated by people in Taiwan.

Taiwanese and Japanese scholars now jointly study the history of Taiwan's days as a Japanese colony with the cooperation of Aichi University. They study our history as objectively as possible. I think an objective assessment of history based upon witnesses' observations is very important to establishing a good relationship.

Q: Do you know about the Cool Japan Fund? It was recently created by the Japanese government and private sector to promote Japanese pop culture. Taiwan must also have done much to promote its culture worldwide. What do you think about such government-business collaboration in promoting culture?

Chu: We established the Ministry of Culture in the Taiwanese government in May 2012, although until then cultural promotion had been handled by only a small council within the government. Since then we have been promoting policies in cooperation with this new ministry in the central government. Cultural bureaus were also created recently in many prefectural governments and many private organizations now engage in promoting a wide range of cultural activities.

We have also established an annual presidential award for distinguished artistic achievement. The ministry also presents several awards for films, music, literature and crafts, as well as promoting and subsidizing Taiwanese artists' international activities, just like the Cool Japan Fund. The ministry is planning to set up 11 Cultural Centers like our center in Tokyo around the world that will engage in promoting and introducing Taiwanese culture as well as international exchanges.

A system called "art bank", which does not exist in Japan, has also been adopted. In this system, the ministry purchases young artists' works and lends them cheaply to public organizations, banks or airport facilities where they can attract public attention, and perhaps then the artists will be encouraged to exhibit overseas.

Another project involves highlighting personal stories told by anybody interested in making them public on the Internet, recorded and edited by volunteer recorders from each regional bureau of culture. In this way a wide range of stories can be distributed all over Taiwan.

I think the Cool Japan Fund is an excellent idea, as it may eventually encourage Japanese SMEs engaged in pop culture to move into overseas markets, in particular newly emerging nations' markets. I am sure they would succeed in strengthening Japanese SMEs' competitiveness and raising their share on the international market.

Q: Taiwanese culture promotion policy does seem to be very successful in promoting Taiwanese soft power, doesn't it?

Chu: Culture can be very powerful and Taiwan has been favorably perceived around the world thanks to the power of its culture. Not only our traditional culture as represented by the National Palace Museum but also our contemporary culture, such as films and pop music, have been helping to contribute to Taiwan's international presence.

Last year the film *Picnic* directed by a Taiwanese and a Malaysian director was awarded the Silver Bear Prize at the Venice Film Festival, and in 2012 *Life of Pi* directed by Ang Lee, a Taiwanese director, won six US Academy Awards including best director. Lee said in his speech at the ceremony, "Thank you so much, Taiwan." Thanks to his words, some other well-known directors have chosen Taiwan as a place for shooting new films. Thus Taiwanese culture is becoming well known worldwide.

China is no exception. Taiwanese music in particular is loved in China, where its market share is more than 70%, which is extremely high. Its popularity has led to Chinese acceptance of Taiwanese films as well, and through films Chinese people's understanding of Taiwan has been greatly increased.

Taiwanese film producers and directors are often invited to China to

collaborate in making films. Taiwanese composers and singers are regularly invited as judges in music contests organized by Chinese TV companies. So it is good to see Taiwanese culture being appreciated in China.

Q: What specific plans do you have to strengthen cultural exchanges between Taiwan and Japan?

Chu: First, we would like to consolidate our function as a center of cultural exchanges. In order to achieve this, we are now looking for new places for offices much larger than the current ones.

Second, we would like to explore new areas with Japan, such as lacquer ware. There was a Japanese artist named Tadasu Yamanaka, a graduate of Tokyo University of the Arts, who taught many Taiwanese students in his school in Taiwan and his students eventually created a new craft by combining Japanese and Taiwanese techniques called "horai-nuri". This is certainly a new area to be further explored.

I would also like to take advantage of our old relations with Tokyo University of the Arts and plan an exchange of young painters between Japan and Taiwan this year.

Of course, the most important cultural exchange event this year should be the exhibition of treasures from our National Palace Museum from June 24 until Sept. 15 at the Tokyo National Museum and from Oct. 7 until Nov. 30 at the Kyushu National Museum. The exhibition in Japan will feature around 230 items, including two priceless ones that have never been out of Taiwan, and it will be our largest so far among overseas exhibitions.

We will also organize an event highlighting the history of friendship between Japanese and Taiwanese modern dancers at Aichi University. At the Osaka Anthropology Museum, there will be an exhibition of handicrafts by Taiwan's indigenous residents, and there will also be six films from Taiwan screened at an international film festival in Fukuoka in September. In addition to all these things, I would also like to create exchanges in the field of calligraphy.

Above all, I would like to see more exchanges among people of the younger generation. I recently came across a small monthly magazine titled "LIP". This is produced by some young Japanese people to introduce Taiwanese art and culture to Japanese readers. They have Taiwanese friends and as they spoke with them their Chinese was greatly improved. Such voluntary efforts are an important pillar of cultural exchanges.

Q: Finally, since we have many young Japanese here keen on studying Chinese, would it not be important to promote exchanges of students who are learning each other's language?

Chu: Yes. In Taiwan as well there are many young people learning Japanese. Young people are very active and competent in conveying their culture to people overseas of the same generation. We should certainly promote exchanges of such young students through language education and have great expectations of a fruitful outcome.

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