

An Interview with Agnes Chan, a singer, writer, lecturer &amp; UNICEF ambassador

# The Role of Culture in Achieving Global Peace & Prosperity

By Japan SPOTLIGHT Editorial Section

Agnes Chan, a singer, writer, lecturer and UNICEF ambassador, has been a symbol of Asian peace and prosperity for many years. She is therefore especially well-positioned to talk about the role of culture in achieving global peace.

## Role of the Internet in Cultural Exchanges in Asia

**Q:** Today we live in a globalized world, in which Asian economies in particular have become closely connected to each other. It has reached a point where there are serious suggestions of Asian integration. Consider the European Union, for example, with its strong commitment to not only economic but also political integration. Achieving such integration in Asia would require commonalities, in particular cultural commonalities: perhaps Confucianism, very important to China, Japan and Korea in the past, but also — especially for young people — modern elements such as Japanese pop music or Korean dramas. The Internet, in particular, is enabling young people to share such culture today. What are your impressions?

**Chan:** First of all, Asians are looking more and more alike. Everybody is looking very much like everybody else these days. When I was younger, you could tell if someone was from Taiwan or China or Japan or South Korea or Hong Kong. People's economic levels were different, the clothes they wore were different, and they behaved differently. But these days young people look, if not exactly the same, then very much alike, and I think it is a wonderful change.

One of the reasons why people are becoming more alike is due to common interests: fashion, music, dances, etc. They have probably



Photo: T&amp;A

Agnes Chan, a singer, writer, lecturer & UNICEF ambassador

found these interests through the media, or through the Internet. Although they may not understand each other's languages very well, there are artists who are popular in several cultures — actors, singers, models — and through them young people are coming together.

These pop cultures may not appeal to everyone, but certain groups of people enjoy and identify themselves with them. Instead of saying “all Koreans like the same thing” or “all Japanese like the same thing”, they can say “We like the same things”. “We” can be people from different countries. Mutual interests are bonding people from different cultures together. Maybe the older generation is not aware of it yet, but younger people are much more connected than we think. And I think this is made possible by the Internet.

I think this is a good trend. They are overriding the barriers of countries or languages or history, and are finding friends with common interests. I think that's a good sign.

**Q:** It has been suggested that “soft power”, a concept developed by Joseph Nye, is important in achieving peace and prosperity. However, not everybody seems to like that idea. For instance, I have heard it said that “French cuisine is French cuisine; even though Germans like French cuisine, Germans may not necessarily like French people. So that's different.” What do you think about the role of culture and soft power in achieving peace?

**Chan:** I think one of the basic things that we must have in our hearts if we want peace is the acceptance of people who are different from us. To understand that, although we may not like each other, we have to live peacefully together, and embrace diversity instead of being afraid of it. The role of “soft power” is very, very important, because through it you can start to like people who are different from you. For example, if you like a Korean actor; you want to learn more about him. So you see his movies, go to his country, visit the sites where the movie was produced — and in the process you may find out that, “Hey, the Koreans are very similar to us. Or maybe a little different, but I like that.”

“Soft culture” is like a door to different cultures and it can spur interest in other people. It breaks down the barrier that says, “I can only live among my own people”, which is not true, because you can have affection for something that’s different. Maybe you can live in another country, or you would like to have friends other than Japanese.

A lot of people like animations in Japan — myself included, such as *Sen to Chihiro no Kami Kakushi* (Spirited Away), *Kaze no Tani no Nausicaa* (Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind), *Doraemon* — and through these productions people not only look at the beautiful pictures or colors, but learn a lot about Japanese: their thinking, what they appreciate, how they teach their children, and what their dilemmas are.

In many ways we have been dominated by Western culture because their “soft power” is so strong. I grew up with The Beatles, Bob Dylan, Elvis, so I learnt all their music before I started to learn how to sing in Chinese. I watched all those movies, with thoughts like “Wow, the kitchen looks beautiful, I want a refrigerator, I want a car” — things like that. I wanted to have a similar life to the people in the movies. Young people are going through the same process. If you like something in a culture, it becomes more difficult to discriminate against the culture.

**Q: You have been working on cultural exchanges for a long time. What do you think about the difference between the past and today?**

**Chan:** I think we have more access. Before it was very difficult for somebody in Japan to learn about the world before the Internet. For example, it would have been difficult to know who’s singing in, say, India or Singapore or Thailand. But now you can actually search for it on Google, or hear them on YouTube. When I was a teenage idol in Hong Kong, my records were sold in Southeast Asia, and my films were being watched there, too. Then after I came to Japan, and

Photo: Japan Committee for UNICEF/T&A



*Agnes Chan playing with nursery school toddlers in Miyagi Prefecture after the Great East Japan Earthquake*

started to work mostly in Japan, a lot of my fans in Southeast Asia lost contact with me, because they couldn’t get their hands on Japanese music. But now, through YouTube, they’re rediscovering me. Fans are tuning in and they are writing on YouTube in the Thai language! They’re very happy that they’re back in the loop, listening to their old-time idol singer and knowing what I’m doing right now, and I am very happy that we are connected again.

This connectivity is changing things. Since there is more access, you can go and look for things you care about. With more choices, you can use them to explore and expand your interests. There’s a lot of great talent out there.

However, recently, politics is getting in the way of young people connecting to each other. The political situation is not favorable between many Asian countries, and young people are being dragged into it even though they have nothing to do with it. Some people are starting to dislike people from other countries that they have never even known or learned about. And that’s very unnecessary and disappointing. I think politics should be politics, but interactions should be interactions. Cultural interactions are one of the crucial foundations for peace. Politics should never interfere with the genuine feelings of younger people. I heard that some people are afraid to tell each other that they like Korean singers, or some people in China are trying to hide that they like anime. I think that’s very disappointing.

**Q: Many Asian countries are now facing drastic economic development processes. Urbanization is occurring at a high speed, and some people have**

said that this is isolating individuals. It may of course be a good thing to be rich, but social connections and community bonds — *kizuna*, we often say in Japanese — do seem to be increasingly disappearing in Asian countries. Do you think this could be one of the reasons pop culture is spreading all over Asia? That young people are getting isolated, and increasingly lonely, and then pursuing friends, connections, and popular culture that can provide them with those linkages?

**Chan:** I think that may be true to some extent. But I think young people always feel isolated, and that is why young people are the best customers for soft culture, such as pop music or animation: because they are trying to find themselves, to identify themselves and find people who share their interests. Young people are always more receptive to new things, as they are not as hard-headed as we are. The feeling of isolation may not necessarily be just because of economic development.

But it is correct to say that although we thought that with more development there would be more interactions, that has not been the case. It is not easy to find friends who can share your feelings when face to face communications are getting harder and harder. In China, many young parents living in rural areas have to leave and work in cities, leaving children behind with their grandparents or friends. Perhaps pop culture can help to fill the gaps in people's hearts.

However, other means of communication are becoming more accessible even in developing countries. People are getting their hands on smartphones, and they can get on the Internet. Now calling home or sending a message is much easier. If people cannot find

music that they like in their own country, they can now look for something else in other Asian countries. And maybe that will help them to spread their horizons and notice that, "Hey, I'm not alone, many people like this singer, just like me", or "We can dance on YouTube and show each other our moves". If that can help people feel better about their daily lives, it's a great benefit and a great gift.

## Assessing Potential Influence of Japanese Pop Culture in Asia

**Q:** Having worked for cultural exchanges for many years, what do you think about Japanese pop culture, compared with the other Asian countries' cultures? Could Japanese pop culture play a key role in achieving commonalities among Asian countries?

**Chan:** Japanese pop culture is already playing a big part in achieving commonalities among Asian countries. Japanese animation is very popular in many countries. The messages portrayed in the stories are straightforward and universal. Many major animations have themes like courage, compassion, love, honor, environmental issues, or even controversial issues like atomic power. Animations that embrace these themes are the most recognized and respected projections of Japanese "soft power". There is a large following all over the world, because these messages resonate with people.

Japanese fashion is another area that young Asian people love. Japanese street fashion leads the trends in many Asian cities and Japanese models are stars in many countries.

These things not only influence the tastes of the younger generations but are spreading goodwill among people.

**Q:** Such as Hayao Miyazaki's works?

**Chan:** Yes, definitely. Other animation — even for example *Doraemon* and *Sazae-san*, *Anpanman*, and works by *Osamu Tezuka* — they are all great. And they're aired in many countries.

**Q:** But in the United States, for example, *Doraemon* does not seem well-accepted, because the hero is lazy and always asking for help from *Doraemon*. So what about that kind of cultural misunderstanding or difference?



Agnes Chan with Palestinian children in Gaza



**Chan:** Japanese appreciate the faults in people and in their characters, but in American culture they prefer something more straightforward: where the good is the good, the bad is the bad, and especially for children, not too complicated. For example, in Japanese animation I really like *Anpanman*. But for my American friends, they think *Anpanman* is difficult because the villain *Baikinman* is so likable — the idea of likable villains is more difficult for them to understand. But I think Asian people can do it, and *Doraemon* is very popular in many Asian countries.

As for Japanese songs, I think the main barrier is the language, because they are sung in Japanese. But these days, a lot of Japanese songs, especially those with dancing, are becoming more popular even if people don't really understand the words. The repetitive lyrics, the fast moves: I think they are popular because it's not just about the song, but also the music, the performance, the dress, and the dancing, the whole package.

There are areas in which only Japan can produce. For example, I'm sure China or South Korea or other places would like to produce the same level of animation, but they may not have the manpower or the talent to do that, so they have to look to Japan for it. So there are areas where Japan is better than others and there are areas where others are better than Japan. But that's why it's interesting.

### Encouraging Exchanges of Young People in Asia

**Q: Today Japanese children are often inward-looking and not so interested in foreign countries. How can we stimulate their interest in the rest of the world?**

**Chan:** First of all, adults have to be more interested. I think it is not only the children who are inward-looking, but also the parents and teachers. Some would hold the idea that we have nothing much to learn from others anymore. But this is not true because there are always lessons to learn, even from countries that are still developing.

Because Japan is a safe, clean, and convenient place, it is a very comfortable. So no matter which country you go to, there's probably going to be something that is not as comfortable as in Japan. So people come to feel that Japan is a paradise: where else can you go to find a better country than this one? And if adults keep thinking like that, children will think the same way.

But the problem is that if you don't look outside, or don't challenge yourself, there's not going to be a stronger Japan, one that can thrive in the future. If you don't stimulate and innovate, you don't grow.

It's enormously important for young people to have an interest in



*Agnes Chan singing in a concert at Tokyo's famous Nippon Budokan*

other countries, and to not be afraid of hardships — to want to be uncomfortable. I want young people to challenge themselves, to search for hardships. That's the only way to find out more about themselves and learn from others and grow.

**Q: In the EU there is a special program called the Erasmus Program, which allows young people to study freely among all the EU member countries. Should we create such a program in Asia?**

**Chan:** I think it's great. Exchange programs are crucial because when we try to teach young people about other countries the best way is to let them see for themselves. Many things we cannot teach by words: they have to feel it, they have to taste it, experience it to know it. Once they learn new things, they can come back and teach us. Japan is a very nice country, but if we want to keep it nice or make it nicer, we need to work on it. If we forget the spirit of learning from others, deterioration will occur. Education must teach children to look outside.

**Q: So with the spread of pop culture among Asian countries, young people might be more interested in other Asian countries' pop cultures, and that would provide them with an incentive to study abroad in China, or in South Korea, or elsewhere in Asia.**

**Chan:** Yes. But it's also not only about pop culture. For example in China, there's not a lot of pop culture that attracts young Japanese. But some of my friends here like to cook, and so they want to go to



Photo: T&amp;A

*Agnes Chan lecturing on the situation of children around the world*

China to learn about cooking. Some of them like tea, so they want to go and learn about and drink different types of tea. So pop culture is one aspect, but traditional culture has its part to play, too. It is the same with Japan; there are a lot of traditions that Japan can offer to other Asian countries. Whatever the interest, I would certainly think that young people should pursue them, not only within their own countries but also outside.

**Q: And perhaps not only university students, but also much younger ones, even elementary school students? The exchange of elementary school students among different Asian countries could be a good idea to promote peace and prosperity in the future.**

**Chan:** I am sure, the earlier, the better. Interacting with other cultures before stereotypes get into our minds helps us to see people as who they are and not just which country or culture they represent. I remember when I was at Stanford working on my PhD, my son was in kindergarten. Because all the international students put their children into that kindergarten, there were children from all over the world. Sometimes he would come home and say, I played with so-and-so — and I would ask him, “Where is he from?” At first he would answer me, but after a while he would ask: “Mum, why is that question important? Does it matter? Why didn’t you ask whether he’s a good boy or a good girl, or whether he plays well with me — why are you asking that silly question about where he’s from? Why?”

It really set me thinking, and I thought my son was right! I was trying to categorize people. I sort of wanted to clarify within myself

where the children were from and I would play out an image in my mind. For my child that was meaningless. He taught me that what was important was not where the person was from but whether they suited each other, had similar interests — those were more important, not nationality or race.

So I think international interactions as a tool for peace and goodwill should be practiced, and the earlier, the better. Children will accept each other not because of which country they’re from, or whether they’re rich or poor, or whether making friends with each other would give them merit. That is the period when we can best teach children to appreciate everybody.

**Q: Today many internationalization plans are being carried out in many Japanese universities. For example, Waseda University is going to build up a sort of graduate school inviting students from all over Asia. But would there be impediments or difficulties in achieving such an exchange? If any, what do you think would be the most serious?**

**Chan:** The most serious one is language, because foreign students must have proficient Japanese to study in Japanese universities. Some universities have English programs, but probably not as good as the Japanese one. So unless you can speak Japanese at university level, you cannot learn in a first-class university in Japan, and that is the biggest hurdle for people from other countries. That’s one of the main reasons why Japan has been less successful in attracting foreign students. If universities can offer more curricula in English, I think a lot of people would like to come and study in Japan.

Many people overseas like Japanese culture — it is an *akogare* for them, like a dream: to come to Japan, to eat sashimi, to eat *real* sushi for the first time, and look at Mount Fuji, and look at the *sakura* etc. Coming to visit Japan is something that’s on many people’s bucket list. If you ask people “Where do you want to go?” a lot of them will say “Oh, Japan”.

Young people will certainly want to come and study. One main reason they cannot is that they don’t know the language, and another reason is the prospect that after graduation — if they do graduate — they may not find a job because visas are very difficult to get. Unless Japan recognizes these setbacks and changes its policies, it will be very difficult to attract top-notch students to come and study.

An attractive English-oriented program, a friendly environment where foreigners can feel at home and good working prospects are crucial for attracting international students.

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