

Interview with Shawn Chin, founder of SOZO Pte. Ltd, an organizer of pop culture events in Asia

The Potential of Japanese ACG in Asia & the Rest of the World

By Japan SPOTLIGHT

Anime Events in the United States and Europe are today drawing much media attention today, but we should not forget about Asia. Its market has a greater potential than in any other market, because of cultural similarities to Japan. Anime events in Asia would not only attract the interest of Japan's neighbors but also the interest of the Japanese in their neighbors' interpretation of anime. This could start further in-depth cultural links.

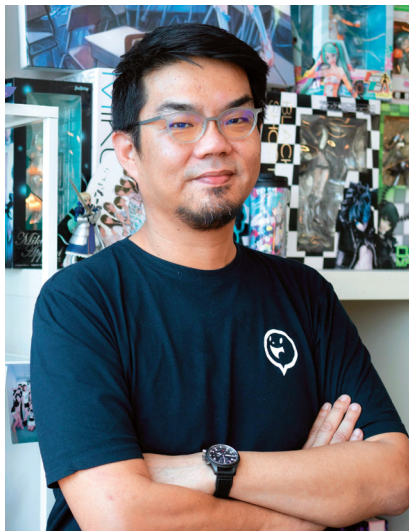
Introduction

JEF: Could we start by having you introduce yourself, your company, and AFA Singapore 2025?

Chin: My name is Shawn Chin, and I'm the founder and managing director of SOZO. The company was founded in 2019 and we are based in Singapore, and from the start we've always been focused primarily on Japanese pop culture and entertainment. Currently we produce events and concerts and many cultural experiences across Southeast Asia and East Asia as well. Our main activities are festivals, primarily the Anime Festival Asia (AFA), and we do many live events like Japanese artists' concerts. We also do IP (intellectual property) exhibitions and merchandise, and also many Japanese IP licensing collaborations. Our company's flagship event is AFA, which is now one of the largest pop culture festivals outside of Japan.

JEF: AFA is actually one of the largest festivals in the world. There are some anime festivals in Europe and in the US, but is the one in Singapore the biggest in the world?

Chin: We are definitely one of the longest, most-established in Asia. We have been around for 17 years. We have done the event under the AFA brand in many countries, not only Singapore, but throughout Asia in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Hong Kong, China, and even in Japan itself. We've done it over 30 times in the past 17 years.



Shawn Chin

Assessment of AFA Singapore 2025

JEF: You have a long history. How do you assess AFA Singapore 2025? I've heard that it was more successful than ever.

Chin: Yes, the event keeps growing. We've done it 17 times already in Singapore, so it's quite a mature event in Singapore. We have also won many awards in Singapore as the Outstanding Leisure Event Award at the Singapore Tourism Awards for a few years in a row, so AFA Singapore has grown into a major regional cultural event. I say regional because it attracts around 30% of its visitors from outside of Singapore. People from

Malaysia, China, Thailand and Indonesia, and people from many countries including in Europe and North America, come to visit the event. Most Japanese companies also use AFA as a gateway to many Southeast Asian markets. And because of the strong success of AFA Singapore, this year, for example, we are also doing an AFA Thailand in Bangkok in May, and then AFA Indonesia continues to be held in August in Jakarta as well. We are looking to have an AFA Hong Kong in the future as well.

JEF: It's not an annual event anymore – including satellite events, it's almost bimonthly or something like that?

Chin: Yes, every three or four months there's an AFA somewhere.

JEF: Why do you think AFA has become such a big

event? What is the key factor?

Chin: I think right now the key factor is that the market has to be there. I believe Japan contents, Japan soft power and ACG (Anime, Comics, Games) contents are strong throughout Asia, and we are lucky to be able to put on an event that celebrates anime, comics, and games, especially from Japan. I think that is the key focus of AFA and that's why we have been able to hold it so many times and for so long.

JEF: This has a very significant economic impact, not only in the Singaporean economy, but also other Asian countries' economies because of the size of the event. And not only the anime event itself, but sales of character goods will also stimulate consumption.

Chin: Yes. Consumption will be stimulated during these three days, for example, if we do it in Singapore and in each country. But I think more important is that our event makes it easier for Japanese companies to join and try their products. It's also a good benchmark. If the product is successful within AFA Singapore, they may say, "Let's explore doing business in Singapore" or business in each country. I think it also helps people who may not know much about ACG. If I'm a Japanese company and the companies in the region may not be familiar with my company, I can go to AFA and showcase my products. If the product is successful, that makes a very good case study for the need to develop businesses further in each market. We hope that for more than just the three days AFA acts as a gateway for many Japanese companies to start their business in Asia.

Some of these companies are the anime rights holders, but we also have many different Japanese companies and also many local companies that are distributors or doing licensing of Japanese contents. And up and coming, we are seeing UGC (user-generated content) contents, with a lot of our customers themselves becoming the influencer or the creator. They all join our event mainly to showcase their contents, and to come together and basically celebrate Japanese pop culture.

JEF: I'm not very familiar with Japanese content companies, but I imagine they have been focusing on the domestic market rather than the international market, so your events give them a chance to internationalize their business.

Chin: The trend over the last 10 years especially is that we have seen many Japanese content holders set up an international division. In a way, yes, we have a good platform for them for jumpstarting their

promotion or their showcase, because our event attracts ACG fans all together in one place.

Pop Culture's Impact on Foreign Relations

JEF: Your event has a good impact on business and the economy, but you also may have some impact on foreign relations among Asian countries. People are falling in love with anime, not only people from Japan but also from other Asian countries, and this promotes mutual understanding among those countries.

Chin: If you look at tourism, for example, I think the number of tourists from Singapore visiting Japan in 2025 was about 600,000-plus, of a population of maybe around 6 million, so more than 10% of Singaporean residents are visiting Japan. Our goal is also to stimulate the culture, and to introduce Japanese culture to new people, and our job is kind of done when all these new people fall in love with Japan. They come to events, which is great, but ultimately they also visit Japan and bring tourism dollars back to Japan.

JEF: I see. As just a very basic question, why do you think Japanese animation and comics and games have become so popular in Asia and around the world?

Chin: First, I think it's quite unique, in that Japanese animation or drama or Japanese history is very culturally different, but yet similar. I think it's the same reason that so many tourists are going to Japan, it's the same appeal. And I always believe that Japanese contents or Japanese products are the result of deep passion and deep work by the creator. I believe that makes the content and the products stand out from the rest of the world's.

I think it also reflects trends. Before the pandemic, a lot of this was driven by deep users, and others following and chasing Japanese contents. Nowadays, however, especially with the easy accessibility of anime on Netflix, YouTube, and others, Japanese content is now very accessible. That has also helped with the success of my event, because we used to attract just the deep users but nowadays we are getting more mainstream customers as well.

JEF: Perhaps Japanese ACG could make some contribution to Asian countries' content business development?

Chin: Yes. First, if you look at Southeast Asia, it's one of the youngest populations in the world. Other than Singapore, it's generally all young and digitally connected people. I've also seen

many companies slowly starting to use Japanese IP for the marketing of their products, and then doing tie-ups with the Japanese IP as well. I think Japanese ACG contents are crucial for promoting to the younger audience in Asia. And anime contents, especially the Japanese genre, may start as a comic, or as an anime, or as a game, but from there, for example, it has really helped us develop a concert business. A lot of these artists are getting popular by singing songs from anime. And of course, merchandise is also another angle. Our company is also doing many licenses for merchandise and then doing pop-up stores and things like that. And we also see this in tourism. For example, a lot of people are going to Japan because of the anime they love, they're going there basically to connect – to go to the different hot spots where the anime was shot or go to different areas where the anime was created, stuff like that as well.

JEF: Besides ACG, what cultural events would be useful in contributing to active business and culture exchanges between Japan and Southeast Asia? You mentioned music events.

Chin: One of SOZO's businesses other than AFA is holding concerts, and we have been quite lucky to do some of the biggest names in the Japanese music scene. A lot of these artists are now doing sold-out shows not only in Singapore, but throughout Asia. For example, we did a concert at the start of 2025 for Yoasobi, and 20,000 people attended their concert in Singapore alone.

JEF: I've heard that Korean animation and Chinese animation are becoming popular in Southeast Asia. Is this also a good opportunity for Asian countries to get closer together?

Chin: First, if you look at anime from South Korea, it looks almost Japanese. There is a big influence from Japan. It's just that these overseas companies are coming in to invest and produce these. These IPs may be owned by Chinese or Koreans, but the content itself, the anime, is actually Japanese influenced. This means that there are more options and choices right now for customers, so it's actually a good thing for the entire market.

Pop Culture's Impact on Industries

JEF: You've already talked about various impacts on other industries like the tourism industry, for example, and also the consumer goods industry because they produce lots of character goods. Do you have any observations about other impacts from the animation industry?

Chin: I think what has happened is that we also see many more resources, as in younger people saying that I want to have a job in the anime industry, so you will see more recruitment of manpower as well. Some of them may be applying for a job in Japan or going to Japan to study and join the workforce. That's from an HR perspective. Tourism and the selling of merchandise are primarily the key areas where I've seen growth. Of course, Japanese food is also very popular in our region. I think this all works hand in hand for the Japan brand.

JEF: How about the digital economy? The digital industry is a very important business for Asian countries.

Chin: In terms of consumption habits, if you want to buy the merchandise, it's not just the little stores anymore, it's all online. E-commerce is actually a huge part of customers' consumption behavior. A lot of customers nowadays are not just going to the store or even coming to my events, they're just going online and buying the products. And of course, digital is one of the key parts of consumption for ACG. It's all digital, you are no longer restricted by physical space. Consumption is mainly on digital platforms nowadays.

JEF: What about legal services for intellectual property rights licensing?

Chin: I think that one is more of a government push as well, and it depends on which country. Legal is only effective if the government follows the law. But education in the importance of copyrights, that content has important value, is also important. It's also knowing the difference between value that needs to be paid for and promotional content. Some people just blur the line. If you own the IP, you should monetize from it, and each market needs to have proper enforcement to ensure that piracy and unauthorized usage is controlled. Of course, this varies by country and is always a challenge for any content, not only for Japanese contents.

Potential of ACG Market in Southeast Asia

JEF: How do you assess the potential of the ACG market in Singapore and Southeast Asia?

Chin: I think the growth has already happened in the past 10 years. It also depends on the political situation for the companies. If there are certain countries that Japanese companies cannot access, they may choose to access other countries. Politically, Southeast Asia continues to be very accessible for Japanese companies and so I

believe that with that in place, it would only get bigger and more mature. There are many players already, it's just a matter of how they get mature and more sophisticated, more like Japan or maybe Taiwan.

JEF: Competition is very severe, isn't it?

Chin: In a place like Southeast Asia, you not only have Japanese content, but you also have all kinds of contents – Hollywood content, Korean content, Chinese content, many types of local content. I think that as long as Japanese content continues to be unique, it will be very successful. I think certain Japanese companies may be saying they want to grow globally and should create content for the global market, but I think that Japanese content should be made for Japanese consumption first. That's what makes it different, for me anyway.

JEF: Shouldn't Japanese content be devised for the international market?

Chin: Yes it should, but when it comes to the story-making content creation, leave it as it is and focus on the Japanese DNA when you create it. But when you distribute it, yes, there definitely has to be more global thinking.

SOZO's Future Business Plans

JEF: Considering the potential of this business, what particular business plans do you have for your company in the future?

Chin: We became part of the Kadokawa group in November of last year, and they have identified our company as one of their key goals for growth in Southeast Asia. Basically, our plan is to expand AFA to more cities in more countries, and we would like to continue to do more with Japanese artists to stimulate the growth of Japanese music worldwide. We are also trying to develop more IP-based exhibitions at galleries and museums. And then we also continue to expand our merchandising and licensing activities. Our goal is basically to make Southeast Asia the key hub of Japanese entertainment outside of Japan.

JEF: Some anime specialists in Japan are now starting to talk about a possible decline of Japanese animation, of it losing its popularity to some extent because of poor human resource development for creators. Do you think Japanese animation has a promising future?

Chin: I'm not that familiar with the local Japanese market, but I definitely think that planting seeds for the future is always important. But at the same time, I also know that there is so much anime and content being produced in Japan right now, and it's only the select few that make it. I don't think Japan right now has any lack of content. It's more about how you market this content overseas, how it is strategically marketed from a global perspective. You also need to continue to be innovating and coming up with new ideas. All content has the same problem. Once you hit the saturation point, you have to think about how to stand out more. It becomes more competitive because people's expectations become greater.

Japanese ACG's Potential in the Regions

JEF: That's good advice. For my last question, do you think Japanese ACG could potentially become popular in regions other than Asia, Europe, and the US, where it is already popular? In Latin America or Africa, for example?

Chin: I've heard that it is growing fast in India, also in South America and in Canada as well. I also see growth in the Middle East. Of course, they have some issues right now, but the Middle East is also huge. I'm not sure about Africa, but I believe that once the economies improve, Japanese ACG should be popular as well. That's the strength of ACG. It transcends boundaries and reaches out to everybody. It's just a matter of making it accessible. When I was younger, in the 1980s and 1990s, I liked Japanese content, but in those days it was so hard to watch even one anime in Singapore. Nowadays it's totally different. It's so accessible. Whatever you can see in Japan you can get overseas as well. So, I think it's a good time for ACG, it's mainstream now.

JEF: Perhaps that means this is a business that can contribute to global peace. Young people in particular like anime, so maybe in the future we will not have war anymore because all the countries' youth are closely linked together and lose the incentive to make a war.

Chin: Why not? That's a great goal to have. Everyone loves the same IP, loves the same genres, and hopefully that will break down boundaries, led by Japanese ACG.

JS

Written with the cooperation of David S. Spengler, who is a translator and consultant specializing in corporate communications.