

Can Pop Culture Develop into a Common Bond for Asia?

By Masakazu Toyoda

Before explaining anything, I should clarify what I mean by pop culture.

As the name suggests, pop culture refers to popular culture. It is also called mass culture, as it appeals to a broad audience and most often stands in contrast to high culture usually associated with more educated people, in terms of classical literature and fine arts. It is very important not to confuse the cultural concepts of popular/traditional with the political concepts of populism/elite. The economic interpretation of the “content industry” is a useful approach to define the term pop culture. The industry encompasses a wide range of fields, such as films and television drama, animation, manga, games, and music.

These industries are important not only for their monetary value but also for their inclusion of different cultural forms, especially among young people. These industries are evolving rapidly influencing language, social behaviors, and collective values. To state my conclusion upfront, pop culture may well become a bond connecting all of Asia in a not-too-distant future. Let me explain.

Let us first look at the reality of the content industry. The global market around 2020 was approximately two trillion dollars. Assuming an annual growth rate of 3–5 percent, the industry is expected to reach four to five trillion dollars by 2040. Asia – including China and India – already accounts for 35–40 percent of the global share, and the content industry is expected to be one of Asia’s growth industries,

How does this compare with the automobile industry, which is globally valued at 2.5–3 trillion dollars in 2020? Given that many countries have already reached saturation, the automobile market may not grow significantly by 2040 and it is possible to imagine that the content industry will eventually surpass the automobile industry. What about the semiconductor industry, which is currently attracting so much attention? Even at the global level, it was only 0.4–0.45 trillion dollars around 2020 – already far smaller than the content industry. By 2040, it is expected to reach only one to two trillion dollars.

In short, the content industry is already far larger than semiconductors and is likely to become comparable to, or surpass the automobile industry sooner or later. In this sense, it is no surprise that many countries are paying increasing economic attention to this industry.

Another characteristic of the content industry is that it influences lives not only in terms of economics but also in terms of culture. Asian countries differ in language, religion, and political systems, yet cultural exchanges are rapidly advancing among young people through Japanese anime and games, Korean K-Pop, Chinese online novels and games, Indian films, and dramas and You Tuber culture from ASEAN countries such as

Thailand and Indonesia. Politically, Asia is not yet unified, but culturally, it may already be forming a kind of community. It is true that politics sometimes hinders cultural exchange, but in the near future, pop culture may become the bond that fosters trust and supports dialogue among Asian people – especially the youth. It is simply logical to expect Asia to continue to evolve and influence the world.

The roundtable discussion in the May/June 2026 issue of *Japan SPOTLIGHT* will address this very point. Let me share with you expressed views of some experts.

– Prof. Nakamura (President, iU – Professional University of Information and Management for Innovation):

“Last year, I participated in an otaku event in Hong Kong, and it attracted one million visitors over five days. Even when political tensions exist, culture blends naturally across borders.”

– Prof. Kawashima (Doshisha University):

“I think Asia is already becoming something like ‘Cool Asia.’ Japanese anime has long been watched casually in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Southeast Asia, and Japanese trendy dramas of the 1980s and 1990s were widely accepted across Asia.”

– Mr. Kaji (Director, Culture and Creative Industries Division, METI):

“Our relationship and bond with Asia are extremely important. In the Tokyo International Film Festival, which we run through public-private collaboration, we organize exchanges with Asian students and set up sections that focus on Asian films. We operate the festival with Asia firmly in mind.”

Why is it possible that pop culture becomes a bond for Asia? At least two reasons come to mind.

First, pop culture seeks to share universal stories about the future, rather than political narratives about the past. Whether it is Dragon Ball, One Piece, or K-Pop, the themes revolve around adventure, friendship, and sometimes romance – not historical conflicts.

Second, pop culture is driven by young people looking beyond the nation-state and toward the world. Consequently, pop culture encourages an outward-looking attitude and is increasing in value not only as an industry but also as a cultural force. This is nothing other than the soft power identified by the late Professor Joseph Nye.

I hope that pop culture will first become a bond that supports peace and prosperity for Asia, and eventually, a bond that connects the entire world.

J.S

Masakazu Toyoda is chairman and CEO of the Japan Economic Foundation (JEF). He previously served as chairman and CEO of the Institute of Energy Economics, Japan, after having been vice minister for International Affairs at the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry.