*C*ommentator

A Comparative Study Might Be Needed in East Asian Popular Cultures

Jang In-Sung

Professor, Department of Political Science, Seoul National University

Before a departmental meeting, I had this conversation with the chairman.

"Mr. Jang, are you doing popular culture?"

"No, I'm not."

"So why are you a commentator?"

I don't know, either. I feel like an examinee student right now. So while I'd like to do a good job, it doesn't look like I will be able to.

I have learned a lot through hearing all of your presentations about the two sides of culture, the world of manga and anime, and the world of popular theater.

And strategy… there is a problem with strategy and phenomena, and while Mr. Morikawa seems to dislike a nation seeing the world of manga as strategic, for me, I see public theater as seeking a road to survival using survival strategies.

These two contradictory cultural worlds exist here in Japanese society.

There are many things I want to say, but as there is no time, I will present a few of the places I would like to question, and some points on the issue.

One is the problem of the first nationality of culture and universality.

Mr. Schodt mentioned that when he saw Tezuka's works in America, he believed them to be not Japanese works, but those of his own country.

Actually, my family and I, long ago, were the same. We had no idea that they were from Japan.

All of a sudden, we knew it. It happened when the Japan-Korea disputes started.

Or, maybe it was during the opening up of popular culture.

We didn't know that it was a Japanese work.

Another thing is that I was a manga maniac when I was in elementary school.

Every day if I had any money, I went to a bookstore – if you'd call it that – and read manga instead of studying. What this means is that there were manga in Korea since the 1960s.

And I'll bet they were influenced by Japanese manga.

There were quite a few series-type manga.

In my countryside town – I'm from the countryside – there were fifteen rental book shops in this small town.

I went around to all of them. Every day.

Well, Mr. Schodt said that manga have started to appear in Korea and China.

That may sound as if there were no manga before, and that just recently Korea has started to produce manga. However, this is not the case at all.

It's the same with the Korean Wave.

All of a sudden Korean productions are being accepted, but there were also Korean movies and soap operas long ago.

And suddenly they became the Korean Wave. Why that happened, is easy. With democratization and economic development, Korea started to become visible.

So then people started to accept what there is there, and what stories there are.

I have wandered a bit from the topic, but "For Culture," whether it's manga or anime, can be seen as one aspect of Japanese culture. But it also has universality.

And concerning the fact that a production of Hayao Miyazaki's won an Academy Award due to its distance from anima maniacs.

It may be my misunderstanding, but I had thought that his winning of the Academy Award for "Spirited Away" was a valuation of his merit. I think that is why he won it.

When I see "Spirited Away," I feel that it has a Japanese view of life and death, and that it has more peculiarity than it does universality.

I also have the feeling that it had a lot less popularity than his previous works.

At any rate, it does have that universality, so there is a limit to the degree to which we see it as having the peculiarities of Japanese culture and see it as strategic.

Just as the receivers of media take things in as being their own, I think it is a world where people take things in not as Japanese culture but respond to them as human beings.

Secondly, I feel that it is the culture of the younger generation.

In the case of manga and anime in Korea, Japanese manga and anime are being received quite well, but on the most part people move away from it as they grow older.

People are interested in it through junior high school, and by college there is only a small number who are moderately interested.

People are also taking part in "cosplay," and I do see it, but people drift away from it as they grow older.

I think it's necessary to think about why this is so.

Next, when thinking about Japanese manga and anime – and I believe this continues on previous issues – and also keeping in mind the comment about manga in Asia – first, Korea and China – it might be possible to compare manga with that of other countries, or even have Comparative Manga Studies. However, there needs to be a set process for comparison.

K-pop is now in fad, but what is different between J-pop and K-pop? There is a difference.

But I also think there are similarities.

I think that those similarities – that sympathy – is there, and it is not the peculiarities but rather the universalities that are making people receptive to it. If there weren't any, then there would be a limit to its success.

Another, especially, is the economic problem of manga and anime.

In other words, how manga and anime should be thought of as cultural commodities. And what meaning anime has as something that will pull up Japanese culture.

In the case of K-pop, it is having the effect of raising the image of Korea, and it is said that it also has economic significance. But how should we see manga and anime in this light? I was left with the impression that this needs to be considered along with the other issues.

That's all.