

**“Made in Japan” Examining the Symbolic Meaning of Japan in Contemporary
Taiwan from Cultural Consumption Perspective
An Examination on Fashion, Beauty and Lifestyle**

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Paper submitted for presentation at the 2007 NATSA Madison, WI

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Abstract:

The wave of globalization has impacted many Asian countries and Taiwan is not an exception. Yet Japan still maintains a powerful influence over contemporary Taiwanese society, especially in terms of culture. This paper approaches this influence through a sociological lens. Specifically on the rationale of culture consumption, I examine aspects of fashion, beauty standards and lifestyle aesthetics in today's Taiwanese society as illustrations of how Japanese culture is being embraced and emulated by Taiwanese culture.

Keywords: cultural consumption, Japan, Taiwan, Fashion, Lifestyle

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The Intertwined Relationships between Japan and Taiwan

Under the wave of globalization, Taiwan has represented many faces of such impact on its culture, yet Japan still maintains a hegemonic position in contemporary Taiwanese culture. Besides the geographically closeness as neighboring countries, Japan shares lots of similarities and affinities. In ancient history Japan was once an affiliation of China and was greatly influenced by Chinese cultures which has made these two cultures share similar basis, such as Japanese characters, known as *Han-ji*, meaning of which could be picked up by the users of traditional Chinese characters. On the other hand, in the colonial history Taiwan was under Japanese domination from 1895 to 1945. Popular tourism between two countries contributes to the interactions besides capitalism and media influences. As so, with the understandings of the background the aim of this paper is to look closer into the Japanese cultural impact on different dimension in the context of contemporary Taiwanese society.

Theoretical Framework and Methods

Previous literature has discussed several dimensions concerning this topic. The focus has been on how media plays an important role on the youth popular culture. The global mania of video games and animations is localized within Taiwanese culture. And the popularity of Japanese drama reinforced by the tourism between Japan and Taiwan, which has made Taiwanese youths could easily found mental connection to the culture and practice all details in their daily life. Responding to this point I would like to look into other dimensions which were not explored before in Taiwanese contemporary lifestyle to confirm pervious discussion on how Taiwanese culture incorporates the other culture. Specifically, I look into the meaning, the definition, the interpretation of beauty

and fashion in Taiwanese society. By identifying beauty and fashion here, I would like to use a broad definitions of these two words, which allows me to not only examine the products related to beauty and fashion and its related promoting materials, but also the fluid viewpoint and ideas these two terms could cover

The theoretical rational of the analysis is cultural consumption. In the cultural consumption perspective, consuming certain products is also consuming its cultural meaning. Methodically I applied grounded theory strategy in the process of content analysis. I examine daily collectable materials for the cosmetic products and its package, the provided information of the products and analyze the data I could get. In the meantime, after identifying several main categories during the analysis process, I further advance my analysis by examining related TV commercials, product website, or any other related textual materials.

“Made in Japan” and Its New Definition

Japanese enterprise has been global famous. Well-known brands such as Sony, Toshiba or Mitsubishi. For some Japanese cosmetics products such as Shisedo and Shu Uemura, could also be bought in the oversea market outside Japan. My main focus is not on its market strategy and the company marketing but the sociological meaning behind. Some world famous brand would have limited edition merchandize only sold in Japan, for example, while Burberry is known as a British brand, Burberry Blue Label. In other words, Japanese products are know as high-quality and in different context.

However if we attribute all Japanese impress in Taiwanese culture to the historical linkage, we overlook the effects of globalization and capitalism. Successful Japanese enterprises have exported their merchandise to the worldwide. When one walks

on the streets in any modern city whether in Asia, in the U.S. or in Europe; or when one reads magazines or watches television program, commercials from prestigious Japanese companies-- Sony, Mitsubishi, Nikon, All Nippon Airlines, or countless other various brands-- are always easy to be observed. While endeavoring to market their products, these Japanese enterprises also impress people with their country as well as export and convey Japanese values. It could be seen that Japan discovers the power of culture in expanding their colonies.

This is especially true in Taiwan. In the past, incorporation of Japanese cultures was forced while today, Taiwanese society attentively embraces Japan in every day life. Since Japanese products are enthusiastically welcomed in Taiwanese society, their advertisements and commercials emphasize this “made in Japan” characteristic to attract attention. In doing so, certain Japanese figures will be introduced in the marketing. For example, promoting travel packages to Japan often involves the traditional Japanese cuisine, a Japanese girl in kimono, hot springs, and incredibly beautiful scenery of *sakura* (the cherry flower) which could be possibly replaced by the fireworks, maple trees or snow in accordance with different promotion seasons. Also in the travel packages, Tokyo Disneyland or the Universal Studio in Osaka become the Japanized attractions in spite of the fact that these are American owned amusement parks.

On the other hand, for selling merchandise that are not exactly from Japan, by presenting them in the way that people will associate with Japan, they could become a “fake” Japanese product and enjoy the advantages too. For example, “designed by Japanese designers” or “come in with Japanese style” could be the way to negotiate with

so-called Japanese product. That is to say the definition of “made in Japan” is revised to meet the expectations of Taiwanese market.

Another example which is an extreme case is the “Japanese style bride cake.” In Taiwanese wedding customs, bride cake does not refer to the cake exhibited and eaten in the wedding.¹ The bride cake in Taiwanese is actually called as “merry cookies” which is packed in well-wrapped boxes. Couples often distribute these merry cookies in advance to their friends and relatives as sharing the happiness. In Japan, bride cake is prepared if the couple decides to have Western-style wedding. Couples may give some gift for their guest after wedding ceremonies on their wedding day as souvenirs. These gifts vary from mugs, coffee cups to cakes or snacks. In other words, Japanese don’t have “merry cookies” in their customs yet the “Japanese-style merry cookies” are sold in Taiwan with astonishing prices. These merry cookies are not fake Japanese merchandise but only borrow the title. On the contrary they are authentic “made in Japan” product. The tricky part is enterprises import merchandize that is similar to Taiwanese merry cookies but Japanese bought them as casual gift for visiting friends instead of giving out for wedding. In this case, the meaning of “made in Japan” is fulfilled by ascribing new cultural definition and practice it.

The Aesthetic Standard in Contemporary Taiwanese Society

Previous literature approaches the Japanization in Taiwanese culture from different dimensions. Youth sub-cultures have been the most prominent group to study on about this trendy influence. Besides, discussions also focus on the media that contribute to Japanization, which vary from comics, cartoon, video games to television romance dramas programs and magazines. Studies that have been done mainly target a certain

¹ In fact, there is no such wedding cake in most Taiwanese weddings.

group of people (instances as teenagers or comics' lovers) or within certain subject realm (like public media). Very limited studies examine the more general theme in Taiwanese everyday lives, a fact of which suggests more than the gap in the literature. As argued above, Japanese culture could be observed everywhere in Taiwan and have contributed to the mainstream of Taiwanese culture, therefore, it is taken for granted unless it falls into the sub categories that make the cultural impact then visible.

Bourdieu talks that "habitus" is the accumulation of one's social status, social capital as well as the cultural ideology. Based on his argument, we could see Japanese culture have merged into the background of Taiwanese culture. In order to identify Japanese values, or the values that worship Japan, I choose to examine the aesthetic standard in contemporary Taiwanese society with the rationale of cultural consumption. My focuses are on fashion, beauty and lifestyle. Specifically I look into different aspects such as the clothing style, cosmetics products, beauty standard, furniture and life utensils to firstly see how Taiwanese culture emulates and practice Japanese culture. And second, how the meaning of Japanese culture is constructed and ready to be reproduced in everyday life.

Japan as a symbol

Japanese cultural elements are often introduced to represent Japan in selling Japanese product. In addition to sakura, kimono or Tokyo Disneyland as mentioned earlier in promoting travel packages, other Japanese images can also be used to be the sign of Japan. For example, green tea is a well-known Japanese drink. Another example is pearl due to the Japanese preference for this jewelry. Whatever makes people association with Japan could become the powerful symbols of its culture. And these

symbols make Japan ready and easy to be consumed. For example, make-up cleaning oil product is added with the smell of sakura and packed in pink color bottle to be sold. Before the advertisement tells its potential customers, they already know it is Japanese cleaning oil merchandise rather than a Taiwanese one. The green tea milk (or cake, or pudding) reminds Japanese preferences and because green tea was reported to be good for health, green tea tissue paper was advertised for the best choice when one gets sick. Responding to the new definition of “made in Japan,” merchandise turn to so-called “Japanese product” by applying some Japanese symbols.

In addition to the visual symbol, lingual symbol is another strategy Taiwanese consume Japan which based on the commonness in languages. As mentioned earlier, Taiwanese could more or less grasp the meaning by reading *Han-ji in Japanese*. Japanese word usages nowadays are brought into and used in mandarin Chinese. The blur of boundary between two languages are especially distinguished in selling products whether Japanese merchandise or not. Japanese words and terms in Han-ji are used directly in the advertisements to mark out its Japanese characteristics. In the fake “made in Japan” product Japanese case, sometimes Japanese terms could be used to indicate it reproduces Japanese styles or aesthetic standard. For example, hot spring in northern Taiwan is also famous and a short hot spring trip is always a popular leisure activity among Taiwanese people. The interesting thing is the han-ji of hot spring in Japanese refers to “soup” (to eat) in mandarin, so if read by word “dipping in hot spring” in Japanese is “dipping in the soup” (and ready to be eaten!) which is ridicules but is too funny to forget. Hot spring spots now use this “dipping in the soup” to refer to their service, even though it is a Taiwanese hot spring and an existing activity, the lingual symbol suggests the

reproduction of Japanese life style. Different from exterior words in Japanese based on pronunciation translation from other languages, Taiwanese consume Japanese language by directly picking up already-made Japanese meaning.

In the meantime having Japanese in the products' name or in the instructions of use is another way in using lingual symbol to refer to Japan. "Fake" Japanese product purposely use Japanese symbol in their names, instructions, and even something meaningless but is in Japanese. For example, some product put Tokyo on the package and on its label the company name is "Tokyo oversea business" while in fact, if looking it closer, the factory address is in Taiwan. For the authentic "made in Japan" products that have Japanese instructions on the package, instead of repacking it to cover the Japanese instructions are left as its original way. Instead of covering the imported Japanese goods, the instruction was maintained and other Chinese materials provided so that people need not to understand Japanese to consume this. A sticker with Chinese translation may be provided to cover part of the instruction, so while appropriate product information is detailed without losing the meaning of the original Japanese content can provide.

Symbols of Japan vary in different forms. As long as they fall into the categories related to Japanese cultures, it could be seen as the symbol even it may not be visible and applicable at the first glance. Japanese lifestyle worships simple, neat, cleanness, stylish and in all a low-key aesthetic standard which respond to Japanese being a reserved, polite, indirect ethnic characteristics. Therefore as long as merchandize that meet with these standard aesthetic standards, they could be called Japanese style and become "made in Japan" product.

Selling a product is not to sell the product itself but to sell the symbol of Japan which is, so to speak, the meaning behind these Japanese symbols. If we see Japanese culture are consumed by indicating symbols, such as green tea and raw fish which often comes with Sushi represent health, what are the symbolic meaning of all these Japanese symbols collectively created?

Japan as an Asian Model

Tokyo is often regarded as the fashion center in Asia. Taiwanese people, especially women, see that is the reason to imitate and follow Japanese fashion. Taiwanese women learn the latest fashion information from all kinds of imported Japanese feminine magazines, by practicing to dress and make-up according to Japanese fashion. These Japanese feminine fashion magazines are quite popular in Taiwan. As for local Taiwanese feminine magazines, the information provided inside still also follows Japanese fashion trends. Taiwanese women are “educated” by all kinds of beauty magazines to perform Japanese style. For example, a Taiwanese woman will bring a Japanese magazine to hair salon, pointing at the Japanese model’s pictures in there and ask for the same hair-style. Now not only Japanese landscape could be founding Taiwan or made-in-Japan products are produced and consumed, people living in this island are practice Japanese style and become “made in Japan” themselves. What are the reason making , for example, Taiwanese women emulate in everyday life to become the women “made in Japan.”

Japanese are known as being serious, precise and pursuing perfectionism. In the Taiwanese group consciousness of Japan has become the pronoun of good quality, high-quality, satisfying, ensuring quality. If a product could survive from Japanese

scrutiny it implied it has good quality. So to speak, Japan becomes the role model to follow. Products are sold as Japanese favorite, best-selling in Japan. Instead of emphasizing the product itself the point become how it follow's the model taste as its credibility building. Japanese identity is practiced by reproducing same Japanese beauty standard or lifestyle. Japan is consumed as the model.

On the contrary to previous discussion on subcultures which only imitate and take part of Japanese cultures, I look through the lens to see how Japanese culture is taken into everyday life. It contributes a lot to the mainstream of Taiwanese cultures, and worship similar values as treating Japan as model, and Taiwanese have a lot of imaginations on Japanese cultures based on such daily reproduction. Mainstream Taiwanese cultures appreciate more Japanese culture which refers to the distinction.

Another characteristic about model culture about Japan is it is the model in Asia. A very good example is a Japanese shampoo brand called Asience it used the famous Chinese actress Ziyi Zhang, who is also the main actress in Memories of Geisha, and in the advertisement her beautiful hair made all westerner being jealous. At the end the conclusion is the product is Asian new beauty. Japanese products are designed for Asian, which products from United States and Europe cannot meet the needs. Similar examples are found in lifestyle or cosmetic products which distinguish the difference. That is to say Japan therefore as become the symbol of Asia are consumed as the Asian model.

Japan as a media to Western cultures

While Taiwanese treat Japan as Asian model to emulate, how do Taiwanese see the Western cultures. I do not see it is very difficult to sell Western culture in globalization. But if in the case getting a free ride on Japan it could be even easier. One

of the reasons is Taiwanese think Japanese fit more to Asian cultures and fit more to Asia countries. Especially the lifestyle is similar. In the logic that Japan is regarded as model and could be more apt to Taiwan, what popular in Japan meaning the products have been proof-reading by Japanese therefore could be worthy adopted by other Asian. Japan then is consumed as the media to link the East and West, the media to the world. Louis Vutton is the popular brand among Japanese therefore, Taiwanese become more familiar with this European brand and if they decide to buy one, they could choose the bestselling bags sold in Japan, or the bag that designed by the Japanese designer. Anna Sui's designer was from New York and is grown up in the U.S. and her first store opened in Soho, New York. In Taiwan, Anna Sui is consumed as a Japanese brand that is famous in the U.S.

Implication and Discussions

As discussed above Japan is consumed and becomes the mainstream of culture, however the Japanese culture being consumed is not deep and overall. Does Taiwanese take up Japanese as being Mcdonaldization. Taiwanese culture consumes Japanese cultures by taking the superficial meaning. For example, the aesthetic behind sakura is the tragedy characteristic. In order to maintain the moment of best memories is to end itself on the spot, which I don't see Taiwanese cultures takes. Japanization turns Taiwanese into Japanese. In Japanese society which structures fashion trend could be observed because everyone dress the same, Taiwan this situation is not that obvious but still come be observed. It is the superficial meaning was taken into the mainstream and distinction as the model to follow. Based on Taiwanese imagination, Japan is actually become flat. For example in Japanese fashion magazine, different Japanese geographical areas will be identified to indicated the style different, in Taiwan, Tokyo becomes the pronoun of

Japan, in other words, the deep meaning is not taken. Taiwanese takes the part they need and ignore the part that not needed. Japan is as flat as Tokyo.

Yet is the flat symbol consumed be unique case in Taiwan this could be advance by reverse, how does western culture consume Japanese cultures, is this the same as Taiwan consume Japan. While for western can hardly tell different Asian races, especially the East Asian such as Japanese, Korean, and Chinese, Moreover we question how Asian cultures is consumed in the west. While the leading actress in Memories of Geisha is Chinese, we not only see the east is generalized and flat but also get a glance how Japan might be hegemonic culture in Asia. It would be interesting to see how other countries consumed Japan in their cultures. At the same time, how does Japanese consume other countries cultures

In the mean time, while Japanese culture has been identified as being the good taste, Taiwanese culture is getting alert toward such mainstream taste and begin to resist this. The “Tai-ke” style is an example which distinguish from the mainstream Japanese cultural practice but signified to the Taiwanese identity. In terms of taste, Tai-ke represents the taste that different from the elegant fashion, and people who do not have the same social capital to appreciate the mainstream. Tai-kei used to see as a stigma while recently the public opinions turn to be treated this as the new fashion. Practice Taiwanese should be proud of. Another example is Korean fashion gradually enter into Taiwan in this decade. It follows the way when Japanese cultures first brought in lately from tv program. As this is the growing trend, we could probably keep an eye to see if other cultures will expand the dialogues between Taiwanese cultures and others. We could see if this turns to be another Japanese case or not.

Conclusion

Countless examples of this form of cultural consumption can be found in different aspects of Taiwanese everyday life and my examination of these three aspects reveal only the tip of the iceberg. Selling Japanese products can be seen in this sense as actually selling Japanese culture. My position is that when Taiwanese people consume products from Japanese brands or products that are not made in Japan but have been given the appearance of being Japanese, they not only consume the products themselves but also Japanese cultures and its symbolic meanings.