

2011-E-3

**Popular Culture and Regional Identity in East Asia:
Evidence from the Asia Student Survey 2008**

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May 2011

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the impact of cultural exchanges on the formation of an East Asian regional identity. Has the spread of popular culture led to the formation of a collective identity in East Asia? A statistical analysis of the data from the Asia Student Survey 2008 demonstrates that cultural exchanges have a positive impact on the formation of an East Asian regional identity. In East Asia, the spread of popular culture has led to the formation of a collective identity or the cultivation of a sense of “we-ness” or “we-feeling.” In concrete terms, students who are more frequently exposed to cultural products originating in East Asia – specifically, TV programs, movies and animations produced in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and China – tend to identify themselves more strongly as “Asians,” and be more sympathetic to the concept of “Asian citizenship.”

Introduction

In East Asia today, the spread of popular culture has been remarkable. The people in this region favor popular cultural products, such as pop-music, TV dramas, movies, *manga* (comic books) and *anime* (animations), originating in the region, including Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and China. Their consumption has increased regional exchanges at the societal level, which are distinct from inter-governmental activities. In other words, by consuming foreign cultural products, they have facilitated the bottom-up process of “regionalization,” as opposed to the top-down process of “regionalism,” centered on inter-governmental institutional frameworks for political and economic cooperation, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) and the East Asia Summit (EAS) (Pempel 2005, 19-24; Hurrell 1995, 39-40).

This being so, the purpose of this paper is to explore the impact of cultural exchanges on the formation of an East Asian regional identity. Has the spread of popular culture led to the formation of a collective identity in East Asia? Given that the people in East Asia are engaging in cultural exchanges on a regional scale, have they developed a sense of “we-ness” or “we-feeling” – described by Karl Deutsche (1957, 36) as an integral component of regional community? This paper examines these questions by statistically analyzing the data from the Asia Student Survey 2008, conducted by the Global Institute for Asian Regional Integration (GIARI) – a five year research project of the Tokyo-based Waseda University Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, from 2007 to 2012.

The present paper represents a new direction for research on community building and collective identity formation in the East Asian region – which, in this paper, simply refers to an area encompassing Northeast and Southeast Asia. The existing research has paid insufficient attention to cultural exchanges. Its main

concern has been developments in the security sphere; namely, the spread of cooperative security ideas through diplomatic exchanges, which facilitate the formation of a community of friendly nations, or the cultivation of a sense of “we-ness” or “we-feeling” (see Snitwongse 1995; Dösch and Mols 1998, 170-171; Acharya 1998, 2001).

Yet, to enhance our understanding of an East Asian community, it is essential to focus on cultural exchanges, the core component of which is the consumption of foreign cultural products. This is because the consumption of cultural products should facilitate community building and collective identity formation, or the cultivation of a sense of “we-ness” or “we-feeling.” The consumption of these products is all about the sharing of common images and feelings through the exchange of these ideational elements across national boundaries. The International Relations literature maintains that the sharing of common ideational elements through various forms of communication and exchange across borders facilitates community building and the formation of collective identities (Deutsch et al. 1957, esp. 145; Adler and Barnett 1998, esp. 41; Barnett and Adler 1998, 416-418; also see Wendt 1994, 388-391; Wendt 1999, 343-363).

In what follows, this paper first sheds light on the spread of popular culture on a regional scale. It then conduct a statistical analysis of the data from the Asia Student Survey 2008, a survey of students in six East Asian countries – China, South Korea, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. To put it briefly, the study demonstrates that cultural exchanges have a positive impact on the formation of an East Asian regional identity. In East Asia, the spread of popular culture has led to the formation of a collective identity or the cultivation of a sense of “we-ness” or “we-feeling.” In concrete terms, students who are more frequently exposed to cultural products originating in East Asia – specifically, TV programs, movies and animations produced in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and China – tend to identify themselves more strongly as “Asians,” and be more sympathetic to the concept of “Asian citizenship.”

Regional Cultural Exchanges

Before examining the impact of cultural exchanges on the formation of an East Asian regional identity, it is important to explore whether there are “regional” aspects to these exchanges – or whether some elements of cultural exchanges can be considered “East Asian” phenomena, taking place within a particular geographical area. This is so because cultural exchanges in East Asia seem to have a global aspect, in two senses. First, the spread of certain popular cultural products seems to be a global phenomenon. For example, Japanese *manga* and *anime* are popular all over the world. Second, the East Asians are by no means culturally insulated from the global society, as they watch Hollywood movies and listen to Western pop music. Given these two points, if no aspect of cultural exchanges is regional, the focus of analysis should be shifted to global cultural exchanges and the formation of a global identity.

Yet, remarkably, some elements of cultural exchanges can be considered “East Asian” phenomena. This is because the popularity of certain kinds of popular cultural products is concentrated in East Asia, namely, TV dramas and pop music. To illustrate this point, it is worth focusing on the spread of Japanese TV dramas and J-pop music. Japanese products seem less likely to spread than those originating in South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and China, for historical reasons. The historical memories shaped in the first half of the twentieth century must have made the people in the East Asian region reluctant to accept anything originating in Japan. Nevertheless, Japanese TV dramas and J-pop music are favored by youngsters in many Asian countries, and influencing their fashion and lifestyle. Understandably, the exports of Japanese TV programs have largely been concentrated in East Asia. The Tokyo-based Institute for Information and Communication Policy (2007) found in 2005 that approximately 60% of Japan’s total exports of TV programs went to the Asian region. A special project team of the Broadcasting Culture Research Institute of the

Japan Broadcasting Corporation found in 2001-02 that nearly a half of Japan's total exports of TV programs went to the Asian region: 46.1 % to Asia, 27.9 % to Europe, 7.6 % to North America, 7.1 % to Latin America, and the rest to other areas (Hara, Kawatake, and Sugiyama 2004, 217).¹

The next task is to examine whether regional cultural exchanges have led to the formation of an East Asian regional identity. One thing is notable in this respect: on the basis of survey data and experts' analyses, it seems fair to say that popular culture enables people to develop a positive view of the country of origin and a sense of affinity with the people in that country. According to a survey conducted in Japan, in the first half of the 2000s, 38 % of the population watched at least one episode of the Korean TV drama, *Winter Sonata*, and many of them either held a favorable view of South Korea or developed a new interest in this country (Mitsuya 2004). With regard to Japanese popular culture, a number of experts have argued that the spread of the country's cultural products has improved Japan's image and boosted the people's sense of affinity with the Japanese, in such places as Taiwan, South Korea, China, Hong Kong, Singapore and Thailand.²

¹ In terms of the number of programs, the top five export destinations were, in descending order, Taiwan, the US, South Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore. In terms of the number of hours, the top five export destinations were, in descending order, Taiwan, the US, Singapore, Thailand and Hong Kong (Hara, Kawatake, and Sugiyama 2004, 217-218). The US, which is the only non-Asian country in these lists, should be considered a special case. This is because a few cable TV channels are available for the Japanese who live there, in addition to NHK World, the international broadcasting channel of the Japan Broadcasting Corporation, which is available in all countries. The present authors thank Yumiko Hara of the Broadcasting Culture Research Institute of the Japan Broadcasting Corporation for clarifying this point (also see Hara, Kawatake, and Sugiyama 2004, 222, 230).

² Ishii Kenichi, Satoshi Watanabe and Susumu Kohari have conducted surveys in Taipei, Seoul and Shanghai, and found that, in each of these cities, people who watch Japanese TV programs tend to develop a favorable view of Japan (Ishii and Watanabe 2001, 62-64; Kohari 2005, 68-70). Wai-ming Ng notes that, in Hong Kong and Singapore, Japanese popular culture is improving the country's image and enhancing the people's sense of affinity with the Japanese (2006a, 198, 2006b, 203). Worawut Worawittayanon (2003) maintains that Japanese *manga* and *anime* are enhancing the Thai people's interest in Japan. Homare Endo (2008, 61) observes that Chinese youngsters are developing a sense of

Research Design

To examine the effect of regional cultural exchanges on the formation of an Asian identity, we analyze the data gathered from a survey conducted in six countries (China, South Korea, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam) in 2008 by GIARI at Waseda University. The sample consists of 2,463 college students from two universities in each of the six countries (approximately 200 students were recruited from each university). Using questions in this data set, we operationally define the important variables discussed in the sections above.

For the dependent variable, the formation of an Asian identity is measured by responses to two questions in the survey. The first question is whether or not respondents agree with the statement, “I see myself as part of Asia.” The second is whether respondents agree with the statement, “We should foster the concept of Asian citizenship.” These variables are coded 1 if respondents answered “strongly disagree,” 2 if “disagree,” 3 if “agree” and 4 if “strongly agree.” We regress each of them separately on independent variables.

For the key independent variable, regional cultural exchanges are measured by responses to questions about the frequencies of exposure to foreign popular culture in Asia. In the survey, respondents were asked how often they were exposed to TV programs, movies and/or animations, produced in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong

affinity with the Japanese, although they remain critical of Tokyo’s attitude toward the issue of history. Yoshiko Nakano (2008) has drawn a similar conclusion, by conducting rounds of interviews with a large sample of Chinese university students: Japanese popular culture has not washed away the negative memories of the past, but it has created a positive image of contemporary Japan. By surveying undergraduate students in Hong Kong, Bangkok and Seoul, Nissim Kadosh Otmazgin (2008, 93-95) has found that the appreciation of Japanese popular culture tends to foster a positive image of Japan, and incites additional interest in other aspects of Japan, such as customs, sports and fashion. On the basis of his interview data, Ming-tsung Lee (2004) argues that many Taiwanese who had watched Japanese TV dramas traveled to Japan by joining the so-called “Japanese TV drama tour,” and then enhanced their interest in the country.

Kong and/or China. Two dummy variables are created, by using answers to these questions. One variable is coded 1 if respondents reported that they were exposed to one foreign popular culture almost every day, and 0 if otherwise. The other dummy variable is coded 1 if respondents reported that they were exposed to *at least* two foreign Asian popular cultures almost every day, and 0 if otherwise. This means that the base category is “no everyday exposure to foreign Asian popular culture.” For Chinese and South Korean respondents, the popular culture of their own country is not counted as foreign popular culture. Therefore, theoretically, Chinese and South Korean respondents can be exposed to two foreign popular cultures at most while other nationals can be exposed to three at most.

Other independent variables are included in the models as controls. Gender (1 if “male,” 0 if “female”), academic year (1-4), age, and major (1 if “science major,” 0 if otherwise) are included to control for the effects of respondents’ demographic characteristics on the formation of an Asian identity. Proficiencies in English and Japanese (1-4, with higher values associated with higher proficiencies) may have a positive impact on the formation of an Asian identity by allowing the students to gain knowledge of foreign countries or to communicate with people from foreign countries. Frequencies of Internet use, email use, and cell phone message use (1-5, with higher values associated with higher usage) may also have a positive impact for similar reasons. Premised on the view that positive images of Asia may enhance a sense of belonging to the region, the notion that “Asia is developing” (1-7, higher values associated with stronger agreement with the statement) is considered an independent variable. In addition, the effect of non-Asian popular culture or soft power should also be considered. The notion that “US soft power is too strong” may entail reactions against American soft power, and therefore enhance an Asian identity (1-4, higher values associated with stronger agreement with the statement), while exposure to US and European popular culture may water down such an identity (1 if respondents are

exposed to US and European popular culture almost every day, 0 if otherwise). The number of countries which, respondents think, are included in Asia may affect their sense of belonging to the region. Finally, the number of regional organizations in Asia recognized by respondents is included in the model to capture the impact of the knowledge of the region on the formation of an Asian identity.

Ordered logit is used to estimate the models because the dependent variables are ordered categorical variables. Standard errors are clustered by countries, and country fixed effects are included in the models. We do recognize that there may be simultaneity between our independent and dependent variables. That is, students who have a stronger Asian identity are more likely to be exposed to Asian popular culture. The most common way to deal with simultaneity bias is to run 2SLS with an instrument variable for the independent variable. In our case, however, this method is not feasible because our key independent variables are three dummies. Therefore, we simply regress Asian identity on the raw independent variables. All Vietnamese respondents are dropped from the analysis due to missing values on some independent variables. Table 1 shows descriptive statistics of variables used in the analysis.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics

Variables	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
I see myself as part of Asia	2031	3.234	0.597	1	4
We should foster the concept of Asian citizenship	2010	2.968	0.681	1	4
Male	2063	0.502	0.500	0	1
Academic year	2063	2.419	1.092	1	4
Age	2063	20.505	2.017	16	32
Science major	2063	0.509	0.500	0	1
Proficiency in English	2058	3.129	0.677	1	4
Proficiency in Japanese	2044	1.323	0.558	1	4
Frequency of the Internet Use	2062	4.781	0.518	1	5
Frequency of email use	2062	4.299	0.879	1	5
Frequency of cell phone message use	2062	4.697	0.770	1	5
Image of Asia as developing	2058	5.123	1.254	1	7
US soft power too strong	2007	2.601	0.769	1	4
The number of countries in Asia	2063	16.358	8.457	1	32
The number of regional organizations recognized	2063	3.005	1.244	1	6
Exposed to 1 Asian pop culture almost every day	2063	0.163	0.370	0	1
Exposed to at least 2 Asian pop cultures almost every day	2063	0.061	0.239	0	1
Exposed to US and European pop culture almost every day	2059	0.271	0.445	0	1

Findings

The results are shown in Table 2. In the first model, male dummy, age, proficiency in Japanese, the image of Asia as developing, and exposure to at least two Asian popular cultures almost every day are statistically significant at least at the 5 percent level. College students who are female, older, more proficient in Japanese, and exposed to at least two foreign Asian popular cultures almost every day are more likely to see themselves as part of Asia.

In the second model, academic year, the notion that the US soft power is too strong, and exposure to one and at least two foreign Asian popular cultures almost every day are statistically significant at least at the 5 percent level. College students who are more senior in their academic years, more cautious of American soft power, and more exposed to foreign Asian popular culture are more likely to think that they should foster the concept of Asian citizenship. It should be noted that, in both models, exposure to foreign Asian popular culture contributes to the formation of an Asian identity while exposure to US and European popular culture does not.

To interpret the effect of exposure to foreign Asian popular culture on the formation of an Asian identity more substantively, the post-estimation interpretation of the ordered logit model is shown in Figures 1 and 2. Figure 1 depicts the predicted probabilities of strongly agreeing with the statement, “I see myself as part of Asia,” as a function of exposure to foreign Asian popular culture, for Chinese, South Korean, Philippine, Singaporean and Thai college students. The exposure to foreign Asian popular culture varies within three categories: “no every day exposure,” “exposure to one almost every day,” and “exposure to at least two almost every day.” All other variables are fixed at their mean values.

These lines clearly indicate that more exposure to Asian popular culture leads to a stronger Asian identity, although the strength varies across countries. For example, the predicted probability of strongly agreeing with the statement, “I see myself as part of Asia,” is .43 for a Chinese college student who is not exposed to Asian popular culture almost every day, while it is .53 for one who is exposed to at least two Asian popular cultures almost every day.

Likewise, Figure 2 shows that more exposure to Asian popular culture leads to stronger support for the concept of Asian citizenship, although the strength varies across countries. For example, the predicted probability of strongly agreeing with the statement, “We should foster the concept of Asian citizenship,” is .13 for a Chinese college student who is not exposed to Asian popular culture almost every day, while it is .19 for one who is exposed to at least two Asian popular cultures almost every day.

Table 2 Factors Affecting the Formation of Asian Identity and the Motivation to Foster Asian Citizenship: Ordered Logit Analysis

Independent variable	I see my self as part of Asia	SE	We should foster the concept of Asian citizenship	SE
Male	-0.334**	0.085	-0.032	0.138
Academic year	-0.084 †	0.047	-0.059*	0.027
Age	0.069*	0.030	0.033	0.032
Science major	-0.012	0.140	0.025	0.066
Proficiency in English	0.094	0.172	0.085	0.165
Proficiency in Japanese	0.187**	0.068	0.125	0.080
Frequency of the Internet use	0.088	0.087	-0.069	0.052
Frequency of email use	-0.024	0.048	-0.015	0.041
Frequency of cell phone message use	-0.023	0.092	0.046	0.050
Image of Asia as developing	0.123**	0.029	0.017	0.068
US soft power too strong	-0.026	0.048	0.187**	0.021
The number of countries in Asia	0.013	0.013	0.004	0.009
The number of regional organizations recognized	0.074	0.050	0.045	0.052
Exposed to 1 Asian pop culture almost every day	0.212	0.187	0.265**	0.090
Exposed to at least 2 Asian pop cultures almost every day	0.399**	0.082	0.412**	0.150
Exposed to US and European pop culture almost every day	-0.040	0.104	-0.001	0.182
Constants	-1.705	1.328	-2.153*	0.982
	0.952	1.052	0.454	0.961
	4.405**	1.036	3.324**	1.036
Model statistics				
N	1951		1937	
Log-likelihood	-1653.982		-1926.007	
χ^2	74.491		81.463	

Significance levels : † : 10% * : 5% ** : 1%.

Notes: Standard errors (SE) are clustered by countries. Country fixed effects are included in the models.

Figure 1 Predicted probability of strongly agreeing with the statement, “I see myself as part of Asia” (All other variables are fixed at their mean values).

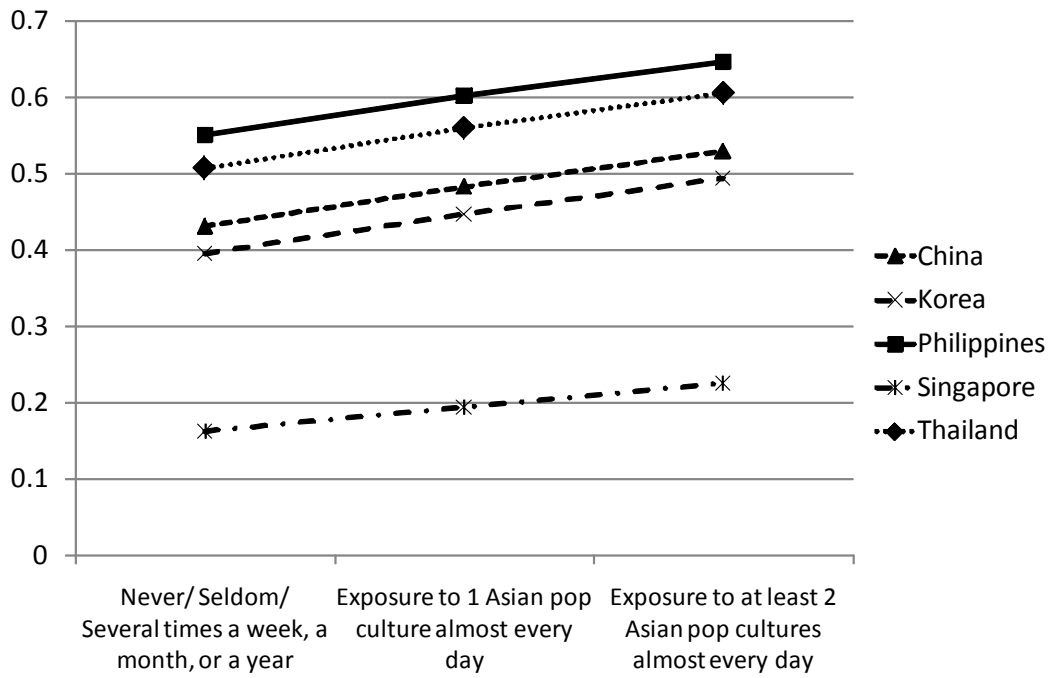
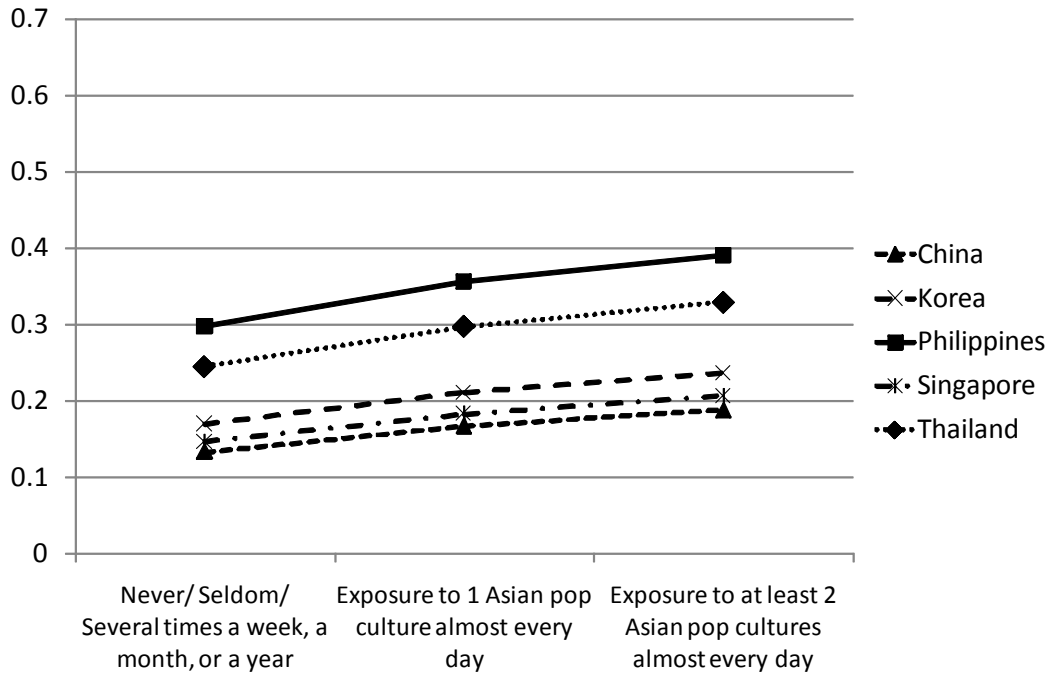


Figure 2 Predicted probability of strongly agreeing with the statement, “We should foster the concept of Asian citizenship” (All other variables are fixed at their mean values).



Conclusions

It can be concluded that cultural exchanges have a positive impact on the formation of an East Asian regional identity. In East Asia, the spread of popular culture has led to the formation of a collective identity or the cultivation of a sense of “we-ness” or “we-feeling.” The significance of the conclusion here should not be underestimated. This is because the consumers of popular cultural products include students and youngsters, or the next generation who will in the future lead the creation of a regional community in various fields, including security, the economy, the environment, education and culture. The images and feelings which this generation share today must have a strong bearing on the future of an East Asian community.

Policy recommendations are in order: the governments of the East Asian countries should promote cultural exchanges at the regional level. Such exchanges facilitate community building, which in turn contributes to the maintenance of a peaceful regional environment. To promote cultural exchanges, they should coordinate their policies within frameworks, such as the APT and the EAS. Within these frameworks, they have expressed their commitment to building an East Asian community which would “contribute to the maintenance of ... peace and security, prosperity and progress” (APT 2005; also see EAS 2005). What they should do now is to put cultural cooperation at the forefront of their community building effort. That is to say, they should collaborate on the formation of what can be regarded as an “East Asian cultural community.”

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GIARI Working Paper Vol. 2011-E-3,

May 2011

Published by Waseda University Global COE Program

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Printed in Japan by TRY-EX Inc.