

Soft Sell, Hard Cash Marketing J-Cult in Asia

Moeran, Brian

Document Version

Final published version

Publication date:

2004

License

CC BY-NC-ND

Citation for published version (APA):

Moeran, B. (2004). *Soft Sell, Hard Cash: Marketing J-Cult in Asia*.

[Link to publication in CBS Research Portal](#)

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us (research.lib@cbs.dk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Download date: 01. Feb. 2023





**Copenhagen
Business School**
HANDELSHØJSKOLEN

Department of
Intercultural Communication and Management

Dalgas Have 15
DK-2000 Frederiksberg

Working Paper no 76, 2004

Soft Sell, Hard Cash: Marketing J-Cult in Asia

Brian Moeran
Professor
bdm.ikl@cbs.dk

Soft Sell, Hard Cash: Marketing J-Cult in Asia

Brian Moeran

Department of Intercultural Communication and Management

Copenhagen Business School

bdm.ikl@cbs.dk

The Asian Popular Cultural Scene

Half a dozen years ago, on my return from Hong Kong to Europe by train, I stopped off in Ulaan Bataar, the capital of Mongolia, for a few days. One evening, our guide took us out for a night on the town and, after a somewhat reckless taxi ride across town, we ended up in a *karaoke* bar. There we were ushered into a special soundproofed room where we could drink, talk and sing as loud as we wished. Even though we were a mixed crowd of tourists, we soon found ourselves going through the customary Japanese-style turn-taking ritual of singing a song each. At one stage during the – sometimes painful – hilarities that followed, I suddenly noticed how confusedly international our gathering was. Not only did we come from a variety of countries (England, France, Ireland, Japan, Mongolia, Singapore, Switzerland, and the United States) and communicate with one another by means of various – occasionally strange – versions of the English language. The technology and media forms used for our entertainment were equally hybrid: the popular cultural form was Japanese, although the *karaoke* machine itself was made in Korea; the video visuals of both people and backgrounds accompanying our songs on the television screen were of Singapore; and the songs could be anything from Frank Sinatra’s “My Way” to the latest European Song Contest hit. I think it was when our Mongolian guide began singing in Chinese one of his favourite Japanese pop songs that I had a sort of intellectual double-take (or what was in effect a quintuple-take). This was globalization in action!

These days, Japanese popular (commercial, commodity, mass, or media) cultural forms may be found in one form or another all over the world. From Hollywood re-makes of Japanese films to Hong Kong Cantonese re-recordings of Japanese songs, by way of street fashions, travelator *sushi* restaurants, karaoke bars, and cartoon character merchandising, Japanese culture industry products and ideas have, since the last decade of the second millennium in particular, permeated the everyday lives of people as far apart as Berlin and Bombay, Sydney and Shanghai, Jakarta and Jamaica, Utah and, as we

saw above, Ulaan Bataar. In the words of Saya Shiraishi, "Japanese popular culture is becoming Asian popular culture" (Shiraishi 1997: 236).

This is not – or should not be – surprising, although the sentiment may be a little exaggerated. The growth of any major economy more or less automatically brings with it a number of residuals that, on the one hand, threaten the style in which other nations imagine themselves as finite, sovereign, political communities (Anderson 1983: 15-16) and, on the other, contribute to theories of cultural homogenization and heterogenization in the context of globalization. In a seminal essay devoted to unpicking what has proved, and is still proving, to be a thorny theoretical issue, Arjun Appadurai pointed out that most small or less-developed polities are worried about the possibility of cultural absorption – especially by those others that are nearby (and mentions the fear of Japanization on the part of Koreans). In other words, one man's imagined community may become another's political prison (Appadurai 1990: 295). Such thoughts are pertinent to a discussion of the spread of Japanese popular culture (henceforth "J-Cult" [*J-bunka*])¹ in the Asian region where, almost without exception, nation states have been grappling with the legacy of both Western and Japanese colonialism and seeking to establish identities that will allow them to be accepted as members of the "club" of advanced industrialized trading nations.

In order to explore what he saw as "fundamental disjunctures between economy, culture and politics," Appadurai (1990: 296) suggested that we should perhaps explore globalization processes in terms of five different kinds of cultural flows – or, of what he chose to call "scapes" – of people (ethnoscapes), images (mediascapes), machinery (technoscapes), money (finanscapes) and ideas (ideoscapes). These scapes are constructed from all sorts of different perspectives by people, organizations and institutions interacting at all levels, from macro- to micro-levels of society. Although global cultural flows increasingly create disjunctures between these scapes, together they constitute the building blocks of multiple, historically situated, "imagined worlds" (1990: 296, 301).

This fertile suggestion I have myself picked up in an earlier publication where I distinguished between "hard" (finance and technology) and "soft" (media and ideals) scapes, with people acting as the intermediaries between them (Moeran 2000). As the Japanese economy has grown over the second half of the 20th century, so have Japanese business organizations begun to move abroad (especially to Southeast Asia), where they have introduced new technologies and made long-term financial investments. Japanese employees have also moved back and forth between Japanese main and Asian (or European and American) branch offices and their presence in foreign countries has led to further developments abroad: notably, the introduction of Japanese schools and Japanese food stores, but also new religious movements and – more gradually – commodities connected with a Japanese lifestyle. The latter itself, thanks partially to rapidly increasing tourism and the flow of millions of Japanese abroad during the 1980s and 90s, made people at the "local" end of these globalizing flows more and more aware of and

¹ In introducing the neologism "J-Cult," I am, of course, following the lead set by the abbreviation of Japanese pop music to "J pop." At the same time, however, I believe that "J-Cult" neatly expresses the fashionable nature of Japanese popular culture, which has to some extent become a cult form among many young people in the Asian region.

interested in Japanese culture. In this respect, I prefer to regard popular culture as a “taste culture,” designed to “entertain, inform, and beautify life” and consisting of values, the cultural forms which express those values... and the media in which they are expressed” (Gans 1974: 10).

In other words, all five of Appadurai’s scapes may be discerned in the flow of Japanese taste culture into the Asian region. Firstly, J-Cult has often depended on new technologies – including, for example, video recording. Secondly, it is the result of financial investment in those technologies, as well as in production and distribution facilities established locally. Thirdly, it has involved people – including, importantly, the marketing (more or less successfully) of celebrities from Japan’s entertainment world, as well as engineers, designers, and others in Japan’s corporate business world. Fourthly, it has encompassed all kinds of media and images – ranging from cartoons and associated characters like Doraemon and Hello Kitty, to fashion, film, magazines, pop music, television programmes, and so on. And finally, it has brought with it sets of ideals reflecting Japanese cultural predispositions and myths of the kind that invariably accompany the production, content and marketing of popular cultural forms.

The Spread of J-Cult

Look up any evening’s television entertainment in a Hong Kong newspaper and you generally find the territory’s Chinese language television stations airing programmes with titles like *Mask Rider Black*, *Tekkaman Blade*, *Chibimanko-chan*, and *Japanese Idol Theatre*. Many of these are dubbed into Cantonese and feature products of Japan’s animation industry (for example, *Doraemon*, *Sailor Moon*, *Dr. Slump*, *Captain Tsuga* and *Dragonball*). These also appear in comic book form, with *Sailor Moon* translated as *Mei Siu Lui Jin Si*, *Dragon Z* into *Lung Jiu Z*, and *Slam Dunk* into *Lam Yi Tong Yap Cheung*. These media character creators – Tezuka Osamu, Shimayama Akira, Fujiko Fujio and Takahashi Rumiko – are household names among Hong Kong fans, and the characters themselves decorate everything from pencil cases and stationery to baby sponges, towels and other domestic products to create what have been aptly called “image alliances” (cf. Shiraishi 1997: 225). It seems that in Hong Kong, and elsewhere in the East and Southeast Asian region, everyone’s favourite cartoon character is to be found somewhere on people’s clothing, accessories, school equipment, household goods – as well as in almost every store where an ubiquitous *maneki neko* cat squats in a window or by the cash register beckoning good fortune and wealth for its owner.

There are various factors underpinning developments such as these – factors that have first enabled and then encouraged the spread of J-Cult into the Asian region as a whole. The first of these is financial and *economic*. When the G7 group of nations decided in 1986 to float the US dollar in an attempt to combat Japanese exports as part of the so-called Plaza Accord, Japanese companies found themselves with virtually no choice but to relocate their manufacturing facilities overseas, as part of an essential production cost cutting strategy. This not only enabled them to continue to export cheaper goods to the United States and elsewhere; it assisted in the development of local economies in the

countries in Southeast Asia that they chose for their operations: Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and, through Hong Kong, mainland China.

The second, related to economic growth, is *demographic*. As a result of the burgeoning economies of these Southeast Asian countries (which themselves kick-started other economies in their wake), there developed a new Asian middle class that was salaried, located in rapidly urbanizing or already urban settings, comparatively young, and looking to spend its money on leisure and entertainment. Not unnaturally, as part of a kind of “flying geese” theory, this new middle class looked to Japan as the only non-Western industrialised superpower. After all, their own lives were rapidly coming to resemble those of people like them living in Japan and, as their local media constantly reminded them, a Japanese lifestyle came to be seen as the desired Asian middle class lifestyle (Ogawa 2004: 147). So they started to import and imitate different aspects of J-Cult that gained their attention: comic books, television cartoons, J-pop music, and Japanese fashions that were picked up all over Asia without ever reaching New York, Paris, London or Milan. J-Cult has thus been used as part of the fabrication and remoulding of identities among – especially young – city people living in the Asian region. Here we should note that “Asian interconnections forged by the flows of taste culture are not *national* ones. They are predominantly between urban spaces, between global cit[i]es – Tokyo, Seoul, Hong Kong, Taipei, Shanghai, and so on” (Iwabuchi 2002: 200). As has been remarked in other contexts, “it is in the city that contemporary popular culture... has its home” (Chambers 1986: 17).

But interconnections have also been forged within generations. In this respect – as with its urban centredness, where city people are separated from those living in the country – J-Cult has been both an integrating and disintegrating force. In a sense, because of their different tastes, it has driven a wedge between generations in different Asian countries, while simultaneously uniting all young people on the basis of a shared taste across the urbanized parts of the region (Belsen and Bremner 2004: 97). We should note, though, that the development of this young, well-off, urban, Asian middle class coincided with a demographic trend in Japan that has seen the number of Japanese teenagers peak at the end of the 1980s² and fall by one quarter in the intervening years. In other words, manufacturers and media alliances in Japan have realised that the long-term decrease in demand for J-Cult in the home market can be more than offset by the newly emerging Asian markets.

There is a *political* element, thirdly, attached to the adoption of J-Cult by young people in Asia and this concerns precisely the generation gap. Whereas their parents and grandparents have long felt antagonistic towards Japan, Japanese and “things Japanese” because of the latter’s various “activities” in the Asian region during the course of the Pacific War, the present young generation in East and Southeast Asia has for the most part put such resentment aside. Although it is extremely difficult to forecast the exact turns that will be taken in diplomatic relations between Japan and its neighbours, it is possible that J-Cult will facilitate communication and help bring an end to a particular historical era – as it is, perhaps, doing in South Korea, following former Japanese Prime Minister Keizō

² The number of 16 year olds in Japan peaked at 2 million in 1989, and has since fallen to below 1.5 million.

Obuchi's formal apology for his country's war crimes and the South Korean Government's consequent relaxation of its ban on cultural imports in the late 1990s (Belsen and Bremner 2004: 96-7).

The political factor is, as intimated, extremely complex. On the one hand, there are conservative cultural critics in countries like Taiwan who perceive J-Cult as a "threat" to their own socio-cultural norms because it takes economic advantage of people and "degrades" local cultures. A similar argument has been put forward by, for example, cartoonists in various Asian countries who, bemoaning the virtual disappearance of local traditions in Indonesia, Taiwan, South Korea and elsewhere because of the ubiquity of Japanese *manga* comics, have "decried the manga invasion as part of Japan's continuing economic and cultural imperialism in the post-colonial era" (Lent 2001: 4). On the other hand, J-Cult is used as an argument for freedom and democracy. The fact that those who adopt it abroad are clearly comfortable with foreign cultural elements shows that they have self-confidence and can make their own decisions. They have got beyond fighting in the streets for basic human rights (however these may be defined) and that is a good thing (Yu-Fen Ko quoted in Belsen and Bremner 2004: 101-2).

Finally, there are the *cultural* factors relating to the spread and acceptance of J-Cult in different parts of Asia. One of the things about Japanese, as opposed to American, popular culture in Asia is that it is "familiarily different." A television drama like *O-Shin*, or example, is more likely to appeal to Asian people who have experienced the Pacific War, gender relations dominated by men, and other issues brought out by the drama than it is (immediately, at least) to north Europeans or Americans whose experiences of war, gender equality, and so on are very different. Similarly, a Japanese young people's fashion and lifestyle magazine like *nonno* has much more to offer people in South Korea and Taiwan, where local editions are published, than a similarly targeted magazine like *Cosmopolitan* whose focus on the dos and don'ts of sex and relationships seems out of kilter with their own lifestyles.

Although there is always the problem of transnational cultural power in the way in which local audiences find pleasure in consuming cultural products from a supposedly culturally similar country like Japan, the perception of "cultural proximity" can contribute to a sense of shared regional community. Of course, in many ways, this cultural proximity is constructed by media organizations keen to distribute their products. It is not something that exists "out there" (Iwabuchi 2002: 133-34). As Koichi Iwabuchi (2002: 50) notes, "Japan's relatively dominant position in intra-Asian flows... generates a positive sense of cultural immediacy" among Asian consumers of J-Cult who feel "a sense of co-evalness," in the sense that they live in the same age and social conditions as Japanese and share with them lifestyles and tastes that are similar enough to enable them to imagine together an "Asian modernity" (Iwabuchi 2002: 153-54).

At the same time as this sense of familiar difference is fostered by images in the media, it is experienced in real life, thanks to the development of tourism that enables those living in the Asian region to visit Japan. Chinese and Korean can be heard on the streets of Tokyo as department stores in the Ginza, boutiques in Harajuku and Shibuya, and theme parks like Sanrio's Puroland, are frequented by foreign tourists (10 per cent of

Puroland's 1.38 million visitors are from overseas [Belson and Bremner 2004: 48]). Such foreign experiences allow people from different parts of Asia to feel more "at home" with one another.

This sense of identity is reinforced in all sorts of different ways in everyday life. For example, Asian people shopping for Japanese fashions can readily find the right cut and sizes to match their physique, as well as the most appropriate material for their home environment (like cotton for summer clothing). This is not true for those Japanese who go to Paris to replenish their wardrobes. Asian people also readily identify with Japanese *manga* comic books and cartoon characters because, for the most part, they have such traditions back home (see contributions by Leonard Rifas and Mary Ann Farquhar in Lent 1995) and are often more used to reading ideographs and icons than they are alphabets. The fact that most societies in the region have musical traditions making use of the pentatonic scale to some extent enables an immediate sharing of popular musical tastes (although many other factors, of course, are at stake [Chun, Rossiter and Shoemith 2004]).

Women's Fashion Magazines

Another aspect of J-Cult's mediascape is its information-age goods, plastered as ads on buses and trams, lit up as neon signs on the tops of sky-scraping buildings, and as real products lining the shelves of crowded supermarkets and stores. There are isotonic drinks, instant noodles, packets of seaweed, plastic containers, tape dispensers, cash boxes, safety scissors – you name it, they all come from Japan. Computer software outlets, too, offer a wide range of Japanese TV games, while pinball arcades feature machines decorated with *sumō* wrestlers and flashing lights that accompany the disappearance of the player's ball with a triumphant "*banzai!*" In the streets of Hong Kong, Seoul and Taipei, stalls sell young Japanese women's fashion magazines – *nonno*, *JJ*, *Ryūkō Tsūshin* and *With* – each filled with information on the latest styles to be found on the streets of Tokyo and Osaka.

Women's fashion magazines have for many, many years depicted in their pages European and American fashion designers' periodic off-and-on love affair with "the Orient." It should have come as no surprise, therefore, that fashion magazines published in Japan and other parts of Asia should have extended this Western interest in the East by orientalising their own fashion images and by starting to use other Asian countries and, occasionally, models for their fashion stories. Thus, in the 1990s we come across fashion stories ranging from "Oriental Colour," "Impressions de Chine" (both *Marie Claire Japon*, January 1993) and "Asia Beat" (*Oggi*, April 1995), to "A dignity of China" and "Oriental Mania" (both *Ryūkō Tsūshin*, April 1997), by way of other stories set in Hong Kong and Macau (*Oggi*, October and November 1995). Occasionally, the exoticism is expressed in other than obviously regional terms: for example, *hi fashion*'s story "Stand Sharp in Silence," featuring a Korean model wearing Hiroko Koshino clothes in Seoul (December 1991).³

³ The same model is featured in the same Japanese magazine's December issue in the following year: "Across the [sic] Asia: Seoul Collection in Mongolia" (*hi fashion*, December 1992).

For their part, Hong Kong magazines also began to bring Orientalist images into their pages. *Marie Claire Hong Kong*, for example, published “The Eastern Dream” in May 1995, and was soon followed by *Elle Hong Kong*, which printed an exoticising “Bright Lights, Big City” feature of Hong Kong fashion designers’ clothes in its September 1996 issue. *Cosmopolitan Hong Kong* adopted the same tack, though with a Caucasian model, in “Eastern Chic” (June 1997), while in July 1997, taking its cue from the handover of the former British territory to the PRC, *Elle Hong Kong* titled its *Basic Style* section “China Girl.”

Japanese advertisers have to some extent followed the lead taken by Japanese fashion magazines. In a significant move, the cosmetics giant, Shiseido, employed two former Hong Kong beauty queens (Li Ka Yan and Chan Wai Lam), along with a Japanese model, in its *PN (Pieds Nus)* make-up ads in the spring of 1997 – presumably as part of an integrated Asian marketing strategy. Its headline read in English, “The Beauty of myth, the soulmate of Chic,” and contrasted somewhat sharply with the Japanese “Setting light to the spirit of make-up” (*Mēku tamashii ni hi o tsukeru*). In a similar move to obviate the differences between Japanese and other peoples living in the Asian region, Seiko advertised its Lukia watches in Japan by showing a mixed group of Asians and Caucasians standing in front of a Hong Kong double-decker red bus and adding the slogan in English, “No Age, No Gender.” For its part, Toyota photographed its Corolla Levin car with Hong Kong license plates against a backdrop of neon lights, most prominent of which was Yue Hwa Chinese Products – all for a launch in Japan. In a different campaign, the same company used a visual of “David Chan, Toyota Regional Manager, After Sales” based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, practising Japanese *kendo* fencing – this time in an Asian English-language business magazine. In its Chinese-language ad for a Mi-Jockey Headphone Stereo set, Panasonic published a photo of a local Hong Kong celebrity sitting in a bus seemingly full of old-style Red guards from the PRC (*Cosmopolitan HK*, March 1995). Asia, it seems, is an integral part and extension of Japan’s commodity culture.

There is something else about advertising that is, perhaps, worth noting regarding Japan’s (desired) integration in the Asian region.⁴ When a Japanese is featured in a non-Japanese setting – shopping in Singapore, dancing in Bali, or relaxing on a Thai beach, for example – she is almost always depicted as being integral to the scene or occasion shown. In other words, as tourists Japanese are depicted not as strangers from a foreign country, so much as local participants in a particular regional culture. This contrasts rather markedly with English and American advertisements depicting the “Orient” where Caucasians are generally made to seem somehow out of place when put in an Asian environment (Moeran 1996). In this way, Japan is integrated into an Asian commodity and taste culture that creates *market* and *product*, rather than national and cultural, differences.

⁴ The following comment is also true of Japanese depicted in European and American settings.

The Smell of J-Cult

One of the comments frequently made about J-Cult abroad is that it is *not* like American popular culture. It does not proclaim itself as “Japanese” in the way that American popular culture proclaims its “American-ness.” In other words, it is not marked by a kind of “in-your-face” national content or style in the way that American popular culture has been perceived to be – giving rise to such phrases as “Cocacolanization,” “Disneyfication,” “McDonaldization,” and so on to describe the globalization of the American economy and associated “scapes”. Rather, it has been described as being characterised by “soft power” (Shiraishi 1997). Its aim is not outright colonization, but a kind of quietly tidal “Corollanization” (Moeran 2000). More trenchantly, Koichi Iwabuchi (2002, and elsewhere) has used the phrase “culturally odourless” to describe products associated with J-Cult. Indeed, in his discussion of audiovisual products, he picks up on past marketing and consumer knowledge in Japan to talk of the “culturally odorless’ three C’s: consumer technologies (such as VCRs, karaoke, and the Walkman); comics and cartoons (animation); and computer/video games” (Iwabuchi 2002: 27).

By “cultural odour” Iwabuchi refers to the fact that some commodities are associated positively with widely disseminated images of the lifestyle of their country of origin. Unlike McDonald’s, however, which is powerfully associated with people’s constructions of what constitutes “America” as an imagined community, Japanese goods are *not* marketed “on the back of a Japanese way of life” (Featherstone 1995: 9). The Sony Walkman, for example, is first and foremost a portable tape-recorder which may incorporate some elements of “Japaneseness” in terms of its characteristics of compactness, simplicity and fine detailing (du Gay et al. 1997: 69-74), but which is not generally *perceived* as evoking a specifically “Japanese” lifestyle (Iwabuchi 2002: 28). Similarly, cartoon characters have long been commented on for their large eyes and generally “non-Japanese” look (e.g. Schodt 1983), so that J-Cult media products in general lack an obviously national origin (*mukokuseki*) (Iwabuchi 2002: 28).

The idea that J-Cult is culturally odourless suggests that a “de-territorialized” pop song, television programme, fashion style, or cartoon character can be readily assimilated by local consumer audiences and “re-territorialized” to suit the latter’s preferences and lifestyles. This certainly happens. When I was teaching at the University of Hong Kong in the mid-1990s, I recall some of my students getting rather angry with me for suggesting that one currently popular Canto-pop hit had in fact originated in Japan: *Kitaguni no Haru*, sung by Sen Masao who, ironically, was (and still is, of course) a Korean Japanese – ironically because this particular style of “traditionally Japanese” *enka* song is said to have originated in Korea.

To some extent, the cultural odourless nature of J-Cult probably helps facilitate both regional integration and the perception of cultural proximity. In this respect, as Iwabuchi (2002: 94) points out, the absence of cultural odour is used for strategic marketing purposes. “Japanese media industries seem to think that the suppression of Japanese cultural odour is imperative if they are to make inroads into international markets.” But there is, I think, more to it than this (although I shall return to this point in a minute). The fact that my students firmly believed, or wanted to believe, that the song was Cantonese,

and the subsequent resentment they displayed when I insisted that it was not, suggests that they felt somehow deceived as consumers by the lack of cultural odour. In other words, marketers of J-Cult are still worried enough about the historical associations in the region of Japan and the Japanese to consciously erase all markers of “Japaneseness.” In this sense, cultural odour takes on a political, and not just, economic “fragrance.”

In fact, this example suggests something else about cultural odour: that the Japanese not only consciously avoid giving their own J-Cult products a “Japanese fragrance” when marketing them abroad; they consciously deprive popular cultural forms from other countries of *their* odour by making them peculiarly “Japanese” in Japan (cf. Iwabuchi 1999: 181). This has frequently been remarked upon in terms of “adoption and adaptation,”⁵ but it marks a certain irony in Japan’s relations with the world around. On the one hand, they play the card of “tradition” – as when Japanese business leaders, for example, will go out of their way to explain their economic successes in terms of Japanese cultural specificities and corporate organization patterns (Yoshino 1992) – even though some of these patterns have themselves originated in the United States.⁶ Particular J-Cult forms, like *enka*, Japanese tea bowls, or *mingei* arts and crafts, are mythologised as “purely Japanese,” even though the first two owe their origins to Korean culture and the last to William Morris and the British Arts and Crafts Movement. On the other hand, they have wiped out virtually all elements of “Japaneseness” and tradition when marketing J-Cult abroad. This is made possible, perhaps, precisely because J-Cult is *not* “high” culture. Kabuki and Noh theatre, the tea ceremony and flower arrangement, are marketed strictly according to their place within “Japanese tradition” as products of the country’s high culture.

But what does all this talk of “culture” signify?

First, *Japanese* culture is a concept that has taken on immense importance in Japan during at least two crucial stages in its modernizing processes when people had to cope, firstly, with radical social changes brought about by the Meiji Restoration and secondly, with equally radical changes initiated by SCAP during the post-war occupation. The idea of both “Japan” and “culture” contributed to the building up of an imagined community when that community was extremely unsettled and likely to fragment. “Culture” thus became a fixed point that people could turn to as they reconstructed their identities in the face of the “four -izations” of the West (especially America), modernity, industrialism, and urbanization.

In this respect, secondly, culture becomes something administrated, and it is hard not to feel a sense of discomfort once this point is realised (Adorno 1991: 94). Such discomfort raises a question. Is there anything to “Japanese culture” other than its being a constructed (and administrated) myth? Here, the link between culture and smell made by Koichi Iwabuchi is extremely thought-provoking. How calculated or how unreflexive was Iwabuchi’s neologism of cultural odour? How come it was a Japanese, and not a European or American, scholar who produced this phrase as part of a discussion of the influences of

⁵ Adorno (1991: 58) argues that “all mass culture is fundamentally adaptation”

⁶ Cf., for example, Tsutsui 1996 and Salaman 1997 on quality circles and management practices; and Du Gay et al. 1997: 71-2 on design.

an indigenous popular culture abroad? I ask these questions because the sense of smell is extraordinarily underplayed – essentially ignored – in Western societies. It is the least developed of all the senses. Yet, research suggests that in Japan, smell is quite highly developed and that Japanese (especially women) are comparatively perceptive of and sensitive to smell (Hakuhōdō Sōgō Seikatsu Kenkyūjo 1994: 55-63). And, as anyone who has read *Genji Monogatari* knows, such sensitivity has a long historical tradition (among some classes of people, at least).

So, thirdly, what does Iwabuchi's use of cultural odour mean? Is it an insightful analytical term? Or is it just a culturally peculiar way of analysing contemporary marketing methods applied to the marketing of J-Cult? Why use the word "culture" at all? After all, culture is so pervasive in our everyday lives that it ceases really to provide a distinctive analytical category. Partly for this reason, Horkheimer and Adorno decided to drop the phrase "mass culture" in favour of "culture industry" when writing their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Adorno 1991: 85). Although since criticised for their elitism, and for seeing the culture industry as a monolithic, all powerful entity, it is worth recalling their vision:

"The culture industry fuses the old and familiar into a new quality. In all its branches, products which are tailored for consumption by masses, and which to a great extent determine the nature of that consumption, are manufactured more or less according to plan. The individual branches are similar in structure or at least fit into each other, ordering themselves into a system almost without a gap."

Adorno (1991: 85)

Now, Iwabuchi's own research shows that the consumption of J-Cult is by no means determined by the industry (in his case, television) that produces it. But, by labelling *all* products of J-Cult "culturally odourless," he is ascribing to Japan's entertainment industries precisely the monolithic power that Horkheimer and Adorno (1979: 120-169) perceived and for which they have been criticised. Surely, there are some products that *are* culturally odourless and some that are not (consider the difference between *samurai* films and the kind of television romance drama series analysed by Iwabuchi), and we need to classify them along a continuum, perhaps, between the flagrantly fragrant and the odiously odourless.

How to do this? In Japan, as in the United States, there is a preoccupation with – some might say a fixation on – culture, rather than with what, as a social anthropologist, I would see as more relevant to critical analysis: the *social* relations that exist among people, and between things and people. It is the different ways in which people are thrown together around particular things – an animated cartoon, a samurai film, or a computer game – and how they negotiate meanings among themselves through the thing that links them that I find most relevant and important in discussions of taste cultures and their dissemination in regional flows. In other words, we need to do research on and analyse carefully, not just the *contents* of J-Cult (or other countries' popular cultural forms) and how they are appreciated and used by *consumers* (the approach taken by so many people working in the field of Cultural Studies), but the process of their *production* and circulation

or distribution. In other words, we have to address the total social processes surrounding the production, appraisal, marketing and consumption of popular culture. How does a designer, say, differ in her approach to the creation of a new product like a Walkman from someone working in Sales or Marketing? How do they negotiate meanings among themselves to enable a successful product to be manufactured? What say does the Finance office have in limiting costs? And how do those contracted to advertise that product successfully weld the manufacturing company's images of both the product and itself as a corporation with what they learn about consumers in different markets? And what, if anything, do consumers themselves think of the product? How do they use it in their everyday lives, and how does this actual usage differ from that planned by the designer, or marketer, or advertising executive? It is this *social* rather than cultural approach to the study of J-Cult (and commodities in general) that is, I think, useful.

Finally, if there *is* something to be gained from using the notion of culture in discussing the flow of Japanese taste culture into and around the Asian region, we also need to be very wary of the potential "disavowal" that the word permits. Here, I refer to the concept of *dénégation* developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1992) in his analysis of fields of cultural production. In the field of art, as he pointed out, there is great potential for participants to pretend not to be doing what they are doing, as well as pretend to be doing what they are not doing. The particular focus of participants' collective disavowal tends to be economic factors. Artists, critics and connoisseurs carefully construct an aura around works of art that is entirely divorced from commercial interest.

What I want to stress here is that a focus on cultural aspects of J-Cult (including whether it is "fragrant" or "odourless") suggests a certain disavowal of the commercial. This is unacceptable because popular culture these days is, first and foremost, a *market* product. Even though academics may be aware of this, and by no means all of them will publicly recognize it in their writings, they can be said to be contributing to a disavowal of the economic by analysing J-Cult in terms of "culture" - something of which I am myself here guilty by fixing on the term "J-Cult." By so doing we can be accused of being, with those who produce, advertise and distribute J-Cult products, "adversaries in collusion" (Bourdieu 1992: 79) since all of us are actively lacquering those products with a veneer of culture (or absence of culture) and failing to analyse critically the economic foundations and consequences of their manufacture, distribution, representation and consumption in the Asian region. In other words, what is required in analysis of popular cultural flows in Asia is research that looks at the production of media commodities, at their content, *and* their consumption. In particular, we need to know to what extent - if at all - those involved in the production of J-Cult actively construct its culturally odourless character, and who precisely is involved in this construction. It is only after such research that we can begin to understand whether cultural odour is a conscious disavowal of the commercial, or whether it somehow just emerges because of the way people are *as Japanese*. That is to say, academic understandings of J-Cult cannot be separated from understandings negotiated among those involved along the continuum from its production to consumption. We, too, give J-Cult its "social life" (Appadurai 1986).

References

- Adorno, Theodor 1991 *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Anderson, Benedict 1983 *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Appadurai, Arjun 1990 "Disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy," pp. 295-310 in M. Featherstone (ed.) *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity, a Theory, Culture & Society Special Issue*. London: Sage.
- (ed.) 1996 *The Social Life of Things*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Belson, Ken and Brian Bremner 2004 *Hello Kitty: The Remarkable Story of Sanrio and the Billion Dollar Feline Phenomenon*. Singapore: Wiley.
- Bourdieu, Pierre 1992 *The Field of Cultural Production*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Chambers, Iain 1986 *Popular Culture: The Metropolitan Experience*. London: Routledge.
- Chun, Allen, Rossiter, Ned and Brian Shoemith (eds) 2004 *Refashioning Pop Music in Asia: Cosmopolitan Flows, Political Tempos and Aesthetic Industries*. London: RoutledgeCurzon.
- Du Gay, Paul, Hall, Stuart, Janes, Linda, Mackay Hugh and Keith Negus 1997 *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*. London: Sage/Open University.
- Featherstone, Mike 1995 *Undoing Culture: Globalization, Postmodernism and Identity*. London: Sage.
- Gans, Herbert 1974 *Popular Culture and High Culture*. New York: Basic Books.
- Horkheimer, Max and Theodor Adorno 1979 (1972) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. London: Verso.
- Iwabuchi, Koichi 1999 (1994) "Return to Asia? Japan in Asian audiovisual markets," pp. 177-197 in K. Yoshino (ed.) *Consuming Ethnicity and Nationalism*. London: Curzon.
- 2002 *Recentring Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Lent, John (ed.) 2001 *Illustrating Asia: Comics, Humour Magazines and Picture Books*. London: Curzon.
- Moeran, Brian 1996 "The Orient strikes back: Advertising and imagining Japan," *Theory, Culture & Society*, Volume 13 (3): 77-112.
- 2000 "Culture, commodities and the corollanization of Asia", pp. 25-50 in M. Söderberg and I. Reader (eds.) *Japanese Influences and Presences in Asia*. NIAS Studies in Asian Topics #25. London: Curzon.
- Ogawa, Masashi 2004 "Japanese popular music in Hong Kong: what does TK present?" pp. 144-156 in A. Chun, N. Rossiter and B. Shoemith (eds) *Refashioning Pop Music in Asia*. London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon.

Salaman, Graeme 1997 "Culturing production," pp. 236-284 in P. du Gay (ed.) *Production of Culture / Cultures of Production*. London: Sage/Open University Press.

Schodt, Frederik 1983 *Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics*. Tokyo: Kodansha International.

Shiraishi, Saya 1997 "Japan's soft power: Doraemon goes overseas," in P. Katzenstein and t. Shiraishi (eds.) *Network Power: Japan and Asia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Tsutsui, William 1996 "W. Edwards Deming and the origins of quality control in Japan," *Journal of Japanese Studies*, Volume 22 (2): 295-325.

Yoshino, Kosaku 1992 *Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary Japan*. London: Routledge.