

What Does “*American*” Mean in Postwar Japan?

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It is often said that postwar Japanese popular culture is basically “American”. In other words, “American” influence has been decisive for the development of cultural consumption in everyday life in postwar Japan. But the question here is in the very concept of the “American” itself in the historical context of postwar Japan and East Asia. Of course, it is very clear that there are many cases in everyday practices, especially consuming practices, in which we can find “American influence”.

For example, the ideal of postwar Japanese home life flowed explicitly from the model of the “American way of life” of the 1950s. People wanted to buy all kinds of home electric appliances and live in American type suburban houses. In the field of design and advertising, “American” influences were more evident. American films and TV dramas were quite popular especially during the 1950s. So we might say that postwar Japanese consumer culture emerged from the overwhelming American influence beginning in the late 1940s.

However, we should never forget that after the mid-1960s these influences were no longer recognized as specifically “American”. Already in the late 1950s, the symbolic products of the American way of life, such as the TV, refrigerator, and washing machine, had come to be seen in a very nationalistic way, as symbols of the Japanese imperial house. After the 1960s, American TV drama series were eclipsed by domestically produced Japanese “home drama” series.

In addition, many new household products were given very traditional-sounding “Japanese” names. In sum, the postwar “American” influence came to be seen as being of essentially “Japanese” origin. There have been many complex influences of “America” on postwar Japanese society. This is not simply a matter of cultural contact, but part of a complex process of identity formation mediated by a sense of desire and prohibition related to the representation and appropriation of the “other”.

Even the process of widespread, overwhelming Americanization began after the late 1940s, the complexity of the postwar Japanese encounter with “America” cannot be understood simply as an extension of the already existing prewar trend towards “Americanization”. Needless to say, throughout the occupation, Japan was in no position to determine its own future without negotiating with an overwhelmingly powerful “other”, the army of occupation. As demonstrated by John Dower, American domination was not entirely one-way, and did not always

have the effect intended.

Nevertheless, as far as concerns the experience of those directly involved, “America” presented itself as an overwhelming source of authority, against which it was very difficult to mount any challenge. “America” was more than just an image of new lifestyles and culture. It was an ever-present force intervening in people’s daily lives, whose word could not be challenged. It was a directly present “other” with which people had to deal on an everyday basis. These direct effects of the American occupation can be considered in two categories: effects consciously pursued as a part of occupation policy, and effects that arose unconsciously through the interaction of occupier and occupied. The principal element in the former category of conscious effects was of course the system of censorship, and the various accompanying cultural policies that were pursued.

At the same time, the army of occupation was itself very much a part of the mass-cultural scenery of postwar Japan. When one considers this other unconscious level, “America” appears not so much as a “prohibiting” presence, but as a “seducing” presence in the everyday consciousness of the times. As an illustration of this, let us consider the link between American military bases and postwar popular music. Many young Japanese singers suddenly found employment entertaining American soldiers on the bases and in recreation facilities, where life went on largely in isolation from the surrounding society and working conditions were relatively good. There were many young popular singers who began their singing careers entertaining American troops.

This linkage between popular culture and the American bases in postwar Japan cannot be reduced to a simple relation of influence. Although it was through a direct connection with the occupying power that many aspects of popular culture regained their footing after the war, popular culture itself adopted a rhetoric of negating this connection. In other words, as the occupation drew to its close, Japanese popular culture attempted to forget its links with the occupier. Underground images associated with the occupation, such as the “black market” and “pan-pan girl”, became increasingly marginalized. As the violent America of the occupation was obscured, “America” instead became a model of lifestyle consumption. The link between these two aspects of “America” is a highly convoluted one.

I would like to explore this here on the level of urban space. There were very different ways of relating to “America”. At one extreme there was a direct encounter with the violence of the bases in such places as Okinawa, Tachikawa, and Yokosuka. At the other extreme there was a hidden relation with “America” in the centers of consumer culture, like Roppongi, Harajuku, and Ginza. Although the later are today not typically thought of in connection with the American military, the reason why they became such special places for Japanese youth after the war cannot be understood unless one takes into account their relation to American military facilities that once existed within them.

Before the war, Roppongi had been a “soldiers town”. Numerous military

facilities were concentrated there, including those of the territorial army, Konoe Shidan, and Kempeitai. The area was devastated by air raids during the war, and the remaining facilities were inherited by the American military after the surrender. Military headquarters, barracks, and housing for military personnel came to be located there. Since these facilities were not returned to Japan until around 1960, Roppongi remained in the shadow of the American military throughout the 1950's. Unlike Yokota, Tachikawa, and Yokosuka, however, there was no airbase or any very large number of troops housed there. There was therefore little sense of “America as the source of violence”. It was here that the young people who came to be known as the *Roppongi-zoku* (“Roppongi tribe”) came to gather. TV personnel, Rockabilly singers and their associates began gathering in Roppongi, and thus it gradually developed its present image as a place for fashionable and colonial-style night life.

Likewise, the development of Harajuku into a “young people’s town” cannot be explained without reference to Washington Heights, which was once a residential facility for American officers. The construction of the Heights began immediately after the end of the war. It was fully equipped with a hospital, school, fire station, church, department store, theatre, tennis courts, and golf course. It thus became a symbol of “American affluence” appearing suddenly like a mirage amid the surrounding burnt out ruins, barracks and black markets. In the 1950's, shops targeted at officers' families, such as Kiddy Land and Oriental Bazaar came to line the streets in the area. It was amid this new townscape that Central Apartments was built. This was known as the most luxurious residence in Tokyo, and came to be a symbol of the district. At that time, Harajuku still had the sense of being “off limits” as a place reserved largely for the American military.

A discontinuity of historical memory now obscures this process whereby places once occupied by American military facilities became centers for the consumer culture of youth. In the Japan of the late 1950's, two “Americas” had begun to appear. On the one hand, there was an “America” that was an object of consumption, whether through material goods or as media images. This “America” had gradually lost its associations with military violence, despite having been born on the American bases and in the military recreation facilities.

On the other hand, there was also an “America” that was literally embodied in violence, and became the object of anti-base protest. These were nevertheless different aspects of the same “America”. A relation with American military bases lay behind the formation of the fashionable postwar images of all the places mentioned above. To this extent, it is possible to trace a continuous cultural geo-political horizon between Ginza, Roppongi and Harajuku, on the one hand, and Yokosuka and Okinawa, on the other.

Nevertheless, at about the time Japan entered the era of high economic growth in the late 1950's, a fault line opened up between the two “Americas”. The “America” embodied in such places as Roppongi and Harajuku, and the

“America” of Yokosuka and Okinawa came to seem like entirely different things. The former “America” came to be understood as if it had existed from the very beginning entirely on the level of consumer culture. In the case of the latter “America”, the cultural dimension was erased and overwhelming attention was drawn to the problems of pollution, violence and prostitution emanating from the bases.

This division between the two “Americas” was reflected in and reinforced by the division in roles between the Japanese mainland and Okinawa. The separation of the mainland from Okinawa clearly reflected the great change in America’s policy towards Asia that occurred around 1947. With the beginning of the Cold War, the focus shifted from the earlier goal of democratization and the decentralization of power, to a policy designed to make Japan into the leading member of the Western camp in Asia. This policy turn-around became definitive after the Chinese revolution.

It became necessary to construct a military bulwark against communism in East Asia, and to stabilize the Japanese economy as the center for economic growth in the region. In the absence of any immediate prospect for the expansion of economic relations between Japan and China, the idea of reviving the Japanese economy by linking it to the markets of Southeast Asia had already been proposed to the Truman administration by George F. Kennan. It was not a sufficient condition to make Japan into the center of an anticommunist economic sphere in Asia. It would also be necessary to reduce Japan’s military burden in order to avoid any drag on the speed of its economic recovery. To solve this dilemma, the military burden was placed mainly on Okinawa, while the Japanese mainland was allowed to concentrate its energy on economic growth.

As a result of this strategy, American military facilities became more and more invisible in the urban areas of the Japanese mainland after the 1960’s. By the end of the 1960’s, there were relatively few facilities left in the Tokyo area, including the bases at Yokota, Tachikawa, Yokosuka, and Zama. The presence of American military personnel ceased to be a part of people’s everyday lives.

Thus it was that the image of “America” in Japan came to be divorced from the experience and memory of direct encounter with the bases and their associated violence, in contrast to the entirely different situation in other parts of East Asia, such as Okinawa, South Korea and Taiwan. “America” was sanitized as an image consumed through the media, and thus spread its seductive power uniformly among the whole population.

From the late 1950’s onward, “America” was distilled as a uniform image with even greater power than before to gain people’s hearts. This can be illustrated by the depictions of America in advertising at the time. Whereas until the early 1950’s the word “America” was simply invoked as a model to be emulated, from the late 1950’s Japanese families, above all housewives, performing the “American lifestyle” were presented as the ideals to be emulated. “America” also came to be associated with the “pop-culture” of Japanese youth.

As “America” became less direct, more mediated, and increasingly confined to images, it conversely became more interiorized and its effect on people’s consciousness became deeper.

So the meaning of “America” in postwar Japan is quite complicated. Although the US-Japan international political relationship has been always “bilateral” throughout the late 20th century, the imaginary relationship toward “America” among postwar Japanese people was much more paradoxical. Japanese people can be pro-American because America is not present as the military power.

We need to consider this postwar Japanese relationship with “America” in the context of the historical condition of Asia in the Cold War period. What has “America” meant in everyday terms for the people of East Asia since the end of the Second World War? What indeed does it continue to mean for us in the present day? Would it not be possible to review the relationship with America built up especially during the period of the Cold War from a comprehensive regional perspective, taking into account the level of people’s everyday consciousness and culture besides military and politico-economic aspects.

At least as concerns such countries as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia, “America” has had a uniquely strong and significant presence. As seen from the perspective of American Cold-War strategy, there can be no doubt that the Pacific Rim area, extending from Japan to Indonesia, formed a continuous space for the establishment of hegemony in Asia. Looking at the everyday consciousness and cultural practices among the people living in this region, does one find a similarly distinctive presence of “America”? Is there also a spatial continuity whereby the cultural responses to “America” are similar throughout the region?

Despite the evident importance of research on such a wide-ranging and complex phenomenon, hardly any attempt has been made until very recently to study the significance of “America” in a region-wide context from the perspective of everyday consciousness and culture while also considering political and military issues.