

# From the Studios of China Radio International

Aoki Akiko

*J-Pop enjoys the unconditional loyalty of young people all over China, forming a key link with Japan. The author shares her observations on the power of this cultural phenomenon in the daily lives of her listeners.*

After having lived in Beijing for a total of five years, absorbed in my work and enjoying life in the Chinese capital, I cannot pinpoint any particular reason to return to Japan. The longer I stay the more aware I become of my affinity for this place. Observing my vacillation over whether to go or whether to stay, a Japanese friend told me: "I'll show you something that will help you make up your mind beyond the shadow of a doubt. You'll cease liking China in five minutes." And he handed me a print-out of letters regarding Japan submitted to a Chinese Internet bulletin board. Anonymously signed, some of the views they expressed were quite extreme:

Japanese are the kind of people who can be sucking dry the blood of your right hand even while they reach out to shake the other.

As long as we treat Japanese nicely, they will never respect us. They are a people who have to be beaten, ravaged, and trampled upon before they learn to fear and submit.

You Chinese who are so friendly and kind, you must never sympathize with Japanese! Never think of Japanese as human beings. Don't believe anything they say!

Some of the postings were reminiscent of the emotional speeches we used to hear aimed at fanning the flames of anti-Japanese sentiment. Some had the ring of lines from what now seem like outdated period movies, like "Revenge will not be complete even if we slice the Japanese devils into a thousand pieces!"

Chinese is a language richly endowed with invective. Expressions like these tend to be

bandied about without being meant literally, but Japanese, who are not accustomed to this sort of abusive language, are quick to react. After reading the postings, even I began to feel that yes, it might be a good idea to go back to Japan after all.

The bitterness of Chinese preconceptions about Japan, although we rarely encounter it in ordinary daily life, sometimes can be bewildering. Not long ago I offered a Japanese-made toy to a Chinese friend, suggesting it might be a nice present for his son. When I next met the friend, he told me, "When I gave it to him and told him it was from a Japanese lady friend, his eyes went round and he asked me why a Japanese would give him a present. Children's TV in China generally presents Japanese in "bad guy" roles, so I guess that made him wonder why the "archenemy" would want to give him a present."

When I was a child, I couldn't help musing, the bad guys were monsters or demons.

One of the teachers who helped me a great deal when I was a student in China in the mid-1990s also once remarked that he had initially been uncomfortable with the idea of teaching Japanese. The image of Japanese he had previously held was apparently quite awful.

It is important to recognize that Japan is not what you would call "popular" in China. I once asked a young man working for a national agency who spoke extremely fluent Japanese why he had decided to study the language. Without hesitation, he answered "My first choice was English, but I failed the exam." Japanese living here must take special pains to maintain good

human relations. One of the things I have tried to be especially careful of is pronunciation of people's names.

In Japan today, use of the original pronunciation of Korean names is becoming general practice. Few call Korean president "Kin Dai Chu" any more, as was the norm for a long time until very recently, but call him Kim Dae-jung, as he is known elsewhere in the world. In Japan and China, which both use Chinese characters, the long-established custom of pronouncing people's names by the native readings of the characters has persisted. In Japan, therefore, Chinese president Jiang Zemin's name is pronounced Ko Taku-min. Most people don't know the Chinese pronunciation. In China, meanwhile, the prime minister, Koizumi Jun'ichiro is called "Xiaoquan Chunyilang," and my name (Akiko) is pronounced "Mingzi." There is nothing wrong with being called Mingzi Xiaojie (Miss Mingzi), but personally, I thought at the beginning, I would really prefer the original pronunciation of my name.

In any case, when I speak to Chinese, I make a point of using the original Chinese pronunciation, not calling Mr. Zhang "Mr. Cho," as in the Japanese reading, and this is no doubt as people would wish it to be. Japan, after all, is not very popular, and I thought we should avoid doing things that might rub people the wrong way. I adopted this policy for our radio program, and after a while I began to receive letters of an unexpected sort. These letters apparently came from ordinary young people who had until then had absolutely no contact with Japan or with Japanese.

## The Awesome Power of Culture

"I am a typical *herizu* (Japan fan). I really, really, really love Japanese culture. Don't you think it is strange that a person who likes Japan so much doesn't have a Japanese name? Would you please give me a really pretty Japanese name?"

"How do you pronounce my name in Japanese? Please let me know."

"I am a third-year high school girl. I'm a little introverted, but I love to chat with my friends. Would you please give me a Japanese name that suits my personality?"



Aoki  
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China Radio  
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Aoki majored in Japanese literature at Waseda University. After graduation she established Staff Advance, an editorial and planning office in 1984. While producing various corporate PR publications, she traveled widely as a writer for magazines such as the Japan Air Lines in-flight magazine *Agora*. In 1995 she enrolled in the Beijing Normal University and the Beijing Institute of Languages. In 1998 she became anchorwoman for China Radio International. She is author of *Beijing de gakusei seikatsu o mo ichido* [A Student Again in Beijing] (Shinchosha, 1998) and coauthor of *Daiseiko: Ajia de kaisha o tsukuru* [A Great Success: Establishing a Company in Asia] (President, 1994).

I receive several dozen letters like this each week. I study the listeners names and the way they describe themselves, and think up a romantic-sounding name that could be the hero or heroine of a manga comic book, television program, or movie. By now, there are quite a few young people to whom I have given Japanese names in this way. And I myself am known as Mingzi Xiaojie (written with homophone characters that mean not Miss Akiko but Miss "Name Child") in Chinese.

Both before and after the rush of letters asking for names, I had begun to receive another unexpected type of fan mail. They were filled with exactly the opposite kind of language from the above-cited extreme view: they raved about Japan.

"I am a super-fan of Japan. My parents tell me I'm very lucky that I was born in peacetime. Otherwise I probably would have been a traitor to China."

"I'm really crazy about Japanese popular music. I never used to be interested in Japan at all, but after I started listening to your program, I've ended up being an enthusiastic fan of the latest Japanese music. My classmates, influenced

Aoki

by my interest, have started to listen to your program as well.”

“I think Japan is absolutely super. I listen to your program every night. I'm so disappointed on nights I've missed the program that I can't sleep. When I tell my classmates about it, they say that I'm selling out my country, but I have no idea what they are talking about. I can't see what they don't like about Japan. What's past is, after all, past, isn't it? I can't understand why they have to bring up old stuff [from the past] like that nowadays.”

“I think anyone who listens to your program will come to like Japan. I think that some day in the future the invisible barrier that stands between Japan and China will surely be removed.”

The “program” of which they speak is “Music Station,” called “Yinyue wangzhan” in

**Efforts to lower the barrier between the government and the public, to train and recruit... younger people... are desperately needed.**

Chinese, broadcast on radio every evening a little after 9:00, and featuring J-Pop music. Two years ago, when I was put in charge of the program, I myself had considerable reservations about it. Due to my prolonged absence from Japan, I had not kept abreast of Japanese pop culture, and I thought that a program featuring talk and interviews with various people targeted at Chinese who were studying Japanese would contribute much more to improved Japan-China relations. But I was 100 percent wrong. We could not have won the hearts of fervent Japan fans we have with only talk and interview programming.

“I am a third-year high school girl. I listen to your program every night without fail, but today may be the last time. Right now I'm facing the big entrance examination to university. My mother told me that if I don't place at least fifth in the exam, she won't let me ever listen to the radio again. What am I to do!? Last night I

had a dream. My favorite star, Hyde of L'arc-en-Ciel was smiling at me, and from the other side Dr. Marx was beckoning me to come his way. Whatever happens, I will get a good grade and come back to your program, so don't go away!”

“Since I learned about your program, I haven't missed it even once. Even when I got sick and had a fever, when it was 9:10 p.m., I would get up and turn on the radio. When I was listening to the Japanese music I love so much, I began to feel that I was getting better.”

“A close friend of mine was hospitalized. We both love Japanese music. I heard that she took her radio and a big box of batteries into the hospital when she went in. She intends to listen to your program every night from her hospital bed.”

Those letters make one almost shiver to think of the awesome power of culture. After reading them, what am I supposed to think about those messages posted on the Internet filled with hatred and cynicism toward Japan? Reading the letters from our listeners, I may not just decide to stay here this time; I may end up remaining in China for the rest of my days.

#### Between Love and Hatred

The relationship between Japan and China today is one of both love and hate, says Dr. Yan Ansheng, Director of the Japan Studies Research Center of Beijing Foreign Languages College. “When you think of it, the same thing happens to a married couple. The closer you are, the easier it is for feelings of love as well as feelings of hate to come forth. Today Japan and China are like a husband and wife who have lived together for a very long time.”

Love and hate. Anti-Japanese rancor and adoring Japan fans. Come to think about it, my life and work is unfolding at a time when these two extremes are in a perilous balance between the two countries.

What happened to the girl who had written that if she did not place at least fifth in the exam she would not be able to listen to the program again? At the end of October, I finally received a letter.

“Can you believe it? I'm back! I scored second in the exam! I'm sure that your program

gave me strength. As a reward my mother gave me a Made-in-Japan Walkman. So now I can listen to Japanese music on my Walkman. I can't tell you how happy I am! I have a favor to ask. Please continue your program. In forty years, fifty years, I may be an old woman who can hardly move, but at 9:10 p.m. I will turn on the radio, and I will hear your familiar voice. Just imagine it! An old woman with white hair, sitting in a rocking chair, listening to the latest trends in Japanese music! Listening happily. Don't you think it's a great idea? I am sending a verse of a song by Lin Yi-lian (a Taiwanese singer), which captures my thoughts exactly. With many thanks. Good-bye.

I am afraid of time passing by too quickly  
Because it shortens the time we are together  
I am afraid of time passing too slowly  
Because I worry all day about losing you.

When this listener becomes an old woman with white hair, the young women and men to whom I gave Japanese names will all be grandparents with children and grandchildren. Those children will be new Japan fans, watching Japan with

enthusiasm and high expectations. By that time, I have no problem imagining that I will not be just a white-haired granny but maybe even a fossil.



Translated from the original Japanese article published in the February 2001 issue of *Gaiko Forum* focusing on China as a great power entering a new millennium. This issue includes another feature article about young people in China.

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