The Routledge Companion to Media and Race

Christopher P. Campbell

East Asia

Publication details
Yasue Kuwahara
Published online on: 06 Dec 2016

How to cite: - Yasue Kuwahara. 06 Dec 2016, East Asia from: The Routledge Companion to Media and Race Routledge
Accessed on: 10 Oct 2023

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EAST ASIA
Looking In and Looking Out
Yasue Kuwahara

The countries in East Asia, particularly China, Japan, and Korea, have maintained close relationships for over 2,000 years. While the bases of their societies, such as the values based on Confucianism and linguistic styles, are similar, and their historical experience with the West is also similar in that they have been under the influence of Western hegemony, their relationships were not always amicable, as attested to by Japan’s colonization of Korea between 1910 and 1945 and recent territorial disputes among them. Such experiences are reflected in the relationship between race and mass media in East Asia.

There are two aspects to the issue of race and media in East Asia—internal and external. The internal aspect refers to how the countries use mass media to promote their views of one another that amend or aggravate their relationships. The external aspect, on the other hand, is about the countries’ separate and collective perception and attitude toward the rest of the world. Needless to say, the internal and external aspects are significantly related, especially the increased global flux of popular culture since the 1980s, which has influenced both aspects of race and media. This chapter examines both aspects.

Internal Aspect

According to the commonly accepted classification of race, the Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese all belong to the Asian race and the differences among them are considered ethnic differences. As research on existing scholarship on race and media reveals, however, ethnicities are often treated as race in East Asia due to the experience of Japanese Imperialism after the late nineteenth century until the end of WWII. The Chinese and Koreans who suffered from the aggression of the Japanese Imperial Army, it seems, regarded the discrimination against them as due to the Japanese view of themselves as the superior race. As Japan began to challenge the Anglo-American order in the 1930s, those in power sought an explanation for distinctive Japanese characters to justify the expansion of Imperialism in the West and Asia. Known as Nihonjinron (theories of Japanese cultural or racial uniqueness), this explanation assumed that Japanese society was “an integrated and harmonious whole” and that “all or most Japanese possess the same national character” (Mouer and Sugimoto 1986: 43–4). Although China and Korea considered Japan a member of the same race that shared a common language as represented by the idea of Doubun Doushu (the same language, the same race), the latter separated itself from the former. With the defeat in WWII, Nihonjinron was forgotten among the Japanese
(until it came back in the 1970s). First too devastated by the aftermath of the war and then too busy to rebuild the country, the Japanese government never formally apologized to China or Korea who, in turn, never forgave Japan for its atrocities during the war. Partly due to historical memory and partly due to education, people in China and Korea have remained anti-Japanese and their relationship with Japan has remained antagonistic until this day, and mass media have reflected it. For instance, only those reports that looked down on Japan with disdain were allowed in Korean mass media prior to 1990. Similarly, Japanese mass media were responsible for the anti-Japanese images of Korea and China that became prevalent among the Japanese during the 1970s (Ko 2012).

The relationship entered a new phase when Japan began to experience high economic growth in the 1970s. Nihonjinron that had supported Japanese Imperialism came back with a new twist as Japan started its economic expansion in the global market. Even though the West thought Japan would forever remain a third-world country in the immediate aftermath of WWII, Japan proved them wrong by successfully rebuilding its economy. Such an economic miracle was possible because of distinctive Japanese characteristics. Nihonjinron was revived. As examined eloquently by Koichi Iwabuchi, Japan positioned itself away from the rest of Asia and created a trilateral relationship consisting of Japan, the West, and other Asian countries through self-Orientalism, which is “a strategy of inclusion through exclusion and of exclusion through inclusion” (1994: 4). Japan saw itself as superior to the rest of Asia because of its economic power. It is equivalent to or better than the West, yet its distinctive characteristics make it exotic to the West. As Japan’s economy continued to grow, people from other Asian countries started moving to Japan with the hope of getting their share of prosperity. As the number of foreign residents increased, the Japanese who were not used to living with foreign “others” were not at ease and tended to discriminate against them. For instance, landlords were reluctant to rent to non-Japanese and some businesses banned them. The Japanese viewed them with suspicion and, when a crime was committed, blamed it on them. Witnesses to muggings in dark streets at night almost always said that the culprit was Chinese or Korean (but seldom Japanese). Mass media advocated such popular sentiment by associating residential foreigners, particularly non-Caucasians, with crime and danger and began to treat them as social problems (Iwabuchi 2007).

While the antagonistic relationships among the three countries continued, there was a positive change brought first by Japanese popular culture and then by Korean popular culture. In the 1990s, Japanese television drama, popular music, and animation began to get the attention of Hong Kong youth who, by the end of the decade, preferred Japanese popular culture to American popular culture. The same trend was observed in other Chinese cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. Although Japanese cultural products were banned in South Korea after the end of WWII, President Kim Dae-jung’s four-stage opening policy lifted the ban in 1998, thus starting a Japan boom (Otmazgin). On the other hand, Hallyu, which refers to the popularity of Korean popular culture outside of South Korea, began with the broadcast of Korean television drama in China in the 1990s and spread over Asia in a short period of time. Hallyu arrived in Japan when Winter Sonata was broadcast on an NHK (Japan’s public broadcasting system) satellite channel in 2003. The archetypal melodrama unexpectedly became a mega hit among middle-aged women who made Bae Yung-joon, an actor who played the protagonist of the show, an international heartthrob and began the “Yonsama boom,” a reference to the Japanese honorific title ascribed to Bae by his Japanese fans. Winter Sonata was broadcast a total of four times in Japan and opened the door to other Korean television dramas.
Positive experience the female fans gained from the exposure to Korean dramas clearly increased their interest in Korean culture as attested to by increased tourism to Korea as well as participation in Korean language and cooking classes, among other things (Mori 2008; Hirata 2008). The popularity of television drama was followed by K-pop, Korean popular music, which attracted younger generations of the Japanese. Groups, such as Girls Generation, Kara, and TVQX, made frequent visits to Japanese music television shows with songs that they sang in Japanese, thus functioning as cultural diplomats between the two countries. The success of their popular culture in Japan was taken seriously among Koreans who never forgot their colonized experience. According to Young Eun Chae’s analysis of two major Korean newspapers, more than 90 percent of the article regarding Hallyu published in Chosun Ilbo and Hangyure dealt with their impact in Japan (2012: 205). Moreover, the rebroadcast of Winter Sonata in 2005, after its success in Japan, garnered higher ratings than any of the previous broadcasts. It was a triumphant moment for Koreans who had long suffered from the colonial memory (Chae). The positive effect of Hallyu in Japan, however, was met by anti-Korean agitation disseminated through books, comics, and message boards.

Unlike China and South Korea, Taiwan maintained an amicable relationship with Japan after WWII partly because older generations of Taiwanese had fond memories of Japanese governance in the early twentieth century, and partly because Japan unofficially accepted Taiwan as an independent state. Therefore, Japanese popular culture was easily accepted by the Taiwanese people, especially those in their teens to thirties, some of whom called themselves 哈日族 (har-lee zu), meaning Taiwanese Japanophiles. On the other hand, Taiwan’s relationship with South Korea, let alone China, was in no way amicable. South Korea and Taiwan shared the same anti-Communist position against China until a diplomatic relationship between South Korea and China was established in August 1992. Taiwanese mass media began to paint a negative image of South Korea by focusing on accidents, natural disasters, and other problems in the Korean Peninsula. They especially offered emotional and negative coverage of Korean sports. It has been said that the Taiwanese media coverage of Korea is equivalent to the Korean coverage of Japan. In the meantime, with the rapid growth of the Chinese economy, South Korea increasingly lost its interest in Taiwan, and recent media coverage is limited to major political issues, such as regime changes. Thus, people in both countries must rely on social media, blogs, and television drama to find out about each other. There was a meeting between the representatives of Taiwanese and Korean media to discuss this situation and find a solution to their antagonistic relationship on December 19, 2014. Those who were in attendance reminded themselves of the importance of fair and objective reporting to serve the audience (Shiroyama 2014).

External Aspect

As for the external aspect of race and media in East Asia, it is essential to understand Sinocentrism, which has formed the basis of Chinese self-perception throughout history. It is the perception that China is the center of the universe and all other countries are Chinese subjects and therefore not really its concerns. It has also formed a dichotomous view that Chinese are humans and foreigners are beasts (Ko). As old as the Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 220), Sinocentrism still influences the Chinese mass media. For instance, villains in a crime film must not be Chinese and “the crime must not be initiated within China’s borders, as if the land itself were somehow pure” (Vittachi 2015: SR7).
Max Fisher considers the 4-month-long campaign of China-based cyber attacks on the New York Times in 2012 as manifestation of new Sinocentrism. Fisher read a blog by Christopher Ford, a China expert who attended a conference in Beijing, and stated that Ford first thought the Chinese government’s attempt to correct “biased” coverage by the Western media aimed to prevent unrest domestically and to eliminate any negative images associated with China internationally. But then Ford realized that such behavior was actually based on Sinocentrism:

China’s fixation upon shaping others’ accounts of China, then, is arguably not necessarily “just” the result of insecurity or narcissism. Some of it may in fact grow out of a deeply-rooted conception of social order in which narrative control is inherently a strategic objective because it is assumed that status or role ascriptions and moral characterizations play a critical role in shaping the world they describe.

(Fisher 2013: n.p.)

Thus, although it has not been proven, Fisher considers that it is reasonable to assume that the Chinese government was behind the hacking incidents which were observed in various parts of the world.

Korea and Japan were influenced by Sinocentrism, especially after the Sino-Japanese War (1894–5), when the East Asian countries fought against European imperialists, a period sometimes known as the White Peril. After WWII, however, as their relations with the West changed, their perception also changed. During the occupation by the Allied Forces (1945–52), Japanese society went through changes that included the political and economic systems as well as civil values. It is interesting to note that to propagate the value of democracy among the Japanese, the occupation government used magazines and newspapers that it controlled (Columbia University 2009). The West, especially the United States, changed from the enemy to a positive referent point during these years. Hollywood movies, television programs, and popular music, including rock ‘n’ roll, were increasingly and widely imported to Japan. American programs that dominated Japanese television in the early 1960s taught viewers the Western lifestyle. The rising popularity of Hollywood movies resulted in the decline of the domestic film industry: box office revenue from Japanese films remained lower than that of Hollywood movies between 1975 and 2000 (Suzuki 2015). Western popular music was regarded as more “authentic” than its Japanese counterpart among some youths, and some FM stations exclusively aired only Western songs. Increased consumption of Western popular culture coincided with Japan’s transformation through self-Orientalism; Japan came to be regarded as the West in the East not only in its self-perception but also by other Asian countries (Iwabuchi 1994).

Furthermore, in the Japanese popular consciousness, only the West mattered, and the rest of the world was regarded as inferior to Japan and therefore unimportant. In terms of race, only white/Caucasians deserved attention and Asians and blacks were discriminated against. The first Japanese exposure to blacks took place in the sixteenth century when the Dutch merchants who came to meet Nobunaga Oda brought African servants with them. Commodore Matthew Perry of the U.S. Navy entertained the Japanese delegate with a minstrel show on his naval ship off the Uraga Bay. Through encounters like these as well as exposure to black images in the Western media, the Japanese perception of blacks came to reflect Western racism, as well documented by John Russell (1991) and...
Michael Washington (2000). Such a perception is shared in other East Asian countries. In China and Taiwan, historically, lighter skin color is associated with status and wealth while darker skin indicates a lower social class, i.e., peasants. Discrimination against the black race intensified when the Maoist state invited Africans to study in China in the 1960s. Barry Sautman, a professor of social sciences at Hong Kong University, thinks that mass media are largely responsible for shaping the Chinese negative perception of blacks: “In the media, Africa is portrayed as a house of horrors, with a huge number of people dying from diseases, wars and extremely high crime rates” (Jaffe 2012: n.p.). Koreans who have had limited exposure to blacks have a stereotypical perception: Black people are uneducated, underclass, and often criminal. This perception manifested itself during the Los Angeles riot in 1992 when Korean shop owners who thought black residents would loot their stores fought violently against them. Moreover, it is astonishing to see “blackface”—non-black actors in dark make-up posing as blacks, a remnant of the American minstrel shows in the nineteenth century—on Korean television as recently as 2014 (Jung 2014).

Perceptions of race in East Asia began to change in the 1990s with the change in economic power and subsequent increased cultural flow. As the Japanese economy expanded the market in developing countries, Japan experienced an ethnic boom in the 1980s. When the Persian Gulf War (1990–1) broke out, Japanese weary of U.S. imperialism began to identify with Asia. The Japan that had disassociated itself from Asia had returned to the region even though it maintained the view that it was “in but above Asia” (Iwabuchi 2002: 8). Other East Asian countries, with their rising economic power, increasingly began to purchase Japanese popular culture until finally Japanese popular culture beat American popular culture in the consumer market. East Asians prefer Japanese products to American products because of the former’s cultural familiarity/proximity. According to Koichi Iwabuchi, East Asians are attracted to Japanese popular culture because it is Westernized/Americanized and they are interested in American popular culture, yet Japanese popular culture contains elements of Asia that are familiar to them. In Iwabuchi’s words, the success of Japanese popular culture is due to “asianization of the West” as opposed to “westernization of Asia” (2012). The changing perception of race is reflected in the mass media. Whereas foreigners who frequented on Japanese TV known as Gaijin Tarento (foreign celebrities) prior to 2000 were almost exclusively Caucasian, African Americans (Bob Sapp, Billy Blanks, Jero), a Nigerian (Bobby Ologun), Koreans (Bae Yong-joon, Hyun Bin), and a Samoan (Konishiki) started getting media attention after the turn of the century (Kuwahara 2008). Also, a television program, Koko ga Hen da yo Nihonjin (roughly translated as Hey Japanese: This is Strange), in which foreign residents compared Japan to their home countries, became popular. As rap music found its way to East Asia, some youth developed an interest in hip hop culture and began to appropriate and remake rap music as represented by “yellow B-Boys” of Japan and Korean “rap dance” by Seo Teiji and the Boys, Hyun Jin Young, and Wawa (Condry 2006; Song 2014). While underground rappers use their music as a means to voice their opinions about society, others, including “idol groups” (acts manufactured by the music industry), merely appropriate black culture and thus perpetuate stereotypes. At an amateur rap concert held in a shopping mall in Seoul in 2011, many performers imitated gangsta rap both in songs and dance, singing and acting out violence. African-American youth who are fans of K-pop often deplore this. Many Japanese youth merely copy African-American styles by, for instance, changing their straight hair to Afros and then locking it, because African Americans are “cool.” Even idol groups appropriate races to
their advantage as Girls’ Generation manipulated the “hegemonic notion of whiteness” and TVQX exhibits identifiable characteristics of African-American masculinity (Oh 2014; Anderson 2014). Such efforts on their part increase their appeal amid the growing global cultural flow, yet do not change the existing perception of race. (As mentioned above, KBS, Korea’s state-run television, allowed blackface to appear on the show in 2014.) While blacks seldom appear on Japanese television dramas, Money War aired in February 2015 had two black actors as bouncers. It seems that a positive stereotype of Caucasians has lost influence in East Asia in recent years but a negative stereotype of blacks lingers on.

Conclusion

Since the end of WWII, the countries in East Asia have experienced changing relationships among themselves from animosity stemming from their colonial memory to alliances for economic gain. Mass media have played an important role, shaping the popular perception of one another. While mainstream media, especially under communist and dictatorial leadership, endorsed the governmental views until the 1980s, the increased influx of popular culture, such as TV dramas, anime, and popular music for the past three decades, has created different perceptions among people in these countries. It will be interesting to see how the continuously increasing exchange of popular culture products will impact the relationships among the East Asian countries. Compared to Westerners, people in East Asia have had limited experience with racial “others” historically. Their perception of “others” was, thus, largely shaped by the Western hegemony which places Caucasians on the top of the racial hierarchy and blacks on the bottom. While the recent global situations as well as the increased global cultural exchange have changed the view of “others,” the traditional perception is still easily observed in the mass media. This clearly shows the strong grip that the mass media hold on the East Asian public.

References


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Further Reading


Pew Research Center. (2014) “Chapter 4: How Asians View Each Other, Global Opposition to U.S. Surveillance and Drones, But Limited Harm to America’s Image.” Retrieved from http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/07/14/chapter-4-how-asians-view-each-other/. (Results of a survey conducted in Asia which reveal the perceptions of one another among China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.)