

# ***A Glance at the Background and Current Directions of Cultural Diplomacy in Eastern Asia***

by Sam Powney

## **The Regional Economic and Political Context: Pan-Asian Forums**

When talking about East Asia, it is important to try to define exactly what the term means. According to the United Nations (UN) definition, 'Eastern Asia', includes China, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, Japan, North and South Korea, and Mongolia. As always when trying to draw regional boundaries, the line seems arbitrary wherever it is placed. In fact the term exists largely to distinguish North-East Asia from South East Asia and Russia, although both those broad lines are of debatable usefulness. After all, in the north, the national borders that separate northern China, the Republic of Mongolia, Kazakhstan and Russia, do not strictly follow ethnic boundaries, and most South-east Asian countries have strong links with Chinese culture, many with large Chinese-speaking populations.

The interconnected relationship between countries across the broad sweep of north-east Asia, South-east Asia and even the Indian subcontinent are becoming more apparent with the gradual enlargement of pan-Asian economic forums that began in 1967 with the creation of ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations). ASEAN expanded over the years, and now includes Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam. The ASEAN Plus Three meetings (ASEAN members plus China, Japan and South Korea), began in 1997 and were institutionalized two years later at the first such summit by that name, held in Manila. On December 14th 2005 the first East Asia Summit, including all the ASEAN Plus Three members as well as India, Australia, and New Zealand, was held in Kuala Lumpur. Those involved in ASEAN and the East Asia Summit meetings are quick to point out that, when all the peripheral agreements are included in the equation, the trade agreements which already exist in Eastern Asia far outweigh even those of the European Union in terms of geographical area, population affected, and trading revenue.

Because of the loose affiliation of member states and the largely apolitical 'talking shop'

nature of the ASEAN and ASEAN Plus conferences (including the East Asia Summit), the Asian trade bloc is much more amorphous than the current European model. This very looseness has been the subject of criticism, particularly in the West, because of the generally perceived reluctance among Asian nations to attach political strings to economic agreements. Thus, critics allege, opportunities to put pressure on governments with bad human rights records have been almost entirely ignored, although some are optimistic that the new ASEAN charter, signed last year, will provide more scope for demanding political change from authoritarian regimes.

However, many Asian governments are hostile to Western pressure on political issues, and point to a cultural difference in diplomatic methods. China has been one of the most vociferous governments in the region in insisting on a policy of mutual non-interference in extra-national affairs. It has long been argued that interference in other countries' political systems is an old facet of Western colonialist policy which, arguably, was largely unknown in Asia before the arrival of the Western powers.

### **Close economies, distant identities**

Perhaps the main reason, however, behind the prevailing lack of transnational discussion in Eastern Asia, at least in the political field, is the diverse nature of political systems in the region. Contrast the comparatively liberal-leaning government in Japan, with the politically conservative but fiercely free-market system in Singapore, the essentially one-party systems in China and Vietnam which although socialist in political ideology are booming centres of free-market trade, and the effectively isolationist state of North Korea.

Pessimists might say that the silence on politics has more to do with underlying national enmities and mistrust which, while not standing in the way of trade, preclude any real union of mind in East Asia. The anti-Japanese riots which took place in China in 2005 are one of the most recent indications of widespread national divides across the region, and allegations of exaggeration or understatement with regard to Japanese wartime abuses are continually resurfacing. Memories of the ethnic cleansing which took place in South-East Asia still haunt that region, and in many areas more ancient perceptions and stereotypes persist in hampering mutual understanding.

The language gap remains a major divide, particularly between the Chinese language group (Sinitic) and the Japanese/Korean language family (Macro-Altaic). In East Asia, as

in other parts of the world, English has often become the language of last resort. Most Asian countries include English on their school curricula and although the levels and effectiveness of this may vary greatly, vestiges can be recalled when all other communication fails. Having said this, there is a recent trend in eastern-Asia for learning neighbouring languages. Around 90% of the foreign student population (90,000) in Japan is made up of Asian students<sup>1</sup> (c.53% from China and Taiwan, and approximately 23% from South Korea), demonstrating a keen willingness to study in Japan in those countries (or, on the down side, a severe lack of it elsewhere). Similarly, figures from 2003 show that more than half of all foreign students in China came from South Korea and Japan<sup>2</sup>, and Chinese is the second most popular choice of foreign language courses in Japanese universities after English<sup>3</sup>. South Korea, which used to have the lowest number of foreign students in the developed world, has seen a remarkable threefold increase over the past four years<sup>4</sup>.

## The Pan Asian Dream

The divisions between Asian nations are particularly unfortunate given the tremendously positive ambitions of the Pan-Asian movement which sprang up in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. A recognition of modern Asian nations' shared starting point and their similar experiences of suffering at the hands of Western imperialistic ambitions, led many intellectuals of the era from across eastern Asia to an almost instinctive affinity. Japanese writer Okakura Kakuzō is regarded as one of the founders of the Pan-Asian movement, beginning his work 'Ideals of the East' (1901) with the line 'Asia is One'. This book and the writings of other like-minded authors across Japan, China, Korea and beyond, famously inspired modern India's most famous poet Rabindranath Tagore to write along the lines of pan-Asian identity. Tagore made several trips to eastern Asia but inevitably became disillusioned by the current of imperialism he saw in Japan in the twenties.

The idea of a closer Asian community of nations, while suffering a serious setback after

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1 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan website, page *Foreign Student Exchange*, section entitled *Acceptance of Foreign Students: Overall Situation*, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/culture/scholarship/index.html>

2 China Guide website, article *More Foreign Students Coming to China*  
<http://www.china.org.cn/english/2004/Mar/90771.html>

3 ChinaNewsReview (in Chinese), article 京将建中国文化中心 (*Tokyo will build a Centre for Chinese Culture*), 05 05 2008,  
<http://gb.chinareviewnews.com/doc/1006/3/5/9/100635947.html?coluid=7&kindid=0&docid=100635947>

4 The Korea Times, *Universities to attract 100,000 foreign students*, 2008-08-04,  
[http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2008/08/117\\_28752.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2008/08/117_28752.html)

the blind alley of the 1940's Japanese 'Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere', seems nevertheless to be regaining strength in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The East Asian Summit is still in its infancy but many believe that it will soon eclipse the ASEAN Plus Three summits (ASEAN members plus China, Japan, and South Korea), although this is an area of contention between China and Japan<sup>5</sup>. China would like to see ASEAN Plus Three develop into the main forum for Asian affairs, whereas Japan is keen to bring politically like-minded India, Australia and New Zealand on side more permanently. What seems certain is that finance and culture are binding East Asian countries together as never before, perhaps at a faster pace than national governments are fully prepared for. It remains to be seen just how fast and how far this fusion will go and what, if any, parts of the European model East Asia will draw on in the future.

## **China, Japan and South Korea: Significant Recent Trends in Cultural Diplomacy**

Cultural diplomacy has been gaining pace in East Asia in recent years, particularly in the case of its three greatest economic power-houses - Japan, China and South Korea. Japan and China are now the second and third largest economies in the world<sup>6</sup>, and South Korea is not far behind. China's most eye-catching initiative is the Confucius Institute, dedicated to promoting Chinese language and culture. After setting up the first institute in Seoul in 2004, the operation rapidly expanded, establishing 295 Confucius institutes in 78 countries and regions by November 2008<sup>7</sup>. The office aims to establish 1000 institutes by 2020<sup>8</sup>. Zhou Qing'an, a researcher at the Center for International Communications Studies at Qinghua University (Beijing), explains the clear 'soft power' impetus behind this expansion, *'China still lags behind in terms of cultural competitiveness, and the Confucius Institute should add more profound and dynamic elements, to attract attention overseas, rather than hanging on to superficial or stereotyped cultural icons'*<sup>9</sup>.

The Japanese educational exchange programs differ from the Chinese model in that the

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5 Malaysia News Agency, article *Japan Pushes For Expanded EAFTA Comprising 16 Countries*, [http://www.bernama.com.my/bernama/v3/news\\_business.php?id=215499](http://www.bernama.com.my/bernama/v3/news_business.php?id=215499)

6 Yahoo News, *China raises '07 economic growth*, by Joe McDonald, 14<sup>th</sup> Jan 2009, [http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20090114/ap\\_on\\_bi\\_ge/as\\_china\\_economy](http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20090114/ap_on_bi_ge/as_china_economy)

7 Confucius Institute Online, [http://www.confuciusinstitute.net/confucius\\_institutes](http://www.confuciusinstitute.net/confucius_institutes)

8 Xinhua News on-line article, *Confucius Institute, promoting language, culture and friendliness* [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2006-10/02/content\\_5521722.html](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2006-10/02/content_5521722.html)

9 As above

Japanese have a variety of exchange programs in different countries and regions, many of which are set up in partnership with Japanese businesses, rather than a single, world-wide, government-led institution. These cultural diplomacy drives have become possible in the context of the rapidly increasing trade in the region. China is Japan's largest trading partner<sup>10</sup>, and by 2004 South Korean investment in China was already greater than that of the US<sup>11</sup>.

Besides the Confucius Institutes, the Chinese government has also established 'Chinese Cultural Centers' in Paris, Malta, Berlin, Cairo, and Seoul. However, the Japanese cultural diplomacy missions are a hard act to follow. The Japan Foundation has 21 offices in 19 countries (including 9 Asian countries). Its 'Maison de la Culture du Japon' in Paris, opened in 1997, is an enormous complex, situated on the river Seine, just a few hundred metres from the Eiffel Tower. Besides the Japan Foundation, there are other large scale extra-governmental organisations with clear cultural diplomacy aims, like the spectacular Manggha Museum of Japanese Art and Technology in Krakow, Poland. Planning for a centre for Chinese culture in Tokyo is under-way following diplomatic meetings<sup>12</sup>, but in Japan there are already several home-grown cultural organisations dedicated to the improvement of China-Japan relations<sup>13</sup>. In the West also, there are a large number of non-governmental Chinese, Japanese and Korean cultural societies, particularly in cities with sizeable Asian-heritage populations like San Francisco<sup>14</sup>, Toronto<sup>15</sup> and London<sup>16</sup>. The South Korean government has recently showed a similar interest in promoting cultural diplomacy. The Korean Cultural Service has opened twelve centres in nine countries, including in five in Asian cities (Beijing, Shanghai, Tokyo, Osaka, and Hanoi).

Relations between India and its far-eastern neighbours are becoming a matter of increasing relevance. Despite its consistently friendly relations with Japan and flourishing trade (growing by over 10% per year since 2000, and valued at 10.2 billion US dollars in 2007<sup>17</sup>), the cultural relationship remains embryonic in some senses. Japan's resident

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10 China Daily website, BizChina center, *China-Japan economic, trade ties have great potential to tap*  
[http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/bizchina/2008-05/05/content\\_6661446.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/bizchina/2008-05/05/content_6661446.htm)

11 Business Week, Asian Cover story, March 31<sup>st</sup> 2004, *Korea's China Play*  
[http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/04\\_13/b3876012.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/04_13/b3876012.htm)

12 As footnote 3.

13 China Govt. website news story, March 31<sup>st</sup> 2006, *President Hu meets heads of Japan-China friendship groups*.  
[http://english.gov.cn/2006-03/31/content\\_241628.html](http://english.gov.cn/2006-03/31/content_241628.html)

14 Chinese Cultural Center San Francisco, <http://www.c-c-c.org/>

15 Chinese Cultural Centre of Greater Toronto, [http://www.cccgt.org/F.cgi/\(en\)/accueil.cgi](http://www.cccgt.org/F.cgi/(en)/accueil.cgi)

16 Chinese Cultural Society, London, <http://www.chineseculturalcentre.org.uk/>

17 Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs website page on relations with India <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia->

population in India was only 2,821 in 2007<sup>18</sup>. However, one of the most recent phenomena in Indo-Japanese cultural relations has been the largely unexpected popularity in Japan of the Tamil film *Muthu* (1995) and other Chennai-based (Tamil language) productions<sup>19</sup>.

The cautious but ongoing revival of friendly relations between China and India signifies one of the greatest diplomatic shifts in recent history, crucial for Asia and indeed for the rest of the world. A spirit of mistrust that continued to fester from tensions between British India and Qing Dynasty China through to the Sino-Indian conflicts of the 1960's, ensured a virtual damming of cultural exchange which had, in previous centuries, flourished through maritime trade. The meeting of cultures, which is logically bound to follow the gradual withdrawal of trade and travel restrictions, should be an interesting space to watch out for. The two nations' combined population of nearly two and half billion, accounts for over a third of humanity.

China's recent focus on Africa also deserves a mention here. Besides China's need for raw materials from the African continent, and the benefits of Chinese technology and investment that African countries stand to gain by, there has also been an emphasis on cultural exchange. Between 1997 and 2000, China received 28 ministerial-level African cultural delegations and sent 7 governmental cultural delegations to visit 17 African nations<sup>20</sup>, according to China's 'Facts and Figures' website.

## The Global Future

Fortunately, the differences between Asian countries are by no means preventing the growing cultural synergy there. Contemporary Korean film, TV series, and music have become one of the most successful examples of cultural export in recent times, becoming popular throughout East Asia and beyond. Within Asia the cultural impact of the film boom is arresting, with audiences lapping up the latest films, often irrespective of their place of origin. A small but increasing number of films are being made that jump between or cross over languages and locations. High profile examples of this are Hong Kong director Wong Kar Wai's futuristic *2046* (made in 2004), which switches between Cantonese, Mandarin and Japanese, Shunji Iwai's *Swallowtail Butterfly* (1996) about immigrants in Japan, in

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[paci/india/index.html](http://paci/india/index.html) section *Economic relations*

18 As above, section *Number of Residents*

19 The Hindu online, article *Breaking cultural barriers*, Sept 16 2002, <http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/mp/2002/09/16/stories/2002091600220400.htm>

20 China facts and figures 2002, Cultural Exchange between China and Africa, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/China-Africa/82031.htm>

Japanese, English and Mandarin, and the Pang brothers' 2002 horror film *The Eye*, set in Hong Kong and Thailand, using Cantonese, Thai, Mandarin and English. Famous Hong Kong actors have long been in the business of multilingual roles, particularly those like Takeshi Kaneshiro, Christy Chung and Anthony Wong who come from mixed heritage. However, it would be a mistake to portray the Asian film boom of the last 10 years solely within the context of East Asia. Noticeably here in the West, the 'Asian Cinema' craze has grown to proportions never seen before even in the 1960s heyday of Japanese greats like Akira Kurosawa. This is to say nothing of the ongoing popularity of Western films in Asia. For example, China officially imported 4,322 foreign films from 2000 to 2004, mostly from the US<sup>21</sup> but it is common knowledge that a far greater number, though not legally sanctioned, are readily available in China. The appearance of cheap pirate DVD's in many Asian nations has led to a keen interest in cinema, which seems to be viewed there more as art than as mindless entertainment. The rise of China's 'fifth generation' of 1990's art-film directors like Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige bears testament to this, though some would argue that the era of much less highbrow Asian 'pop-corn blockbusters' has already arrived in earnest.

Indeed, much of the cultural interaction in modern Asia seems to be more globally slanted than the early Pan-Asian writers might have imagined. The arrival of 'pan-Asian cuisine', in books, TV shows and chef-training courses indicates a melange of influences which can be upsetting to hard-line critics of the 'melting pot' theory. Asian cuisine is becoming ever more popular in the West, (and vice-versa), and Britain's recent rash of TV-chefs like Jamie Oliver and Gordon Ramsay (whose shows, curiously enough, have begun to expand into the Asian media) draw on mix-and match eating habits now especially common in countries like Britain, whose own culinary traditions are less inspiring.

The modern pan-Asian media is similarly east-west oriented, English/Chinese language news websites like the Asian Times On-line<sup>22</sup>, Channel News Asia<sup>23</sup>, and the Far Eastern Economic Review<sup>24</sup> (all centred in Hong Kong) cater to a cosmopolitan readership who want news that crosses continents as well as national borders, both in terms of content and perspective. National-based newspapers and magazines, both in Asia and the West, are also increasingly offering several language options for their websites (e.g., the Wall

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21 Xinhua News on-line article, *Confucius Institute, promoting language, culture and friendliness* [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2006-10/02/content\\_5521722.html](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2006-10/02/content_5521722.html)

22 Asia Times On-line, *About Us*, <http://atimes01.atimes.com/mediakit/aboutus.html>

23 Channel News Asia, *About Us*, <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/about/>

24 Far Eastern Economic Review, *Introduction to FEER*, <http://www.feer.com/about/introduction>

Street Journal, BBC News, Xinhua News, People's Daily, Deutsche Welle). In Korea and Japan, English language editions of major newspapers are a relatively recent arrival, but given the opportunities for expansion, it does not seem unlikely that some will expand this to include other languages in the future. The plethora of foreign-targeted News websites, many with government backing (e.g. [www.mongoliadirect.com](http://www.mongoliadirect.com) available in Japanese and English, and The Seoul Times - logo 'Serving All Foreigners Interested in Korea'), or set up primarily by foreigners for foreigners (like the English language newspaper Cambodia Daily, or [www.searchina.ne.jp](http://www.searchina.ne.jp) which offers China-related information in Japanese) are often lower-profile but taken as a whole represent a significant component of eastern Asia's transnational media.

In Asia, as we have already seen, nations' domestic policies are often worlds apart. In theory, were it not for their geography, Japan and South Korea would make almost ideal candidates for EU membership according to the Copenhagen criteria (the defining rules of EU eligibility). EU membership for East Asian nations may seem absurd (despite the apparent malleability of the Maastricht Treaty's Article 0 on Europe's 'borders') but, given the recent instability of the international financial system, some sort of more global economic union in the future does not seem altogether unlikely. Application for membership to the East Asia Summit was put on hold for two years in 2006, but many other countries, including Russia, the USA<sup>25</sup> and the European Union<sup>26</sup> have expressed their desire to play some role in the summit's future.

To some extent, South-East Asian countries lead the way in cultural diplomacy in Asia as, for most of them, cultural exchange has played a central role in their history and indeed in their current identity. In Malaysia and Singapore most local inhabitants speak at least a smattering of Malay, Chinese (often several dialects), English, and perhaps even some Tamil. ASEAN's role in bringing Asian countries together is a manifestation of this, as is the pan-Asian food phenomenon, which stems largely from the diversity of South East Asian cuisine.

There is no doubt of the increasing interaction between states within East Asia, in terms of formal diplomacy, trade, and travel, as well as educational and cultural exchange. Yet this

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25 Parliament of Australia Parliamentary Library website, section entitled *East Asia Summit: Key Issues*, [http://www.aph.gov.au/library/intguide/FAD/eastasia\\_summit.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/library/intguide/FAD/eastasia_summit.htm)

26 Times of India, *East Asia Summit freezes membership for two years*, 20 May 2006, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/1539589.cms>



interaction seems set to take place within the larger context of a need for much closer co-operation globally, and a more globalized cultural environment.

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