

## Retrospective and Prospects of the Japan Foundation Through its Activities in Thailand

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### 1. Opening Chapter

At the beginning of the 1970s, considerable trade friction between the United States and Japan had almost reached boiling point; and eventually the Japanese government had to create an international cultural exchange policy to cool down the situation. Consequently, the Japan Foundation was established in October 1972 as the sole/core agency for that purpose. Though the direct cause which gave birth to the Foundation was the politico-economical conflict between the two countries, the ultimate goal was to enhance mutual understanding between Japan and other countries through various kinds of cultural activities which would effectively contribute to further human welfare worldwide.

Since its establishment until the present, the Foundation has been operating its cultural exchange programs in three designated fields: arts and cultures, Japanese studies and Japanese-language education abroad. This is the first chapter of the Foundation's birth story.

In addition to the politico-economical conflict between Japan and the United States, there was also serious conflict between Thailand and Japan, mainly caused by the "tsunami" of Japanese economic power - products, services, companies - that had flooded into Thailand. In 1973, a nation-wide boycott against Japanese merchandise was dramatically broken out when the then Japanese Prime Minister Tanaka Kauei paid his first official visit to Thailand. The following year, in July 1974, the Foundation opened its liaison office in Bangkok<sup>1</sup> under the auspices of the Japanese Foreign Ministry and its Thai counter-authorities, which guaranteed the Foundation's permission to conduct its cultural exchange activities throughout the country. This is also the first chapter of another birth story, of which following chapters have been described in Thailand. To tell you about some parts of the second chapter of the latter story, it is worth reviewing chronologically some memorable events which were organized between the two countries in each field.

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<sup>1</sup> Expanded in 1991 as 'Japan Cultural Center, Bangkok,' and then reorganized in 2003 as 'Japan Foundation, Bangkok.'

## Art and Culture

The term of “culture” is generally considered to represent each specific ethnicity and its own traditional culture, so that we often regard cultures as ethnic and/or national identity. This typical concept about identity remains a priority for those people who share the social values and virtues within the framework of “imagined community”<sup>2</sup> even though they face globalization, which has brought a rapid and voluminous exchange of information and mobility of people worldwide. In this context, cultural exchange activities between Thailand and Japan were organized and devoted principally to the introduction of traditional arts such as music, dance, theater performances, folk crafts and so on. Various types of Japanese traditional theater such as Noh, Kyogen, Kabuki, were proudly introduced to Thai audiences; folk craft exhibitions and demonstrations were also organized. Similarly, Thai traditional court/folk dances were invited to Japan several times.

In a much broader sense, not only traditional cultural events but also contemporary ones were also held frequently so that mutual understanding was gradually formed and strengthened through those events by experts, educators and leaders in various fields including sports, journalism and literature. In particular, some large-scale events were

organized for such auspicious occasions as royal celebrations for the King and Queen, commemorative years of bilateral diplomatic relations, and so on. The Thailand Cultural Center, built by the Japanese Official Development Assistance scheme, has long served as the core institution/venue for those events since its establishment in 1987; the Center has been one of the key bilateral “cultural icons” representing the very best of the Thai-Japan relationship, and it has become an “international cultural icon” in Thailand. I vividly remember the world-class concert in 1991 by the Tokyo Symphony Orchestra, which featured two world-famous artists, namely pianist Hiroko Nakamura, and violinist Teiko Maehashi. In 1992, in celebration of H.R.M. Queen Sirikit’s 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, a huge concert by the famous New-Age musician Kitaro was held at Rama IX Park. “*Oshin*,” a Japanese TV drama series must also be specially mentioned as another successful event, because it certainly drew great applause from Thai audiences when it was first broadcast in 1984 and it has grown even more popular from repeated broadcasts since then.

Many different kinds of musical and theatrical performances ranging from traditional to contemporary have played for audiences of all kinds around the country, as following examples show<sup>3</sup>:

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<sup>2</sup> Anderson, B. (1983)

<sup>3</sup> 国際交流基金 (2006) 『国際交流基金 30 年のあゆみ』

<70s - 80s>

‘77: ‘Kabuki’ theater - first performance in Thailand

‘80: ‘Takeda Puppet Theater’

‘80: ‘Takarazuka’ girls’ revue

<90s - Present>

50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Coronation of H.R.M. King Rama IX: 1995-96

- a) ‘Kabuki’ demonstration (1995)
- b) ‘Wadaiko Yamagata’, traditional Japanese drum concert (1995)
- c) ‘Kabuki’ theater (1996)

72<sup>nd</sup> Birth Year of H.R.M. King Rama IX (1999)

- d) ‘Orchestra Ensemble Kanazawa’ concert
- e) ‘Jazz, New Vision’

Observing the current situation in this field, the most discernible phenomenon, witnessed not only in Thailand, but also worldwide, is the global expansion of so-called “pop culture”, consisting of various “transnational cultures” such as music, anime and manga, all of which are popular and attractive to young people everywhere. Since Japanese anime and manga are highly popular with youth, they are sometimes regarded as a strong motive for the younger generation to learn Japanese. I wonder if this is true or not; my interpretation of this idea will be articulated in the latter part of this essay.

### Japanese studies

I would rather say that those events in the field of ‘arts and cultures’ are relatively common to general public even though some of them are for connoisseurs of certain genres of cultures, and some are not. Besides, academic and intellectual approaches to Japanese culture, including politics, economics, society and its people have long been necessary to comprehend Japan itself, the results of which enable public understanding through education and publications by academics and intellectuals. It was in 1978 that the Foundation granted scholarships for the first time to two young promising Thai graduates to study for their doctorates in the United States, and then some years later, in 1986, the first Thai-Japanese studies center was established at Thammasat University, Rangsit campus, through the support of the Japanese Official Development Assistance scheme. Since then the Foundation has been a key financial/academic partner in enhancing relevant research at the center and at other institutions. The Center, through its continuous efforts and achievements in conjunction with Japanese and foreign academic counterparts, is now an established and respected core institution in this field in Thailand. A decade and a half later, in 2000, a similar type of Japanese studies institution was established at Chulalongkorn University.; the Japan Foundation provided financial support in order to develop Japanese studies in parallel with relevant research at Thammasat University. In 2008, Chiang Mai

University also opened a Japanese Studies Center as the core institution for Japanese studies in the northern region of the kingdom.

Thus, although academic research in Japanese studies in Thailand has developed, some critical issues have mutually been recognized by both sides i.e. by the above Thai institutions and the Japan Foundation, including Japanese academic counterparts. To the best of my knowledge, those are integrated into two main categories in such a way that budgetary constraints on both sides would gradually make them passive in their activities. Moreover, the emergence of China and its influence in the international arena will no doubt surpass Japan in many other arenas including academic ones. A typical phenomenon in academia concerns ‘area studies’, in particular, some European Japanese studies centers have been closed or amalgamated into much broader area studies centers. In some cases, Chinese studies courses have been set up instead. Referring to the most recent phenomenon, some hundreds of ‘*Confucius Institutes*’ have been established at various universities/colleges worldwide, where Chinese studies focused on culture and language are being taught to students and the general public as well. The ‘China wave’ is now rising higher and higher, while the ‘Japan wave’ is now ebbing; and that phenomenon will be reflected sooner or later in the field of Japanese studies.

### Japanese language education

It goes without saying that language education is one of the key elements for promoting international exchange beyond the difficulties of the language barrier and communication gap. The Japan Foundation, like other foreign cultural institutions, has initially taken account of it as one of the three pillars of activities in order to accomplish its mission, as stated below:

...to contribute to the improvement of a good international environment, and to the maintenance and development of the harmonious foreign relationships with Japan by the efficient and comprehensive implementation of activities for international cultural exchange, which will deepen other nations’ understanding of Japan, promote better mutual understanding among nations, and contribute to the culture and other fields in the world. (Article 3: The Law of the Japan Foundation Independent Administrative Institution)

In terms of the scale of Japanese-language education abroad when the Foundation made its first step, there were at most 717 institutions, 1,890 teachers and 56,649 learners<sup>4</sup>. In Thailand, Japanese-language educational dates back to 1947 when Mattayom Wat Borpitpimuk School started a basic Japanese course at secondary level, but a formal

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<sup>4</sup> 嘉数 (2006), *Annual Review of Japanese Language Education: 2006*, National Institute for Japanese Language

education in Japanese language did not begin until 1965, when Thammasat University began a course with a limited number of students, followed Chulalongkorn University which initiated a similar course in 1966. However, it was the latter that started the first full-time undergraduate major course of Japanese (1971), followed by the former in 1982. In 1981, Japanese was officially adopted at Thai secondary level as one of the second foreign languages of the National Curriculum. Since then, Japanese-language courses at both secondary and tertiary levels have grown remarkably.

In line with this trend, the *Japanese-Language Proficiency Test*<sup>5</sup> was introduced to Thailand in 1984 together with 13 other countries including China, Indonesia and so on. The number of test-takers has been increasing in parallel with the expansion of Japanese-language courses nationwide in Thailand, about which the latest statistics<sup>6</sup> revealed that the total number of learners has reached nearly 80,000. In terms of a numeric scale, the said statistics shows that Thailand is now placed the 7<sup>th</sup> in the world and 2<sup>nd</sup> in the Southeast Asian region after Indonesia with nearly 720,000 learners. This expansion of learners has been enabled by an increase in the number

of teachers, many of whom were trained through Thai-Japan collaboration at universities, educational institutes and the Japan Foundation. The Foundation's long-term perspective has proven to be a major element in the growth of Japanese-language education in Thailand.

## 2. Second chapter as prospects

The Japan Foundation, Bangkok has been eager to play its role in cultural exchange between Thailand and Japan since its establishment in 1974 up until the present day. During this period, Thailand has developed at a great pace and has become one of the economic leaders in the ASEAN region, and with higher living standards Thai citizens can afford to enjoy themselves with various types of cultural activities. This means that they can proactively participate in cultural events then might create a new dimension of cultural exchange not only between Japan but with other neighboring countries.

In contrast, Japan continues to struggle with economic depression since the collapse of the bubble economy in early 1990s. Consequently, the Japanese government has long been in financial difficulties which have resulted in major administrative reform. The Japan Foundation changed its status from a

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<sup>5</sup> The Japan Foundation operates the test abroad, while the Japan Educational Exchanges and Services do it in Japan.

<sup>6</sup> The Japan Foundation news flash based on "Survey on Japanese-Language Education Abroad 2009", July 29, 2010.

legal entity i.e. a government institution to an independent administrative institution in 2003, at the same time downsizing its budget and cutting some programs. In addition to this situation, another drastic reform strategy by the current administration will force us to undertake a comprehensive reconstitution of our activities. Japanese-language education and merry ‘*J-Pop*’ culture are strongly expected to expand further in order to redress Japan’s weakened international presence; however, other fields/genres of activities are no longer considered as before or given the same attention. I cannot help but disagree with this tendency, however serious the situation should be, since I would not want to agree with an attitude that considers cultural exchange as if it were a product being sold in a market place. Cultures are not always subject to mere vogue or calculation. In other words, ‘*J-Pop*’ is not always welcomed by all generations, and the expansion of Japanese-language education abroad is not necessary for better understanding of Japan, either. Japanese-language education should rather be well facilitated methodologically and environmentally for every kind of learner/teacher to assess or evaluate his/her proficiency. Once Japanese-language education has been well equipped with the same kind of perspective and system of the CEFR<sup>7</sup>, which is now commonly shared by European nations to deal with their

multi-lingualism, Japanese as a foreign language will be recognized as a parameter by European nations. In this regard, the first version of ‘JF Standards for Japanese-Language Education’ will be released to the general public no later than March next year.

Though the priority will be given to Japanese-language education and ‘*J-Pop*’ within the framework of fiscal 2011 and onward, I would like to argue that the Japan Foundation still has to operate functionally/quantitatively balanced cultural exchange activities consisting of the three major activities mentioned earlier, i.e., arts and cultures, Japanese studies and Japanese-language education abroad. And in future, it is quite possible that such activities will not always be run by the Japanese themselves but sometimes by multi-national individuals or parties. Ideally, any nationalistic concerns about ‘Japanese-ness’ will fade away, since cultures nowadays, with no exceptions, are becoming more transnational as a result of the dynamism of globalization. Nevertheless, having said that I believe that we should still be more conscious of the essence or uniqueness of our own cultures as long as we do not take sides with ethnocentrism nor pro-nationalism.

In terms of the Thai-Japan context, I believe that the future activities of the Japan Foundation, Bangkok should be reexamined and reprogrammed so as to be utilized by neighboring countries, including Cambodia,

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<sup>7</sup> Abbreviation of ‘Common European Framework of Reference for Languages’

Laos and Myanmar, since Bangkok is now the hub of this region. Our recent quantitative involvements with Mekong regional affairs also suggest the future necessity of reaching out to these countries.

Our first chapter has nearly come to an end, and the story continues. The second chapter is now ready to be written.

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