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TV Content in Asia: More Waste or Substance?
8th AMIC Annual Conference
Information Poor to Information Rich
Strategy for the 21st Century
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Asia Now Documentary Proposals Competition
For Substantial TV Content in Asia (Revised Edition)

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With the coming of satellite and digitization technologies, we have now multiple satellite television channels, and in a few years we will also have multiple terrestrial channels in Asia as they have in Europe and North America. In such circumstances, what kind of contents or programmes will television stations, especially terrestrial national networks, provide for general audience?

That is our serious concern as we think that television is not only a tool to supply entertainment but also news and information as well as culture and education.

In order to promote radio and television as cultural entity or means of providing culture to listeners and viewers, my organization, the Hoso-Bunka Foundation, was established in 1974, 25 years ago, by Japan’s public service broadcaster NHK.

The Hoso-Bunka Foundation has been doing numerous activities such as giving grants to research and projects related to broadcasting, awarding the annual HBF Prize to best radio and television programmes, and holding symposiums and forums on broadcasting and the media.

Since 1995 we have started a new project in cooperation with ABU and AMIC, which aims to stimulate production and exchange of quality Asian TV programmes among Asian broadcasters. The HBF-ABU-AMIC joint project is entitled Asia Speaks Out: Towards Greater TV Programme Diversity In Asia. The report and recommendations of the research project was adopted by the
1996 ABU General Assembly in Hong Kong, and concrete steps were being taken by the ABU towards achieving the goal of the *Asia Speaks Out* concept.

The AMIC and HBF also held a seminar on TV Content the Asian Way in Bangkok in September 1998. The three-day meeting brought together TV programme directors, producers and writers, academics and critics from 10 countries to review the state of TV entertainment programmes in Asia, and propose more creative ideas and concepts to enhance the Asian-ness of broadcasting content in the region.

**Asia Now Documentary Proposals Competition**

In parallel with this *Asia Speaks Out* project, we at the HBF have started another project in 1994 entitled the *Asia Now* Documentary Proposals Competition. The goal of the project is the same as the *Asia Speaks Out* concept: production of quality programmes by Asian producers.

We invite programme makers in the Asia-Pacific region to propose documentary ideas depicting various aspects of present day Asia. They should not only satisfy the tastes and interests of viewers in their own countries but also in other countries of Asia and the rest of the world. For the first *Asia Now* documentary proposals competition in 1994, a total of 25-million Japanese yen (about $200,000) awards were offered to three winners from Japan, India and Vietnam.

The competition drew a very favourable response. The first competition in 1994 drew as many as 139 entries from 18 Asia-Pacific countries (96 from Japanese and 43 from overseas applicants). The second in 1995 drew 108 proposals from 16 countries (71 from Japanese and 37 from overseas) and the third in 1996 131 from 17 countries (75 from Japanese and 56 from overseas).

Three winners were selected in the first two competitions, and four in the third. Top two winners were awarded ¥10 million each and the runners-up ¥5 million for the production of the proposed programmes. The production of the 10 winning proposals (five Japanese, two Indian, one each from China and Vietnam) has been completed, and they have experienced wide distribution in Japan and abroad (including Europe), through television broadcast, film festivals and other release.
However, after the three successive yearly competitions, we had to skip one year and hold the event not very year but on the biennial basis, starting in 1998. This was due to financial difficulty. We are short of fund. But we decided to keep the total amount of the awards in each competition to remain ¥25 million.

Applications Doubled;
576 Proposals Submitted in All

Last year (1998), in the fourth competition, we had as many as 198 proposals submitted from 20 countries: 91 from Japanese programme makers and 107 from those in 19 other Asia-Pacific and Middle East countries. It is significant to note that the number of applications from outside Japan surpassed those from within Japan, doubling from 56 in the third competition in 1996 to 107 in the fourth in 1998.

This was the result of our two-year effort of promoting the project directly to broadcasters and filmmakers at the meetings of the ABU Programme Committee, the PPP (Pusan Promotion Plan) of the Pusan International Film Festival, Korea, and the CineMart of the Rotterdam International Film Festival. We are grateful for the co-operation of the ABU secretariat and the film festivals’ authorities concerned.

(We are in the process of selection of winners by an independent selection committee composed of senior TV professionals, academics and critics. The winners will be announced in May 1999 and the award-giving ceremony will be held on June 18 in Tokyo, when the HBF Prize is also awarded.)

As we see the entries of the past four competitions, we had as many as 576 proposals, 333 from Japanese applicants and 243 from those in 28 other countries in the Asia-Pacific and the Middle East regions. They include 57 from Korea, 44 from India, 23 from China, 22 from Australia, 12 each from the Philippines and Singapore, and 9 each from Vietnam, Sri Lanka and the United States.

The 333 Japanese proposals were submitted from 69 directors/producers employed by at TV stations, 242 directors/producers working at production
houses, 14 independent producers/directors, and 8 others. The 243 non-Japanese proposals include those from 35 directors/producers employed by TV stations, 156 directors/producers working at productions, 20 independent or freelance producers/directors, and 22 others.

This shows that directors/producers working at productions and freelancers, rather than those employed by TV stations, have more programme ideas and enthusiasm to enter into the competition. The ratio of applicants is 3.7 production staffs and freelancers to one TV station staffs in the case of Japanese, five to one in the case of other Asians. This may mean that staff producers/directors of TV stations are too busy with their regular daily work and do not have time to think and write proposals to our competition even though they have good programme ideas.

Diversified Themes Proposed

Themes of the proposals were diversified and were not easy to categorise. The themes Japanese applicants chose were current and human interest topics, food and agriculture, arts and culture, children and youth, environment and pollution, history, war and peace, volunteer activities, travelogues, etc. But the themes other Asian applicants chose were more serious. The chart shows the themes of the proposals and the countries the applicants represent. As you see in the chart, popular themes among the 243 proposals from non-Japanese applicants were as follows:

Development and economy (35 proposals), art and culture (27), family life (27), women (24), human rights (22), refugees and race relations (18), children and youth (17), environment and wildlife (15), travelogues (13), environment and pollution (13), migrant workers (11), etc.

To be more specific, such problems, Asian nations currently face, as economic development, pollution and protection of environment and wildlife; women’s suffering in the family and society; street children and child labour; refugee camps; and the plight of migrant workers, were proposed as the themes of Asia Now documentaries.

Many applicants are experienced directors/producers or filmmakers. Some of
them are winners of prizes at various international and national film festivals or TV programme contests. We have learned through this Asia Now documentary competition that we have quite a number of veteran film or programme makers in our part of the world, who are eager to document the current realities of Asia and its people on video tape or film.

Past Winners and Their Themes

Now let me introduce a number of winners and their productions in the past three competitions:

A Vietnamese photographer/director, Mr. Le Manh Thich was one of the two runner-ups in the first contest. His proposal *Ups and Downs on the Perfume River* tells the story of the boat dwellers’ life on the Perfume River which flows through the city of Hue in central Vietnam.

People on the river have had to deal with war, misfortune and the ups and downs of life that have come in a constant flow like the flow of the river itself. During the Vietnam War, people took sides, but whichever sides they chose, they remained just as loving, tolerant and forgiving as before.

The 48-minute documentary was premiered in Europe at the 25th Rotterdam International Film Festival in 1996 and broadcast nationally in Vietnam and Japan as well as in some francophone countries.

One of the winning proposals in the second competition was submitted by two prominent young Chinese filmmakers, Zhang Yuan and Ning Dai. Zhang Yuan became internationally known for his first feature *Mama*, which won two prizes in 1992 at the Festival des Trois Continents at Nantes, France. Zhang and Ning’s first joint production, a feature film entitled: *Sons (Erzi)*, had its international debut at the Rotterdam International Film Festival in February 1996.

Their proposal was *Demolition and Relocation*, a story of bewildering Beijing citizens involved in the reconstruction of their old living quarters in the fast-changing Chinese capital. The documentary was completed in late 1998.

The top 10 million yen prize winner in the third competition was a proposal
Dislocation: Plights of Asian Immigrants submitted by Iranian programme makers, Mohammad Reza Kashani and Ali Akbar Abdolrashidi. The documentary is about three generations of a tribe of nomads in Iran who had to leave their homes for various reasons.

The programme, completed in 1998, featured the nomads at their seasonal resorts, and compared it with life in urban areas, where some of their sons and daughters lived to fulfil their dreams of comfortable modern life. They have already abandoned their traditional nomadic way of life, but they still cannot completely identify themselves as city-dwellers, either. The documentary also featured some of their sons working in Japan, seeking desperately their dreams of wealthy modern way of life.

Another non-Japanese winner was a career Indian producer N. C. Rajamani, who proposed the production of a programme entitled Enemy Within Us. The 60-minute programme dealt with violence against women: how violence against women in India starts even before their births and continues until their deaths, taking different forms regardless discrimination related to caste, creed or economic status. The programme was broadcast on an international satellite channel of Measat-Astro based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

More Fund Needed

The problem we face now is that our fund is limited and we can give financial support to only three or four winners at one competition, and that because of shortage of fund, we have to hold the competition once in two years, and not every year.

Soros Documentary Fund

Recently I find that there is a fund solely devoted to support documentary production. It is a fund provided by the Open Society Institute in New York called the Soros Documentary Fund (SDF). The Open Society Institute is a private operating and grant-making foundation, established in 1979 by Mr. George Soros, Chairman of Soros Fund Management, a private international investment management firm.
The Soros Documentary Fund, established in May 1996, supports international documentary films and videos on current and significant issues in human rights, freedom of expression, social justice, and civil liberties.

The program has two funding categories to ensure that support is available to all filmmakers, regardless of their experience. Seed funds are available for projects in the research or pre-production phase. Preference will be given to emerging filmmakers. Projects in production or post-production are eligible for the maximum grant award.

The Fund has supported a wide range of projects focusing on issues from the trafficking of women and children in Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia; to rape as a war crime; the global problem of sweatshop exploitation and many others. Grantees are from over 16 countries in Europe, Africa, Southeast Asia, and the US.

Seed funds are available for projects in the research or pre-production phase. Preference will be given to emerging filmmakers. Grants for this category range up to $15,000. The Works in progress include projects in production or post-production. The maximum grant in this category is $50,000 but will average $25,000.

In 1996, its first year of operation, SDF supported more than 42 film and video documentaries from 16 different countries in Europe, Africa, Southeast Asia, and the United States. In 1997, SDF awarded 50 production, pre-production, and seed grants to filmmakers from over a dozen countries. The total number of grants made in 1998 was 47 (26 works in progress, 14 pre production, 7seed) and the total amount awarded was $1,144,155.

One of the grants in 1998 was a film entitled "Made in Thailand" about women factory workers in Thailand and their struggle to organise unions in their newly industrialised country. But, it is a proposal of two U.S. filmmakers. Another documentary entitled "Khilawadi: Eldest Daughter of a Gypsy" on a community of gypsies in India was also proposed by U.S. filmmakers and not by Indians.
The Soros Documentary Fund covers all over the world, but as this was the case, the grants have been given mostly to filmmakers in North America and Europe. As far as I looked at the list of 1998 grants, I found no Asian recipients. The total amount of the Soros grants awarded in 1998 was more than $1,000,000, and they say they would continue to do so in the future.

Collaboration and Support Essential

Last February we approached the Soros Documentary Fund to hold initial talks about possible collaboration of our two projects so that Asian programme makers can have chances of winning their grants to produce documentaries on Asian issues. Their initial reaction to our approach was quite favourable.

(After attending the Board meeting of the ORBICOM, the international network of UNESCO Chairs in communications, and the international conference they are organising, Connecting Knowledge in Communication, in Montreal in mid April, I will go to New York to have a talk with them on this matter.)

We are also looking forward to establishing co-operative relationship with the PPP of the Pusan International Film Festival. Mr. Kim Dong Ho, Festival Director, has kindly expressed his willingness to discuss the matter with us. The PPP aims to support promising filmmakers by selecting 10 feature and two documentary film projects each year and introducing them to prospective investors, distributors or buyers. The Pusan International Film Festival started this PPP last year.

Last March, JAMCO, Japan Media Communication Centre, held an international symposium entitled "Voices of Asia: Documentary Producers Speak Out," inviting six documentary producers from Asian television networks as panellists and also Mr. Hugh Leonard, Secretary General of the ABU, as a keynote speaker. Mr. Leonard, speaking on a theme entitled "Taking Asia to the World through TV Documentaries," noted that documentaries are the ideal vehicle to promote Asia because there are unlimited material of themes, no language problems, and people are tend to look for information on other countries. He then emphasised that Asian producers should study the market they want to distribute and produce quality
as well as entertaining or attractive documentaries of high technical standard for that market.

Programmes produced by the four participants from Nepal Television, Philippine Children's Foundation, Dalian (China) Television and KBS (Korea) TV1 were shown and the panel discussion was centred on these documentaries. It was a very stimulating session for the panellists and audience, mostly those from the television industry, to know and exchange ideas on how to encourage quality documentary productions and promote them beyond the national boundaries. They were urged to look for opportunities in the Asian market first and then the world, and also video market along with the television market. Participants hoped that the symposium would lead to open opportunities of promoting talent, skills and techniques of those creative people in Asia.

How to Expand and Consolidate the Asia Now Project

Now that we have learned that there are quite a number of experienced programme makers and programme ideas, we have to plan how to mobilise their talents to produce substantial content for TV channels in Asia and also in other parts of the world for the benefit of viewers. Here are some points that we have examine and materialise:

1. Make network of Asian producers/directors

* We need to make database of qualified producers/directors in the region and construct effective communication network to help them exchange ideas and information related to programme production, financing, promotion and distribution as well as mutual co-operation among themselves. I think AMIC can be the centre of the database as it has ample experience in this field.

2. We have to secure more funds.

* In order to make effective use of their programmes by TV stations, we have to provide at least a package of 13 programmes for half a year weekly broadcast. To support the production of 13 documentaries a year, we need at least $1,000,000, possibly $1,500,000 a year, excluding promotion and distribution expenses.
* For making an international version of 13 programmes and promotion and distribution, we need at least another $500,000.

* How can we procure the fund? I have no idea. A small foundation like ours can not provide such a large amount of money to one project. We need support of others, perhaps some international organisations such as UNESCO or its IPDC (the International Programme for the Development of Communication), as one of the mandates of UNESCO is to encourage the development and distribution, regionally and internationally, of audio-visual productions. We should also seek support from ODA aid-giving agencies of advanced countries.

3. Asian broadcasters’ support is essential.

* We also need firm support of fellow Asian broadcasters to broadcast the documentaries thus produced by Asian producers on current Asian issues. For this we need active and substantial co-operation from the ABU, Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union, as it is the only organisation uniting broadcasters in the Asia-Pacific region for the promotion of their cultural and educational activities.

* Mr. Hugh Leonard, ABU Secretary General, said the ABU is going to open soon (in the mid 1999) the ABU Programme Market on its Internet website as a show case or trading post of television programmes produced by its members.

4. Establish international network for distribution

* We have to establish contacts with international TV channels such as Discovery and ARTE, public broadcasters in North America and Europe which show interest in broadcasting documentaries, and also programme distributors who are willing to handle documentaries on contemporary Asian affairs. We have to collect information concerning this at various programme-markets such MIP-TV, MIFED and MIP-Asia, where broadcasters and distributors meet to buy and sell programmes.

* With regard to this, we are looking for the progress of development of a
UNESCO programme entitled "Screens Without Frontiers." It is a project to establish a film bank and database for the use of the public television channels of developing countries. UNESCO held an expert meeting last February in Budapest to prepare for the launching the project. According to the General Overview of the Project introduced by Mr. Hnerikas Yushkiavitshus, Assistant Director-General for Communication, Information and Informatics of UNESCO, the project aims at "establishment of the database combining existing and appropriate sources, and establishment of a partnership and a network among the organisations concerned." And, the meeting decided to launch the first phase of the project with four organisations agreeing to list up programmes for UNESCO's database of TV programmes. They are:

1) URTI (International Radio Television University, France) collects 500 programmes (in French, English and German versions) from Western European countries.
2) INPUT (Independent Public Television, Spain) offers 150 programmes in Spanish and English.
3) FFCC (First Foundation for Central and Eastern European Cooperation, Hungary) provides about 2,000 programmes in English, Russian and Hungarian.
4) JAMCO (Japan Media Communication Centre) offers 800 programmes in English and Spanish, and has already created its library homepage on the Internet.

Mr. Yoshikuni Ono, Executive Managing Director, of JAMCO, spoke at the meeting that his organisation launched its video library homepage November 1998 and you can easily find the content of 800 Japanese television programmes provided free of charge to broadcasters in the developing countries. He offered his organisation's full co-operation with UNESCO's "Screens without Frontiers" project by providing the know-how of the video library on the Internet.

Mr. Ono said his organisation was requested to be an Asia-Pacific centre for the UNESCO project and include not only Japanese programmes but also programmes of other Asian and Pacific countries. Asian broadcasters and producers have to discuss how we can co-operate with the UNESCO project.
5. Look for international co-producers and encourage co-production.

* We also have to look for producers in North America, Europe and elsewhere, who are interested in co-producing documentaries on Asian affairs with Asian colleagues. Co-production is the best way for Asian producers and directors to learn how to make programmes to suit the taste of viewers in other countries, while keeping Asian flavour, and have the products shown in other countries through the co-producers. And, through the counterparts they would know how to market their programmes in the world market.

* On the other hand, the foreign producers would benefit greatly through co-production with Asian counterparts, because without the insiders’ help, the choice of subject, explanation, and interpretation may well be distorted because of linguistic, cultural and sociological differences.

* At the JAMCO symposium “Voices of Asia: Documentary Producers Speak Out,” a Nepal TV production “Journey of Discovery” was shown. It was a co-production with YLE, Finnish Television, excellently produced technically and artistically. According to the producer, the documentary was produced for the European market and broadcast not only in the Scandinavian countries but also in other European countries.

In Japan, there is much interest in Asia now, and Japanese networks, both public service NHK and commercial stations, broadcast a variety of programmes such as variety shows, travelogues, documentaries, and music shows, produced on location in Asian countries or co-produced with Asian networks or productions.

NHK, broadcasts not only its own productions on Asia, mostly current affairs and documentaries, but has special slots for Asian networks’ news programmes, drama serials and feature films on its terrestrial and satellite channels. Asian programme makers should look for chances of working with Japanese networks.

* We need to make database of producers in Asia and other parts of the world who are interested in co-production and establish effective communication networks among them.
These are some points I have thought of with regard to our Asia Now documentary proposals competition. We need thorough discussion on how to comply with these points among those who are concerned: producers, broadcasters, and other related institutions such as ABU, HBF and AMIC. Through these talks I hope we can establish effective ways of exchanging or distributing Asian programmes among Asian TV stations and also beyond Asia to the other parts of the world.

Our HBF's Asia Now documentary proposals competition project is still an infant. With your cooperation and support, we would like to bring it up to at least a young man, who can actively work for its aim of providing substantial content for TV channels in Asia and other regions of the globe.
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