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"Co-Productions: Ideal Solution Or Ideal Dream?"

By

Akiyoshi Kobayashi
"Killing two birds with one stone" is a common axiom among those who use Chinese characters. However, you would have to have a very good rifle and be a very good shot to kill even one bird. Ordinary hunters usually miss two birds for every two they try to shoot. Even so, killing two birds with one stone is a dream of ideals. It's like the dream many TV producers have for their co-productions. They may be able to double their budgets with funds from abroad, or those on the administrative side may be able to cut the budget in half. These are signs of successful co-productions.

The cost of quality, creative TV production is very high. In the U.S., the average price of prime time programming per hour is said to be a million dollars or more. The U.S. is perhaps the only country in the world which can pay such a high price for TV programs. In Japan, the average cost of a prime time TV program would be around $500,000, or 50,000,000 yen. Why does this difference exist? Perhaps because Americans can share the cost among 240 million viewers whereas Japan divides the burden among 100 million
viewers. The same situation applies if a TV station is supported by commercial sponsors, public funds, or pay TV fees. Economy of scale applies to the TV industry.

Casting a net to catch a whole school of fish

If someone could invent a program which could be viewed by 300 million people, the most probable price of such a program would be 1.5 million dollars per hour. In reality, there already are such programs. The Olympic Games and perhaps the World Soccer Championships are examples of such programs. The cost of the broadcasting rights for sports events is skyrocketing, but seems still to be viable for both broadcasters and sponsors because it is accountable as a commercial media in terms of cost per thousand viewers.

In the field of news, CNN is trying to build a superstructure in which everyone in the world can watch the same news at the same time. Mr. Turner is trying to catch a whole school of fish with the cast of a net, which is called a global network. This is the least expensive method of operation if you see television as a business. Mr. Murdock is also trying to build a global network which will be cost effective.

Another way to make TV programs less expensive is to sell the programs to other countries and recoup a portion of the production costs from foreign sources. Even before TV became as popular as it is now, Hollywood movies were made to be seen not only in the U.S. but throughout the world. America had accumulated movie experience even before TV started. Now most American TV programs are made in Hollywood. It was the people in Hollywood who first tried
to produce popular programs for global distribution.

**U.S. cultural invasion of Japan**

TV as a business is a rather new concept to us. NHK started radio operation in 1926 as a public service. We still think of radio and television as public services rather than as businesses. There are, of course, commercial broadcasters in Japan and the competition between public broadcasters and commercial broadcasters is very keen. So public broadcasters have to try to be as cost effective as commercial broadcasters.

Let me tell you about the U.S. cultural invasion which actually occurred in Japan in the 1960's. In the early part of the 1960's, one third of the prime time TV programs in Japan were imports from the U.S. "Ben Casey", "Laramie", "Rawhide" and "Rin Tin Tin" were some of the most popular programs in Japan in 1962.

At that time, the Japanese TV industry was still in its infancy. We were not able to make quality programs at that time. Imported programs are usually less expensive than in-house productions because most of the production costs are recouped in the country of origin. Import cost is usually one-fifth of the home production cost, so if imported programs could earn good ratings in prime time slots, TV station managers did not feel the need to produce quality programs themselves.

We can infer much from what happened in Japan in the latter part of the 1960's. The Olympic Games were held in Tokyo in 1964 and from that time programs imported from America almost completely lost their competitive advantage in prime
time slots to Japan-produced programs. There were no local content regulations at the time; Japanese audiences simply lost interest in American programs. Big hit American programs like "Dynasty" and "Dallas" no longer earned adequate ratings in prime time slots in Japan.

Yet, we still import a lot of TV programs from abroad. Japan is a great exporter of electronic instruments but we import several times more TV programs than we export. We are hard exporters and soft importers.

The lesson we learned from the experiences we had in the 1960's is that we can expel the U.S. cultural invasion by producing quality programs ourselves. I am fully aware that this is sometimes difficult in other countries. As I said, imported programs cost only one-fifth of in-house productions. Therefore there is a natural trend toward making cheaper homemade programs of poorer quality in order to compete with foreign programs in terms of cost. However, I would think that in every country viewers tend to like programs which are socially and culturally familiar. In other words, viewers usually prefer homemade programs to foreign made programs. That is why we can expel foreign programs even though they are cheaper in cost.

I do not mean to say that Japan should expel all foreign programs from our broadcasting schedules. We would like to import quality programs. We would also like to export good programs. We live on small islands and tend to think of ourselves in an isolated way. We export things but we are ineffective at expressing our thoughts to our neighbors. We feel we are being misunderstood by our fellow Asians. Our TV programs are not widely accepted in Asia, except for some animated cartoons. While we are proud that "Oshin" has been
broadcast in 42 countries throughout the world, there is little else that Japanese TV producers are known for internationally. What steps can we take to promote international exchange of programs?

Co-production as a tailor-made purchase

We think of co-productions not only in economic terms but also in synergetic terms. Co-production is not only co-financing. It is a mechanism by which to share television culture.

We co-produce one series of programs every year with CCTV in China. We have also co-produced several programs with the Discovery Channel and PBS stations in the U.S. The most important element in co-production is to work with like-minded organizations. We exchange news with ABC in the U.S., but we seldom co-produce with them. We sometimes co-finance with the BBC but we find it difficult to work together sometimes.

Co-production is sometimes not so distant from program purchase. Let me give you an overview of the various types of co-productions in which NHK is commonly involved:

1. Co-financing—An organization makes a program and we simply supply production money. This is the type of co-production the BBC often asks us to join.

2. Co-planning and franchising the distribution area—In this case, working plans are usually agreed upon in advance. European distributors get the distribution rights in Europe and/or the U.S. and NHK gets the distribution rights in Asia and/or the U.S.
3. Versioning—As partners, two or more organizations pursue the same theme but the end products are different. This is the type of co-production we sometimes do with KBS in Korea.

4. Consortium—This type of co-production is successful among countries with common languages such as French or German speaking nations. Each member organization can make program proposals to the consortium members. If enough money is raised by the members the project goes forward. Members may be able to get additional funds from non-members like NHK depending on the general appeal of the programs.

5. Genuine co-production—In a worst case scenario, this can be like having two different directors for the same program. It is only workable when we have a long-standing relationship with our partners. We have come to understand that the style of production is very different from country to country. The greatest differences occur in the editing room. For example, Americans tend to like up-tempo editing while Japanese prefer a more smooth and sentimental atmosphere. Hollywood has a strong liking for up-beat music whereas Japanese tend more toward the heart-warming melody. Compromise is seldom successful. The relationships among the crew members are also quite different from country to country. In Japan, the relationship between the director of the program and the cameraman is one of production partnership, while in the U.S., the director's word is the last word. Japanese cameramen therefore find it difficult to work as crew members with American directors unless they have had a long-standing relationship. We have also found that in France, a director has to get personal permission...
from each crew member for overtime work. Valuable time and money are lost in re-scheduling and re-shooting when crews do not have the flexibility to work overtime when necessary.

How to succeed in co-production

Finally, I have to stress that co-production is not an idle dream. Through it we can save money. We can share the same television culture in successful cases. We have a great many themes of global importance such as AIDS, environmental issues and human rights which could be the themes of documentary co-productions. However, co-production as equal partners is seldom successful. We do not need two directors on a co-production; it's like a dragon with two heads. If Station A has the final responsibility for the content and quality of the program, the director of the program has to come from Station A and what we need from Station B is a co-production coordinator. If filming is necessary in Station B's country, it would be natural that Station B provide the field crew with a location manager or location director.

There are a thousand ways a successful co-production can be arranged depending on the theme of the program and its production style. Broadcasting rights can be shared in many ways depending on the contribution each partner has put into the co-production.

NHK sincerely wishes to enrich our programming through contributions from Asian broadcasters. We also wish to contribute to the TV culture of Asian countries in as many ways as possible.