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"Bridging the Gap: Foreign and Local Programming"

The Annual Conference of the Asian Media Information and Communication Centre (AMIC)
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 20th June, 1997

By Shinichi Shimizu
Executive Advisor
International Affairs
Hoso-Bunka Foundation

It is indeed a great honour for me to speak before the distinguished participants in this celebrated annual conference of the Asian Media Information and Communication Centre (AMIC).

I would like to express my hearty gratitude to its Secretary General, Mr. Vijay Menon, for inviting me to participate in this significant meeting. I have known Mr. Menon for more than 10 years. And, AMIC and my organization, the Hoso-Bunka Foundation, have been cooperating with each other for about the same long years.

The Hoso-Bunka (Broadcast Culture) Foundation is an independent, non-profit organization. It was established in Tokyo 23 years ago, three years after the AMIC was born. Its purpose is to assist in the cultural and technological development and progress of broadcasting.

We organize the HBF Prize Awards for best radio and television programmes produced and broadcast in Japan. We also participate in the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union’s ABU Prize Awards. We organize, as one of our projects, the "Asia Now" Documentary Proposals Competition.

We also carried out a research project entitled "Asia Speak Out: Towards Greater TV Programme Diversity In Asia." We started this project in April 1995 with the cooperation of the AMIC and the ABU. The final report and recommendations of the project was adopted by the ABU General Assembly in Hong Kong last November.

The first meeting of an ABU Task Force, recommended by the project, was held here in Kuala Lumpur two month ago. Thus, we took the first concrete step towards achieving the goal of the "Asia Speaks Out" concept.
The "Asia Now" Documentary Proposals Competition also aims at the same goal. That is production of quality documentaries 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.

We started the competition in 1994. We attracted 139 proposals that year. Last year we had 108 entries. We have selected six proposals from among them, and commissioned their production.

The first three proposals have been produced and broadcast in their own countries. One of them, "Ups and Downs - The Perfume River" by a Vietnamese film maker, Mr. Le Manh Thich, was European premiered in February last year at the Rotterdam International Film Festival. It was also shown in Japan on NHK's satellite channel earlier this year.

This year we had 131 entries from 17 countries, 75 from within Japan and 56 from abroad. Among them, 13 proposals came from the Republic of Korea, 10 from India and 9 from China. Proposals also came from Iran, Mongolia, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Turkey.

We have selected four winning proposals this year. The winners will be announced this afternoon at the HBF Prize Awards presentation ceremony in Tokyo. A top winning proposal will be awarded 10 million yen to cover the production cost of the proposal. Three other winners will be awarded five million yen each.

These two projects, the "Asia Speaks Out" and the "Asia Now," are still very modest ones. But, we think that they are the first step towards "bridging the gap between foreign and local programming."

The problem of foreign programming has been widely and loudly discussed by educators, politicians as well as broadcasters since the start of transborder satellite television services in the early 1990s in the Asia-Pacific region.

But, before the start of the satellite television services, our established television stations had been broadcasting hours of foreign programmes.
In 1983, 14 years ago, I made research on programming of national television stations in 11 Asian countries. All of them were using foreign programmes, mostly American series, at least 20 percent of their total programming, and some as much as 70 percent.

Two years ago, we carried out similar research in connection with our “Asia Speaks Out” project. We found similar figures.

Besides, we have now dozens of transborder satellite television services trying to penetrate into our homes. They include such major players as STAR TV, CNN International, BBC World, MTV, Discovery, ESPN, TNT & Cartoon Network, ABN, etc. They can be received directly by DTH receivers, or through cable services.

Four years ago, AMIC carried out an international research on viewers’ response to these transborder television and foreign programmes. The study was partly financed by the Hoso-Bunka Foundation. The empirical study of mass media and cross cultural communication was done in India, Japan, Malaysia and Hong Kong.

In India, viewers’ opinion towards foreign programmes were generally favourable. News, current affairs and sports scored better than similar Indian programmes. Indian films and serials were liked more. The national network Doordarshan, irrespective of whether foreign or local, were more purposeful in selecting programmes conforming to Indian values and lifestyles.

In Japan, in the 1950s and 60s, foreign serials, mostly American, dominated television screens of both public service NHK and commercial networks. But now, the proportion of foreign programmes on terrestrial television is very low, just a little more than five percent of total. The reason for failure of foreign programmes to flourish in Japan is strong competition from local programmes.

Since the early 1970s, Japanese television networks and production houses have been producing competitive programmes to better suite the tastes and lifestyles of the Japanese audience than “made-in-Hollywood” programmes.

But on its domestic satellite channels, NHK’s BS-1 and BS-2, we have more foreign programmes, more than 60 percent of total. They are carefully selected to suite the tastes and needs of our diverse viewers. They are of various origins, both Western and Asian, and include news, sports, documentaries, music, drama
serials and feature films.

Viewers in Hong Kong do not find values of foreign media culture more harmful than local programmes. They think that foreign programmes of good quality will help understand other cultures. They also think that when local productions are abundant, low quality foreign programmes are unlikely to be selected. Hong Kong viewers now look for alternate foreign sources other than the United States or Europe, such as China, Taiwan or Japan, those with closer cultural affinity.

In all these countries in Asia, viewers said they did not like sex, vulgarity, violence and crime in foreign programmes. But, they were against banning of foreign programmes.

Today, television stations in Asia look for alternate foreign sources other than the United States or Europe such as China, Hong Kong, India, Japan, Mexico or Taiwan. The success of NHK’s drama serial “Oshin” in the 1980s in many countries in Asia has provoked the attention of the programming executives of Asian television networks to look for more Asian programmes, which will better suite the tastes and values of their viewers and appeal to their emotions.

In recent years, many drama serials, broadcast on Japanese commercial networks and depicting the life of young people in Tokyo or other big cities in Japan, became popular among young viewers in Asian countries. They were initially telecast by STAR TV’s Mandarin channel and Taiwan’s cable channels.

In Japan, there is much interest in Asia now as we approach the “Century of Asia.” Japanese networks broadcast a variety of programmes such as documentaries, variety shows, travelogues and music shows, produced on location in Asian countries or co-produced with Asian networks or productions. Fuji Television’s pop contest music show called “Asia Bagus” is an example. It is a monthly programme jointly produced with networks in ASEAN countries.

The Japanese public television, 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. Thus, Asian television networks are more interdependent and inter-related now.

NHK has been broadcasting a monthly co-production music programme entitled “Asia Live” since two years ago. Commemorating the two year anniversary,
NHK produced and broadcast late last December a three-hour gala show entitled "Asia Live Dream." Let's look at the highlight of the show.

(Video No. 1 - 4:20)

As you have seen, this programme was jointly produced by 12 Asian television stations and participated by popular singers and performers from different Asian countries. I think this is an Asian programme in its true sense.

NHK also telecasts information programmes on Asia regularly. One of them is a weekly programme called "Asia Now." Let's see what it's like.

(Video No. 2 - 4:35)

This is a bilingual programme, broadcast both in Japanese and English, on NHK's satellite channel and is designed to inform viewers at home and abroad what is happening in Asia. It takes up mostly topics which viewers can enjoy looking at and understand what is happening in Asia.

There is another series of 10-minute programmes entitled "Asia Who's Who." They are also broadcast on NHK's satellite channel. The series pick up ordinary citizens, usually young and active, and report on their business or social activities. Through portraying the individuals and their daily life, the series informs viewers what is happening now in Asia. The programmes are broadcast only in Japanese, but I would like to show you two abridged episodes.

The first episode is about the chairman of Malaysia's Proton automobile company, and the second one is about a young executive of an Indonesian aircraft manufacturing company. Now, let's see.

(Video No. 3 - 6:20)

These are just a few examples of programmes which represent Asian programmes on present-day Asia.

Most terrestrial networks in Asia are national, public service broadcasters. They have responsibility of not only entertaining but also informing and enlightening the public by providing a variety of programmes.

In spite of an increase in the number of satellite channels, subscribers to these
channels are still limited. Therefore, what matters to the general public is established national channels and the wisdom of their programming executives in selecting programmes.

According to a BBC survey in 1985, when only four channels are competing in the United Kingdom, the BBC’s share was 46 percent. Ten years later, when 74 channels became available with the introduction of satellite and cable, the BBC still maintained 44 percent share. This shows that the increase in the number of channels does not matter. What really matters is the content of the channels.

By providing quality original dramas, music and variety programmes, our Asian national networks can entertain and enlighten their viewers. By providing impartial and comprehensive news services, documentaries, and information programmes, they can inform and enlighten the public about their own countries and their Asian neighbours.

The HBF-ABU “Asia Speaks Out” project is designed to work out a scheme to jointly develop and produce quality “Asian” programmes and share them among Asian broadcasters. It is also designed to distribute them to networks in other parts of the world so that their viewers have chances of learning more about our dynamic Asia and its people, and also the diversity of its culture.

It is vital for Asian networks and productions to improve their skills to produce quality and attractive cultural and informational programmes to meet the needs of their viewers in the face of competitive foreign programmes.

I am very pleased to say that AMIC has been playing a significant role along with the ABU and HBF in pursuing this objective through its timely and expert audience research activities.

Through these joint efforts, we will be able to bridge the gap between foreign and local programming, and provide our viewers with a diversity of quality Asian programmes and meet their needs and interests.

Let us continue our joint efforts to make broadcast culture bloom and flourish in Asia.
MEDIA REGULATIONS FOR
NEW TIMES

Koh Tin Fook
Peter Webb
TOPIC: Media Regulations for New Times

* Government-private sector roles in protecting sovereignty, privacy and the common good

* Rules on media ownership and monopoly

BIODATAS:

Mr. Koh Tin Fook
Mr. Koh Tin Fook, is the deputy Chief Executive Officer of Singapore Broadcasting Authority (SBA). He had held an appointment in MINDEF prior to being a director of Programmes for Singapore Broadcasting Authority (SBA). From April 1st, this year he has been Dy CEO for SBA.

Mr. Peter Webb
Mr. Peter Webb is the chairman of the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA). He had been, previously, ABA’s original members, he was the outgoing Chairman of the former Australian Broadcasting Tribunal. He was appointed an associate member of the Trade Practices Commission in 1993 and of the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission upon its creation in 1995.