

## **Intercultural Communication Between Thai and Japanese People: A Survey in Bangkok**

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between Thailand and Japan has been long and intimate. The royal family members in both countries have been visiting each other; approximately 30,000 Japanese are currently staying in Thailand; and nearly 2,000 students are enrolled in the Thai Japanese Association School in Bangkok; while 34,825 Thai nationals have completed the alien registration in Japan by the end of 2003; and more than 90,000 Thai people have traveled in Japan between January and October in 2004.

In such a situation, the author has conducted a study of Thai people's images of Japan and Japanese people 3 times in the past 11 years.<sup>1</sup> Each study interestingly portrayed new tendencies of Thai people's impressions toward Japan and its people. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is, for Japanese, to learn about ourselves in the light of Thai people's view, and for both Thai and Japanese citizens, to seek for a better way to attain a smoother and more active intercultural communication.

### 2. THE OUTLINE OF THE STUDY

#### 2.1. The Questionnaire

The study was conducted in August 2004 in the form of questionnaire. The primary intention of the questionnaire was to obtain Thai respondents' images of Japan and Japanese people through adjectives with which they might associate. After providing personal information such as age, sex, occupation, mother tongue and affiliation, the respondents were asked to answer 10 questions, which will be elaborated later. The first 9 questions were given

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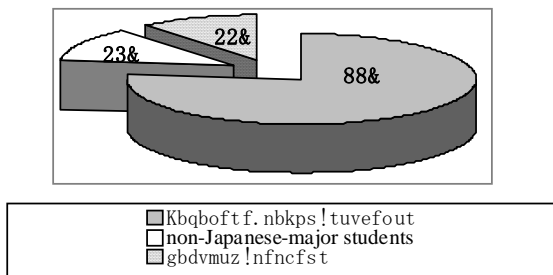
<sup>1</sup> Part of the result may be read in the following two papers; Honna & Takeshita (1996) and Takeshita (1999).

in Thai, and the last one in simple English. Of the 10 questions, 7 were multiple-choice questions and 3 were open-ended questions. Respondents were free to choose from Thai, Japanese or English for answering those 3 open-ended questions.

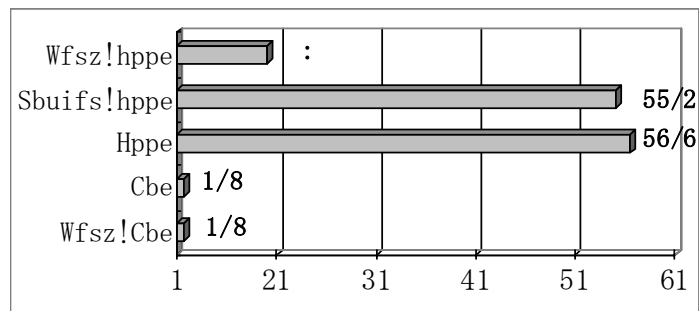
2.2. The Respondents

The respondents were 413 students and teaching and clerical staff members at the University of the Thai Chambers of Commerce.<sup>2</sup> This institution was chosen for the study for the following two reasons; one of the past two surveys already included respondents of this university; the university established the faculty of the Japanese language earliest among Thai private universities and thus shows much interest in Japan. As Graph 1 shows, of the 413 respondents, 318 were Japanese-major students, 52 were non-Japanese-major students and 48 were professors in the departments of literature, technology and law, and departmental secretaries. The Japanese-major students are expected to have more knowledge about and interest in Japan and the Japanese people. The respondents not only in this study but also in the other two studies in the past questionnaire-based studies have in common the fact that they are among the small percentage of Thai citizens with high academic background.

**Graph 1: Respondents at U. of T.C.C.**



**Graph 2: How do you evaluate the relationship between Thailand and Japan**



3. THE RESULTS

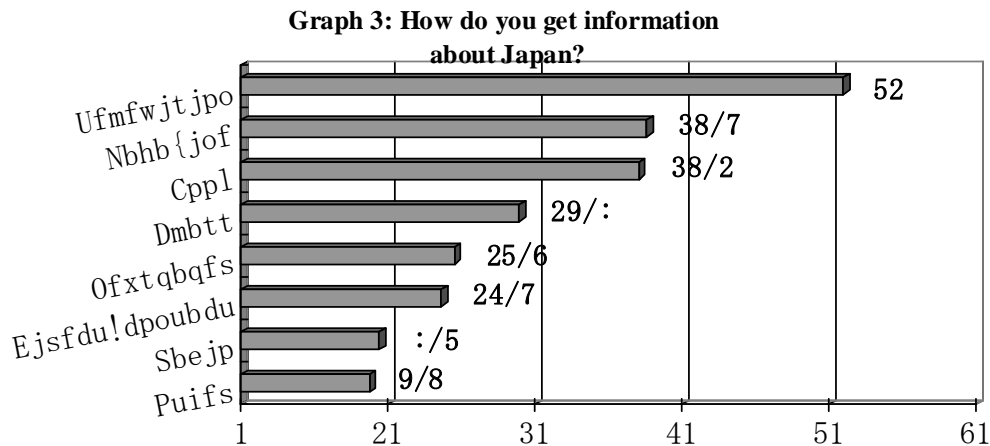
3.1. The Relationship Between Respondents and Japan

<sup>2</sup> The questionnaire was actually administered by Ms. Keiko Kushida, who then was a lecturer of Japanese at this institution.

The percentage of the Thai respondents who had been in Japan stood at 11.4%; approximately 10% of the students had been in Japan, while nearly 30% of the faculty members had the experience. Whether they have been to Japan or not, 95% of the respondents hope to visit Japan in the future. As Graph 2 indicates, when asked to evaluate the bilateral relationship between Thailand and Japan, 9% said it was very good, 44.1% rather good, 45.5% good, and those who thought it bad and very bad remained 0.7% respectively. When asked if the present relationship would further improve, 76.7% answered positively. Generally speaking, the respondents were pro-Japanese.

Before asking the respondents about their images toward Japan and the Japanese, the author hoped to know where they got information about Japan and its people. It turned out, as Graph 3 shows, that TV programs as well as books and magazines were playing an important role in their learning about Japan. Others included family members, friends and acquaintances, the Internet, cartoons and comic magazines, etc.

The percentage of those who obtained information through direct contact with Japanese people was 13.6%, which is a tremendous drop from former studies; more than 50% in 1993 study and more than 30% in 1999. Therefore, the images of Japan and Japanese people that were presented in this 2004 study had been formed not purely subjectively through direct interactions with Japanese people; they had taken root among the respondents rather objectively and indirectly with the influence of mass media such as TV programs (animated movies, dramas, news reports, etc.) and magazines and newspapers. This could lead to an estimation that the images below are more generalized and closer to those held by Thai people living in local areas with hardly any contact with Japanese people.



3.2. The Images of Japan Held by the Respondents

The images of Japan were obtained by asking the respondents to give 5 adjectives that come up to their mind when they think of Japan. The answers were restricted to adjectives in order to avoid nonsense nouns such as “Mt. Fuji,” “sushi,” “Pokemon”<sup>3</sup> and so on. Chart 1 shows the top 20 adjectives<sup>4</sup> with the respondents’ percentages. The ranks for each adjective in the 1993 and 1999<sup>5</sup> surveys are also given for comparative purposes.

Chart 1: Images of Japan Presented by the Respondents

Rank	Adjectives	'93	'99	Percentage	Rank	Adjective	'93	'99	Percentage
1	Beautiful	1	1	46.7%	11	Convenient	7	9	9.0%
2	Cold	3	7	25.4%	12	Not spacious	5	→	8.0%
3	Expensive	2	9	25.2%	13	Cute/lovely	20	→	7.7%
4	Delicious	16	→	19.6%	14	Pretty	4	→	7.5%
5	Lively	20	14	17.4%	15	Quiet	→	11	7.3%
6	Clean	9	2	12.6%	16	Interesting	8	→	7.0%
7	Small	6	5	11.4%	17	Populated	→	→	6.5%
8	Modern	10	→	11.1%	18	Fast/quick	20	→	5.8%
9	Advanced	11	4	9.7%	19	Pleasant	→	→	5.3%
10	Pokemon	→	→	→	20	Various	20	13	5.3%

<sup>4</sup> Some respondents wrote their answers in Japanese, others in Thai, and still others in English. Those that were not written Japanese were once translated into Japanese by Thai collaborators with a good proficiency in Japanese, and then translated into English by the author for writing this paper.

<sup>5</sup> Following the research result published in Honna & Okamoto (2000), the adjectives for the 1999 study were ranked only up to the 14<sup>th</sup>.

In all the 3 surveys, “beautiful” ranked first, whose impression is shared with “pretty” and “clean.” Frequent introduction on TV of natural beauty such as Mt. Fuji, cherry blossoms, hot springs, and historic beauty such as the old cities of Kyoto and Nara must have led the respondents to give these adjectives. Japan continues to exist as a beautiful country for Bangkokians who live in a city where poor people throng in slums over the modern tall buildings and beggars sit in front of the brilliant shops for big-name brands and expensive restaurants for gourmets. The tendency to refer to Japan as an advanced country was evident not only in this survey but also in the past 2 studies, with such adjectives as “modern,” “advanced,” “high-tech” and “convenient.”

The adjective “delicious” needs an explanation, for it is new in this present survey. The last several years have witnessed a Japanese food boom in Bangkok. Expensive dishes such as *tempura* and *sushi* which they could hardly eat before are now available to the middle- and upper-class Thai citizens including students. What has played the leading figure is a successful buffet-style Japanese restaurant, capitalized by a Thai, called Oishi.<sup>6</sup> Partly due to the Oishi Group, Thai people have never felt so close to Japanese cuisine than before. Here is a page from the company’s homepage:

From an original idea to develop a food business that would offer Thai consumers something new and different, yet with the highest levels of service and product quality, Tan Passakornnatee, President and CEO of the Oishi Group, launched the first Oishi Japanese Buffet restaurant branch in Bangkok 's Soi Thonlor on September 9, 1999 .

Its innovative concept, unique style and high quality selection of dishes quickly caught on with Thai consumers, and the company's buffet-style concept proved to be an historic moment in the Thai restaurant industry. Given its initial success, the group expanded rapidly with new branches opening across Bangkok.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> “Oishi” is meant to be the Japanese word for “delicious,” which should be written “oishii” instead of “oishi,” but it still carries the meaning.

<sup>7</sup> Oishi Group, “About Oishi Group,” ↪ [http://www.oishigroup.com/profile\\_en.html](http://www.oishigroup.com/profile_en.html)↩ .

A series of questionnaire personally administered by Kushida at the University of the Thai Chambers of Commerce also shows the change in the relationship between Thai citizens and Japanese cuisine. The percentage of students majoring in the Japanese language that have the experience of eating Japanese-style dishes had remained approximately 30 %, but the figure grew to nearly 100 % in 2004. The popularity of Japanese cuisine in Bangkok today matches that of Italian food in Japan.

### 3.3. The Images of Japanese Held by the Respondents

The images of Japanese were obtained in the same way as those of Japan were obtained; by asking the respondents to give 5 adjectives that come up to their mind when they think of the Japanese. Chart 2 shows the top 20 adjectives with the respondents' percentages. The ranks for each adjective in the 1993 and 1999 surveys are also given for comparative purposes.

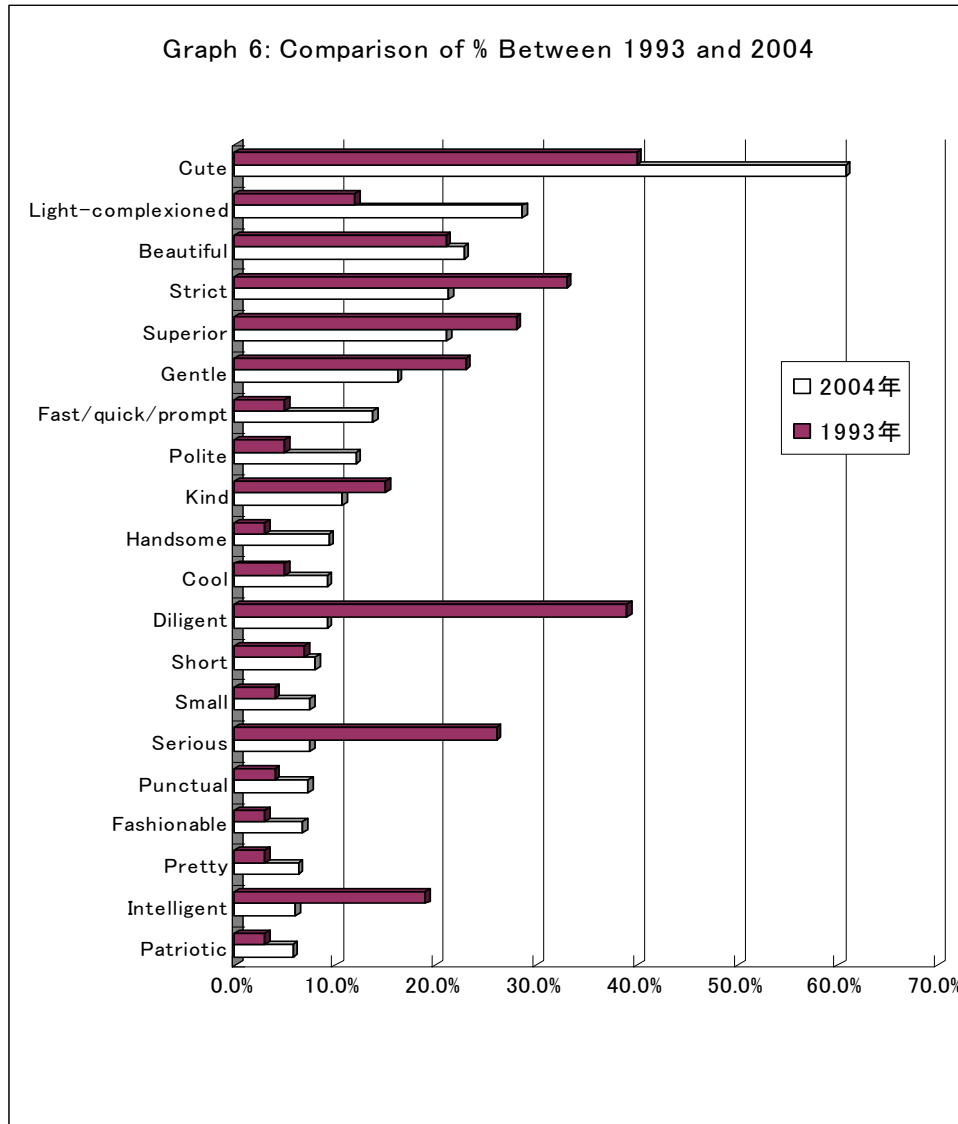
“Cute,” which is ranked first here and 13<sup>th</sup> for the images of Japan, is a translation of a Thai word, *naa rak*. *Naa rak* is applied to more subjects than the Japanese equivalent *kawaii* (cute). While in Japanese, and probably in English, too, the word is primarily used to modify small and adorable things such as a little baby, a pretty doll, a kitten and a puppy, Thai could apply this adjective to something that is affectionate, favorable, friendly and comfortable. The grand and awe-inspiring Mt. Fuji could be *naa rak* for a Thai. Therefore, with this adjective, the respondents express a good feeling that they have toward Japan and the Japanese people.

Chart 2: Images of Japanese Presented by the Respondents

Rank	Adjectives	'93	'99	Percentage	Rank	Adjective	'93	'99	Percentage
1	Cute	1	2	60.8%	11	Cool	20	→	9.2%
2	Light-complexioned	8	13	28.6%	11	Diligent	2	1	9.2%
3	Beautiful	6	6	22.8%	13	Short	13	→	8.0%
4	Strict	3	3	21.3%	14	Small	24	→	7.5%
5	Superior <sup>8</sup>	8/12	10/14	21.1%	14	Serious	4	12	7.5%
6	Gentle	5	→	16.2%	16	Punctual	24	8	7.3%
7	Fast/quick/prompt	20	→	13.8%	17	Fashionable	→	→	6.8%
8	Polite	20	→	12.1%	18	Pretty	→	→	6.3%
9	Kind	7	4	10.7%	19	Intelligent	4	→	6.1%
10	Handsome	→	→	9.4%	20	Patriotic	→	11	5.8%

The other adjective that needs attention is “patriotic.” Being patriotic is not meant for the patriotism that might be associated with nationalism, militarism and fascism especially during the wartime. What Thai respondents truly mean here is that Japanese people love their country, which is expressed in such behaviors as buying made-in-Japan products, occasionally visiting the old capitals of Kyoto and Nara, and maintaining cultural traditions such as tea ceremony and flower arrangement. Most likely, this has been influenced by Dr. Thaksin Shinawatra, prime minister as well as founder and leader of Thai Rak Thai Party (“Thais Love Thais”). He has been in office since 2001 and has had a policy to promote Thai products from the grass roots level up to [Small and Medium-sized Enterprises](#) and exporters’ level.

Graph 4 is a comparison of percentages for the top adjectives between 1993 and 2004. It is clear from this comparison that more adjectives related to appearances are more popular in the 2004 survey. Namely, “cute” and “light-complexioned” got more percentages in 2004 than in 1993. So did “handsome” and “fashionable.” On the other hand, those adjectives that refer to the nature and characteristics of the Japanese people such as “strict,” “superior,” “gentle,” “kind,” “diligent,” “serious” and “intelligent” lost their percentages in 2004. Adjectives such as “patient<sup>9</sup>,” “quiet<sup>10</sup>,” “rich<sup>11</sup>,” “cold-hearted<sup>12</sup>,” “stingy<sup>13</sup>” and “orderly,”<sup>14</sup> all of which were with the top 20, are out of the list today. The reasons for the fact that the respondents presented adjectives with rather favorable images may be: (1) unlike the former two surveys, very few respondents in the 2004 survey had Japanese colleagues and bosses to work with, and (2) many of the respondents have seen Japan and Japanese through the mass media. Their images are not really based on their personal contacts and interactions with Japanese, but on visual and superficial information they got on TV, in books and magazines, movies and comic books.



### 3.4 Responses to the Open-ended Question

As the last question of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to freely give any comments on Japan and Japanese. They gave a volume of comments in return. Some were written in Japanese, others in Thai, and still others in English. Part of those comments will be presented below. Statements in the italics were given in English, so that the author has left

them untouched. If some statements read rather blunt, it is because the original Japanese statements have not been developed well enough.

Comments by non-students

- Although they are unfriendly to strangers, Japanese become unbelievably gentle once got acquainted. Strangers pretend to be so indifferent that they could be misinterpreted as cold-hearted people. (38-year-old woman)
- I would like Japanese to think of us as brothers and sisters. (41-year-old man)
- Japan is now becoming a multi-cultural country, Japan should conserve its own unique cultures, especially Japan's traditional ways of life which is very interesting. Having western life-styles among young Japanese is alarming. (41-year-old woman)
- Japan is the economic leader in Asia. (44-year-old woman)
- Japanese people are trained to be discipline which I think Thai people should follow this idea, as Thai people have no discipline at all. Another thing is Thai should follow Japan in mixing their culture with modernization. They develop the country which still conserve their culture. (45-year-old man)
- Japanese should learn Thai language. (50-year-old woman)
- Japan is a comfortable country to live in. Japan has a king just as Thailand. Japanese are especially patriotic. (53-year-old woman)
- Japan is clean, and they separate trash according to type before throwing away. Japan has developed technology in many fields. Japanese fashion is prosperous in the world. They have maintained their culture. Japanese are serious, and make much of the time. It is developed in sports, too. (woman, age not specified)
- Japan is orderly. They solve problems quickly. They seem to think of others before doing anything. (30-year-old woman)
- When I was in Japan and asked the way or asked for help in English, they often replied in Japanese or did not say anything in return. I want Japanese to speak in English more. (32-year-old woman)
- Japan is successful in technology and economy. It has developed so much that they could be the leader of Asia and the world. As a result, people in many countries including Thailand began studying the Japanese language in order to make Japanese a

communicable language in addition to English.... Thai young people have been influenced very much by Japanese youth, such as fashion, hair style, food, drink, and sex. We have to be warned against this trend. (39-year-old woman)

- Japanese have a good culture and good behaviors, which has influenced favorably to the Japanese economy. For example, Japanese are diligent. They are patient and hard-working.... It is interesting that they can maintain their old culture to such an extent. What worries me is that competitions are quite high. This gives people stress, and resulted in the rise in the percentage of unsuccessful people committing suicide. I think the Japanese government should get alarmed for this, and try to solve this problem soon. (45-year-old woman)
- Japan is a technological hub in the world. However, the leader of the country is not quite aggressive so the people in other countries cannot see any movement nowadays. (51-year-old woman)

#### Comments by students

- Japan is a country of high technology. People are kind and hard-working. I want to travel in Japan, because it is a convenient country. (18-year-old woman)
- I wish Japan would be more open because it is very difficult to visit Japan. (18-year-old man)
- Japan is a beautiful country. In addition, it has an old culture that has survived until today. Japanese are a kind people. It's a good country to travel in, and its dishes are in fashion, too. So, I want to be in touch with Japan. (18-year-old woman)
- Japan is clean and modern. But Japanese walk too fast. I have no idea why they are so fast. But they are good-natured. (18-year-old woman)
- Japan is an advanced country both in technology and fashion. (18-year-old man)
- Japan is an expensive country to live in. It is especially difficult to look for a house to live in. It's not so convenient. When it comes to food and shopping, it's good, because it's a modern country. (19-year-old woman)
- Japanese are too serious to work. They had better find time to rest. Men, especially, should not work all the time but look for time for their family. (19-year-old man)
- Some Japanese ideas are unacceptable. They discourage others by talking too frankly.

(19-year-old woman)

- Japan is much advanced in technology, and the people are advanced and patriotic. Japan is also the leader of fishing industry. (19-year-old woman)
- Japan is a beautiful country. Like Thailand, it has both old and new sight-seeing spots. In addition, Japan is an advanced country. Its people are polite. Moreover, Japanese are punctual. They walk fast because they make most of the time. Japanese is a difficult language, but the more difficult it is, the more I get interested in it. (19-year-old woman)
- Japan has high technology. People are orderly. Therefore, it is easy to administer things. Japanese do not get friendly with others, and it takes them longer than Thai people to become intimate with others. (19-year-old woman)
- Japan is a comfortable country to live in. I am interested in Japan. Japan is beautiful and interesting. Their culture and customs are old. I am also interested in Japanese people. Japanese people are lovely. Japanese streets are clean. (19-year-old woman)
- I want to go to Japan but I don't have enough money. The prices are very high. Won't you lower them a little bit? I will work hard so that I will be able to go to Japan someday. (19-year-old woman)
- The Japanese culture is totally interesting. And Japan is one of the important countries in Asia. That's why the Japanese language is and will be very important. I wish there were more opportunities for cultural exchanges between Japan and Thailand. (19-year-old woman)
- The relationship between Japan and Thailand is good. And the Japanese government has been promoting Thai education. The government, the Ministry of Education, has been providing Thai students with scholarship. I'm so grateful. (19-year-old woman)
- I like president's hair of Japan so much because it different from another president. His hair show his character so well (confidence). (22-year-old woman)
- Japan is a world leading figure in computer technology. Especially, I mean AI. Japan is advanced because Japanese people are capable. So, they say the Japanese standard of living is highest in Asia. Moreover, the Japanese language has been popular among young people in other countries. (26-year-old woman)

#### 4. Conclusion

The Japanese and Thai people share a lot in common, and yet differ from each other remarkably. To our eye, Thai people are easier to distinguish from ourselves than Chinese and Koreans are: the two peoples are different in terms of appearance and atmosphere. Japanese may laugh at Thai people because they believe that a traffic accident has been caused by a mischievous little spirit. But we are equally unscientific when we try to purify a site by having a Shinto ceremony before building a house there.

Both Thai and Japanese people live on rice, but Thai people do not necessarily like the kind of rice we grow and eat in Japan, and vice versa. Although the Thai culture is deeply influenced by the Chinese culture, but the Chinese characters mean nothing to most Thai citizens. Both countries are closely related with Buddhism, but how they live in the Buddhist environment with every man's experience of becoming a priest at least once in a lifetime is quite different from our involvement with the religion. Similarities and differences coexist between Japanese and Thai people.

The present research shows that, generally speaking, Thai people hold a good sentiment toward Japanese. A similar view has been pointed out and reasons for such a good image have been analyzed elsewhere. Aoki Tamotsu, a Japanese cultural anthropologist, believes that the good images of Japan in Asia and Europe have been created not only through the modern Japanese music, movies, fashion and healthy food, but also with the fact that the young Asian generation that have grown with the Japanese animated movies are now in power.<sup>15</sup>

This view coincides with our research result: the subjects of the research indicated that they had acquired much knowledge about Japan and Japanese people, and had formed certain images about them, through the mass media. Of course, it appears to be quite natural for Thai students of the Japanese language to be pro-Japanese, but no matter if one takes interest in the language or not, people seem to share the same source for the information about Japan.

The influence of the mass media seems to be prominent all the more for the fact that the majority of the respondents are young college students. The adjectives presented in the 2004 survey are more superficial compared to those in the 1993 survey, which featured

those adjectives directed to the inner nature of Japanese such as “diligent,” “strict,” “superior” and “serious.”

Apart from the influence of the mass media, we should not forget that personal relations affect and determine what images one holds toward another. The respondents of the 1993 survey included young Thai people who study the Japanese language and work at a Japanese company at once. Their relationship with the Japanese bosses, how advantageous or disadvantageous they were in the relationship, and how closely they worked with their Japanese bosses and colleagues were all reflected in the images they presented. As the respondents in the 2004 survey experience actual contact and interaction with Japanese people, such personal relations shall take an effect in their own way.

Indeed, for the time being, the prominent tendency of the images Thai people have formed about Japan and Japanese is probably particular especially to the young generation; the mass media that transmit visual information such as TV play an important part in forming their images. This tendency is expected to further strengthen in accordance with the spread of the Internet among Thai youth. This could lead to two possible outcomes: (1). people feel as if they knew the other enough without actual contact and interaction with the other; (2). the images toward the other may become even more superficial.

We may believe that the present research manifests a facet of those who are likely, with their linguistic abilities, academic background and interest in Japan, to come in contact with Japanese people, admitting that the research has limitations in that the survey was conducted for a small percentage of Bangkokians. Then, will their images toward Japan and Japanese people become more pro-Japanese, when they actually interact with Japanese? Or will their images be adjusted to be less pro-Japanese through various frictions, conflicts, misunderstanding and miscommunication? We need to look for the answer in a longer research plan.

Finally, research results like these should be of great help in an intercultural situation between Thai and Japanese people. When Japanese people actually encounter with these Thai nationals, their knowledge of Thai images of Japan and Japanese will be quite effective in creating meaningful communication scenes and ultimately deepening mutual understanding. For one thing, the Japanese may contemplate upon the background from which those images

have been formed, and thus understand the Thai cultural environment. For another, whenever Japanese find some of the images to be untrue or unfair, they could initiate discussions explaining why they think the images are wrong and try to amend or modify those images, so that Thai people may understand Japanese in a better way.

In such an interaction, both parties are naturally engaging themselves in meaningful intercultural communicative activities. The more visual the sources are for molding images, and as a result the more superficial the created images are, the more actively and frequently such activities may occur. And because of the increased mobility of people in different parts of the world, the possibility is higher for different people constantly to meet and modify previous images, thus enhancing mutual understanding in various intercultural environments.

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