

## What Evidence is There to Suggest that Late Twentieth Century International Culture is American Popular Culture?

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When we look around us, we realize that we are surrounded by American popular culture such as Disneyland, MacDonald's hamburgers, Coca Cola, Starbucks, jeans, etc. Hollywood, Microsoft, Disneyland played the major role to spread American culture all over the world. The great economic power of the U.S.A put American cultural imperialism forward though anti-American movements were reported. The fact that English is an international language is also a big factor to allow the hegemony of American popular culture. The author tries to find the evidence how far American popular cultures become prevalent globally in the late twentieth-century.

**Keywords:** American popular culture, low culture, E Pluribus Unum, Americanization, cultural colonization, American hegemony

### Introduction

When I visited Brunei in 1996 and attended an international conference there, I was guided to Juradong Park where there was an amusement park managed by the government. One of the Brunei delegates explained me that the park is a sort of copy of Disneyland. The differences are that we can ride everything free of charge and that people working in the park are public officers. There a laser show started in the open theater. It was a Michel Jackson show, which was a recorded film of the performance when he was invited to Brunei by the Sultan. I saw evidence that Islamic country is also soaked in American popular culture.

Disneyland, Kentucky Fried chickens, MacDonald's hamburgers, Coca Cola, jeans, Broadway musicals, movies, jazz, rock music, computer games, all of them came from America and they are abundant in our daily life and well known by everybody regardless of age difference or nationality. And they constitute the core of popular culture in the late twentieth century, especially among the young generation in the world. On the other hand, Italian opera, Shakespeare, classical music, and Russian ballet are also culture known all over the world. However, these are classified as

high culture compared to low culture. Most of American culture belongs to so called mass culture, popular culture, and classified as low culture which is accepted by everybody regardless of class division. The number of people who love low culture better than high culture is larger since old times as it is so in late twentieth century society.

First I would like to see what is American culture. And I'll consider of the nature of American culture. Then, the relation of American culture and media has to be examined. Then, I'll see how America is moving toward the expansion of their culture under the name of globalization. We should not disregard some anti-Americanization movements at the same time. I'd like to see opinions of people who are against the American cultures as an American imperialism, and I'll consider of the economic power of America and the possibility of success of Americanization in future. Finally, the power of language has to be considered relating to culture imperialism.

There are diverse movements and ways of thinking about American popular culture and American hegemony. Nevertheless there is much evidence showing that American popular culture is accepted or forces other nations to accept it. I believe, therefore, late twentieth century international culture is American popular culture and is closely intertwined with American capitalism.

## 1 . American culture

To begin with, I would like to examine what American popular culture is. Smith argues,

Certainly American culture has been internationally visible, the cause of much emulation and dissension in other countries. It does clearly exist and with knowable features. (Smith 1994, p.299)

And some of which will be identified in Richard Hamilton's picture, "Just what is that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?" His picture illustrates the international impact of the 'American Way' of life. (Mitchell and Maidment, 1994, p.232) In that picture, a typical American life style is described such as movies, electric appliances, canned foods, emphasis on sex appeal, coffee drinks, admiration of Ford, etc. Considering that this picture lacks refinement and repose, his attitude to American culture seems to be rather critical.

American culture is described with 'E Pluribus Unum', which means that American culture consists of many diversified cultures. According to the data of *The Harvard Encyclopedia of America Ethnic Groups* (1980, p479), almost 80 percent of the white population of America in 1790 came from the British Isles and other minorities are from Germany, Netherlands, France, Sweden and others. So the foundations of American culture were mainly British.( Mitchell and Maidment, 1994 p.302) In 1980s and 1990s the largest group of immigrants came from Asia. And in 1890, the number of the foreign born and their children was 53 percent of the urban population. Thus, American cultures are made up by diversified and heterogeneous ethnic cultures but America maintains homogeneous national culture as described above because it is otherwise impossible to control multinational population in a giant nation like the U.S.A. (ibid. p.304) Before reaching to extreme homogeneity of culture, America experienced the struggle of nativism and racism and tried to "rally disparate citizenry: the flag, the Declaration of Independence..."(ibid. p.305) American culture is powerful cohesive statement to "help to organize an enormous continent made up of evacuees from other countries, other cultures".(ibid. p.305)

According to the definition, "popular culture is something to buy," "popular culture is consumed by almost everyone." "Nor is popular culture class-based". "Popular culture is, then a mass marketed culture, and it is a homogenized culture, easily digestible by these diverse groups. But popular culture is not rubbish. It may still be capable of presenting challenges to the establishment." And popular culture belong to low culture differing from high culture which is loved by the elite. (Horwood & Bell, 2000, p.4) Most of American cultures belong to low culture according to this definition. Generally, the number of the elite is fewer than that of lower class people. It means the power of popular culture is more dynamic than that of high culture. Moreover, under the policy of capitalism, commercialized American culture is exported all over the world through media under American control.

## **2. Hollywood, Microsoft, and Disneyland**

Then I should see how America succeeded in exporting their culture to the world. Hollywood is the most successful film industry of America. With big financial power, Hollywood now have monopolized the movie market in the world. Hamelink (1994) describes,

An appeal singed by over 4000 professionals in the industry accused the USA of

'cultural dumping'. In the European protest against GATT rules for audiovisual services, important economic interests were at stake. Some 80 per cent of the European AV market is controlled by US producers. The sales of US TV programs in Europe have increased from US\$330 million in 1984 to US\$3.6 billion in 1992. In 1991 some 77 per cent of US AV exports went to the European market and this market grows at an annual 6 per cent. It can be expected that the introduction of more advanced AV technology will only lead to more channel capacity and thus more demand. A strong lobby against what was perceived as European protectionism was represented by Motion Picture Association President Jack Valenti and film producer Steven Spielberg....The European industry expressed as its position that the application of free trade rules would promote the global spread of Hollywood materials and would effectively annihilate European culture. (Thompson,1997, p.156)

Advanced information technology industry represented by Bill Gates, Microsoft, conquered the computer market in the world. Through internet manipulation, America can control information in the world. For example, if we have a look of "Worldfact" data information by CIA, we can know about detailed information of each country. Since the decline of Russian power, America now is the first country in the space technology. Analyzing data sent from American satellite, America can gather all kinds of information of the world. People in the world are forced unconsciously to get information of the world via America. This means people in the world might be brainwashed in American way, in other words, American culture.

Next, Disneyland culture also plays a great role in spreading American culture in the world. In the case of Japan, it's a kind of dream to go to Disneyland for children these days. Japanese children today know of Mickey Mouse or Mini better than heroes or heroines of Japanese folk tales. Many of recent Japanese mothers don't read Japanese folk tales to their children as before though they take them to Disneyland. I wonder when children can learn traditional Japanese folk tales. I think same phenomena are happening all over the world. Theme parks such as "Oranda Mura" (Holland Village), "Supein Mura" (Spanish Village) are also attracting children and young generations in Japan. They are popular due to Japanese people's obsession with western culture. I wonder whether or not they can learn about Asian values.

### **3. Movements against American cultural hegemony**

If sharing the same culture by the people in the world means cultural globalization,

today's globalization is considered to be a sort of Americanization as described above. This consequently may lead to American imperialism or hegemony. European nations resist this tendency. Especially this was a big issue for France. When Ted Turner's CNN access was realized, an article written by Levinson is as follows:

... Turner is only the avant-garde of the big U.S. companies who are sitting back to see how Europe reacts. If he gets in, Disney and Time Warner will follow (Powell, 1993).

And Levinson continues,

The European stance has been articulated as a battle for freedom of expression. "We want the Americans to let us survive. Ours is a struggle for the diversity of European culture so that our children will be able to hear French and German and Italian spoken in films( *ibid.* )" (du Gay, 1997, 37)

Other countries also took protectionism of their identity and culture. Tomlinson describes as follows:

One example is legislation banning the import and use of satellite dishes or decoders which is now quite common in Islamic states. Satellite dishes have been illegal in Saudi Arabia for a number of years and during 1995 similar bans were declared in Bahrain, Egypt and Iran. In Malaysia, for example, legislation banning the use of parabolic antennas passed in 1988 was due to be lifted at the end of 1995 to allow access to the Malaysian government's own Measat satellite (BBC Monitoring, 30th June, 1995, p.11) This is one way of curbing the cultural assault...we showed the world that we are against foreign culture, that is we will never be subservient to that culture and invasion by foreigners.(BBC Monitoring, 16th June, p.5)  
(Thompson, 1997, p.127)

He continues,

In Iran, the banning order issued in April 1995 followed a year of heated debate and a number of ambiguous government statements demonstrating a reluctance to enact unpopular legislation.( *ibid.* )

In the Guardian, I found a new movement in the film industry in Brazil. A younger director, Walter Salles, produced *Central Station* and won over 50 international awards. He says as follows:

As for the problem of creating a counterweight to North American cultural colonization, he says "On the one hand I believe that what in the 60s was called 'cultural

imperialism' is still reality. On the other hand, I believe new technologies will somehow democratize the access of more film-makers to our medium.(Lennon, 2000)

The Guardian's article also reports the decline of Coca Cola: Coca Cola is the most influential icon of American culture. It was drunk by John F Kennedy, Marilyn Monroe, Clinton, Castro, Beatles. The world drinks it. We can see the advertisement all over the world. However this company is confronting with a critical period. One is a lawsuit with black employees concerning racial discrimination. In Europe, the company's products were ordered off the shelves in four countries after a contamination scare last summer. In addition to that, the company is accused of its grubby, anti-competitive business practices - such as offering kickbacks in return for shelf space. Also Coke attempted takeovers Cadbury Schweppes and the French fizzy drink Orangina last December. France rejected the bid for Orangina, and European Union curtailed the one for Schweppes. Thus, they are protecting themselves from the American hegemony.

#### **4. Economic power and cultural imperialism**

It is clear that cultural imperialism is closely related to economic power. To protect from American economic hegemony, economic blocs were organized. They are European Union (EU), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Conference (APEC), and The South Common Market (MERCOSUR). The power of each bloc is still far behind the United States. It is quite an urgent matter to strengthen the power of these new blocs.

As described above there is a lot of anti-American culture movement or imperialism all over the world. Schmidt is critical in his book against American globalization as follows: American people believe that they are the only one big country in the world. Wishing to be the first country in next century too, they are making continuous effort to be so. However, they are wrong. He continues that in 21 century there will exist three big countries in the world: America, China and Russia. Japan will be positioned as one-half big country considering the economic power. In 20 years, India will join a big country also. Compared to these big nations, England, France, Italy, Germany Poland, Spain are mid-size nations and Holland, Belgium, Sweden and Denmark belong to small nations. (Schmit 2000, p.44)

Moreover, Johnson argues America's posture as follows: we, Americans, firmly believe that America is taking the purely noble role in the world. Even in case that our action led to a disaster

for other nations as the result, we believe that our action is justified. Looking back the history after the end of cold war, America was promoting their own foreign policies relying on intimidation, military power and financial manipulation ignoring diplomatic negotiation, international laws or multi-national regulation practices. American government never notice of their erroneous policies to other nations, such as Asian financial crisis, Asian colonization as seen in the case of Okinawa. Domestically America also holds many issues such as the increase of the poor, too much spending on military expense, etc. He continues that the latter half of 21 century will be the time of “blow back” from other nations to America. He further states that nobody can guarantee that America will not fall apart like Russia unless they stop the policy of imperialism.(Jhonson 2000, p.268)

However, America owns 50% of the world wealth with only 5% of the population of the world. And the economic power can hold the biggest military power. In the 1980s it was said that the United States as a superpower was in decline – “humbled by Vietnam, traumatized by Watergate, under threat economically from Germany and Japan.”( Elliott, 1999) America made once marvelous economic recovery, and regained again confidence and power over the world. The economic recovery is reported as follows:

At the end of the 1990s it no longer looks like that. The economy has grown by more than 3% a year over the last 10 years, making it comfortable the best performing of the G7 rich industrial nations. Only yesterday the White House raised its forecast for 1999 from 2% to 3.2%.(ibid.)

The disaster in September of 2001, unfortunately, forced America increase the military expense. Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq cost tremendous expenses, and moreover, the nation building after the wars is unstable. The U.S.A cannot avoid asking for the cooperation of other advanced nations. The U.S.A. again fell to a debtor nation. Nevertheless, the position as a superpower is unchanged.

While Japan cannot get out from the long tunnel of economic stagnation, and shows a small recovery from minus growth rate recently. The economic success of the United States comes from the fact that they lead in the six industries of microelectronics, computers, telecommunications, designer materials, robotics and biotechnology, which shape the economy of the future of America. At the end of the 1980s, seven of the 10 biggest companies in the world were Japanese and only two were American. In the 1998 data, nine are American and one Japanese. (ibid.)

## 5. The power of language

Finally I'd like to consider of the power of language. Now English is the most effective language for communication and is the tool for multinational communication. The number of English speakers in the world reaches to 2 billion today. There are approximately 300 million native speakers. (Honna, 1993, p.1) It means that most English speakers are non-natives. Culture is spread through language, and then, the culture of an English speaking country can always stand in a superior position. MacArthur (1987) classified English used all over the world with a table of "a circle of English in the world." He explains that there are 8 groups of English: British and Irish Standard English, American standard English, Canadian standard English, Caribbean standard English, West, East and Southern African standard English, South Asian standard English, East Asia standard English, Australian, New Zealand and South Pacific standard English. Thus, people all over the world speak English conquering the difficulty on accent or pronunciation. The formal language for most of international conferences is English. Accordingly, the nations where English is not mother tongue stand in inferior position in world negotiations due to the lack of fluency compared to the natives.

## Conclusion

Film industries represented by Hollywood, computer industries represented by Microsoft, food industries like MacDonald, media industries and bio industries in the U.S.A. are far ahead of other countries in the world. America is always a step forward. This presents the feature of American culture, which is characterized by the willingness to try something new. Furthermore, the U.S.A enforces the protection of the intellectual property right, which will benefit them greatly. American people don't fear failure and never forget venture spirit that was fostered in their frontier period. Empowered with the economic superiority supported by global economy system in the name of globalization, America is promoting the hegemonic empire. Other nations are reluctant to the American-centered policy and form individual economic blocs to protect themselves from American influence. American culture intertwined with economic policy are getting into other nations very tactfully and succeeding to catch people's mind in the twentieth century. EU's power isn't still stabilized and Japan and other Asian nations are still in a long economic stagnation. Unless other nations achieve economic success surpassing the United States, the counter power to American



popular culture will not succeed and the world will be in the hand of the United States as said  
“Winners take all.”

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