

Mass Culture and Literature in Japan in the Interwar Period

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Abstract: The paper deals with the conditions influencing the emergence of mass culture in Japan in the interwar period. It describes the spread of mass media, statescript reform, appearance of the enbon and specifics of big publishing companies. Special attention is devoted to the characteristics of popular literature and the emergence of historical and detective novels as new genres.

Key Words: Japan, mass media, elite and mass culture, popular literature

Introduction

The development of social and economic relations during the 20th century brought about changes in the creation and use of cultural values, resulting in the emergence of two types of culture: mass and elitist. Such a division is based on the views of Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset that society is always a dynamic unity composed of two factors: minorities and masses.[4]

The basic difference between elitist and mass culture lies in their commercial components. Elitist culture is an artistic product, which is created not only for commercial purposes, while mass culture is a commodity, which is produced for the market in an industrial process and earns profit through its sale to mass consumers.

Cultural scientists and art historians differ in their views concerning the time when the elements of mass culture began to emerge. According to American sociologist D. White, the first elements of mass culture can be found in gladiatorial fights in ancient Rome because they attracted large audiences. T. Adorno holds that the prototype of modern mass culture emerged in England with the rise of capitalism (at the turn of the 17th to the 18th century). In his opinion, the novels from that period, like those of Defoe and Richardson, had a distinct commercial component.

According to the modern view, mass culture first emerged in America at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, with the spread of capitalism and its penetration into all spheres of life: economics, politics, administration, control, communications and human relations. The development of global market relations could not bypass the sphere of intellectual activity. The commercialisation of all social relations, associated with the fast development of the means of mass communication, brought about the emergence of mass culture. The notion of "mass culture" does not give a true picture of the changes that occurred. The basic meaning of "mass culture" is culture for the masses, culture intended for people or, in other words, popular culture. However, in essence, "mass culture" is consumer culture, or the market opened to consumers of culture.

The emergence of mass culture was accompanied by the creation of a new social class, which was termed "middle class" and represented the consumer masses. In Western countries, the middle class became the basis of industrial society.

On the artistic plane, mass culture performed special social functions, the most important being the illusory one – the introduction of man into the world of illusions and unfulfilled dreams. All this was coupled with the overt or hidden propaganda of the dominant ideology aiming at separating the masses from social reality, inducing conformism and adjusting people to the existing living conditions. Therefore, literature belonging to mass culture is characterised by light genres: detective and Western fiction, melodramas, musicals and comics. They form a simplified view of life, which reduces everything bad to psychological and moral factors, while at the same time making wide use of the launched axioms that "a good deed is always awarded" and that "love and faith (in God, in oneself) always win". However, despite being seemingly insubstantial, mass culture has a serious basis in the method of its functioning and not in its quality.[7]

The Specifics of The Emergence of Mass Culture in Japan

Mass culture emerged in Japan after the Great Kanto Earthquake. In considering mass culture in Japan in the interwar period, Fujitake Akira points out that it owes its emergence to the creation of four crucial preconditions from the end of the Meiji period to the mid-Taisho period:

- The emergence of the people as a force in the political and social sphere;
- The rise of capitalism during the First World War and postwar economic crises;
- The strengthening of Japan's international position over a condensed period of time; and
- The introduction and flourishing of foreign culture within the middle class.[3]

During the 1920s, two events had a decisive impact on the formation of mass culture. The first was the Great Kanto Earthquake in September 1923, while the second one was the adoption of the Universal Male Suffrage Law (*Futsu senkyo kisei domeikai*), which gave rise to the pro-democracy movement in the Taisho period, and the Peace Preservation Law (*Chian iji ho*), which was adopted in 1925 as a counterweight to the mentioned democratic law.

On 1 September 1923, the Great Kanto Earthquake destroyed Tokyo and Yokohama. Apart from its disastrous material consequences and human casualties, it had a great psychological impact on the Japanese people. In 1934, during his visit to France, Yokomitsu Riichi stated that it had the same impact on the Japanese way of life and culture as the First World War on the fate of Europe. He held that, after the earthquake that had destroyed the old culture, it was necessary to develop some other artistic values. He also believed that, after rejecting its past, a new Japan would emerge from the ruins and flames of Tokyo. By a new culture he primarily meant the literature and art of modernity, which abruptly began to spread in Japan, like in Europe, after the First World War.[5]

The earthquake caused the enormous destruction of residential and commercial buildings. Over 80 per cent of all buildings in Tokyo and Yokohama were destroyed and over 100,000 people were killed. Tremendous material damage (over 5.5 billion yens) brought into question the overall Meiji modernisation project, revealing its uncertainty. Thus, Seiji Lippit quotes Uno Koji: "This metropolis, built for more than 50 years during the Meiji and Taisho periods... vanished in smoke in a moment during the September earthquake."[9]

Most printing houses and editorial offices were also destroyed, so that many avant-garde, proletarian, women's, civil and other journals ceased to come out (*Shinko Bungaku, Aka to Kuro, Tane mako hito*). In 1925, the government adopted the new Public Order Preservation Law in order to provide additional legal grounds for sanctions against radical activities, which affected the further work of Marxist-oriented societies, including anarchist-minded groups of poets.[8]

The great destruction of old Edo enhanced the feeling of distance from the past because it did not exist any more. Thus, Western technology was adopted in its entirety and implemented in the rebuilding of the city within a few years (formally – until 1930). This new "Westernisation" helped build the city, but that was not old Tokyo any more. It was a fully urbanised, modern new city, which completely adopted the Western principles.

Apart from the reconstruction of productive industries, publishing activity was also modernised, thus creating a scope for the spread of mass culture and popular literature. Owing to the import of fast rotating machines, the circulation of commercial periodicals and non-periodicals sharply increased. Thus, for example, from 1920 to 1924, the circulation of the newspapers *Osaka Shinbun* and *Tokyo Shinbun* rose from 600,000 to 1,000,000 and from 350,000 to 710,000 respectively. This was also contributed by the script reform carried out by the Ministry of Education.[2]

In addition, the publishing companies *Asahi* and *Mainichi* seated in Osaka and Tokyo, which published the high-circulation dailies *Asahi Shimbun* and *Mainichi Shimbun*, introduced special systems for fast information transmission (telegraph and air mail), thus considerably improving information gathering and transmission. Thanks to the actualisation of information, the press was transformed from "opinion journalism", as it was since 1910, into "mass journalism", which was explained by the President of the *Mainichi* publishing company, Mojoyama Hikoichi by saying that "newspapers are a commodity".[3]

The content of newspapers also changed. It became diverse and, apart from information and advertisements, included novels in instalments and comics, which were later to develop into a very popular genre in Japan. This considerably increased the number of middle-class subscribers, so that the circulation of some newspapers reached one million.

Journals began again to be published under their old or new names. The best-known journal of general character was "King" (*Kingu*), whose first issue, published in 1925, was sold in 750,000 copies. Such a high circulation was largely due to a well-organised advertising campaign which, inspired by American ones, was conducted by all publishing companies. This practice was also adopted in book publishing. In 1926, low-priced (one-yen) paperback series began to come out (the enbon programme). The first series consisting of 50 volumes was published by the *Kaizosha* publishing company under the title "Complete Collection of Modern Japanese Literature" (*Gendai nihon bungaku zenshu*). It was followed by "Complete Collection of World Literature" (*Sekai bungaku*

zenshu), launched by the *Shinchosha* publishing company in 1927. The series also consisted of 50 volumes. A quote from the advertising message shows the way in which the reader is approached: “We enable you to read books at the lowest possible prices!” With this slogan our company carried out a great revolution in the world of publications, liberating art from the privileged class and giving it to the masses.”[2] An aggressive advertising campaign and the low prices of newspapers, journals and books contributed to the democratisation of culture, increase in the reading public and, thus, an increase in the cultural level in general.

Apart from *King*, other weekly journals also began to come out. In 1922, *Asahi* and *Mainichi* began to publish *Shukan Asahi* and *Sande Mainichi* respectively. The following year, *Asahi* began to publish the illustrated weekly journal *Asahi Gurafu*. *Iwanami Shoten* and *Kondasha Ltd.* also began to publish such publications.

The publishing company *Iwanami Shoten* was established in 1913 by Iwanami Shigeo, who evolved from an antiquarian book seller into a successful publisher of novels, scientific journals and paperback series. His success encouraged many leading scholars to contribute to his publications. With the series entitled “Iwanami Library of Classics” (*Iwanami Bunko*), launched in 1927, the company definitely shifted to serious, elitist intellectual culture. Such an activity became known as “Iwanami Culture”. A series of articles on Japan’s capitalism (*Nihon shihon shugi hattatsu shi kōza*), published by the company since 1932, became the Marxist forum before the Second World War. In 1938, the company also began to publish a series of articles on current issues, like the *Iwanami Shinsho* series.[1]

The *Kodansha* publishing company is one of the most important companies of its kind in Japan. Its predecessor was the Greater Japan Oratorical Society (*Dai Nippon Yuben Kai*), which was founded by Noma Seiji (1878-1938) in November 1909. In February 1910, he started to publish the periodical “Oratory” (*Yuben*) under the motto “The judiciary will suffer if oratory gets worse”. One year later, Noma founded another publishing company, *Kodansha*, with the aim of publishing less serious journals. The first was *Kodan kurabu*, which was followed by several other journals published during the period 1914-1923. In 1925, he began to publish his best known journal “King” (*Kingu*). That same year, Noma merged his two publishing companies into one company, *Dai Nippon Yuben Kai Kodansha*, which published nine *Kodansha* journals. In the interwar period, they covered 70% of the Japanese journals market.[6]

The publications of *Iwanami Shoten* and *Kodansha Ltd.* had a great impact on the Japanese patterns of thinking and behaviour in the interwar period. The journals published by *Iwanami Shoten* were intended for the elitist (intellectual) public, while the publications of *Kodansha* appealed to the middle class and provided a special impetus to the formation of mass culture in Japan. Due to the difference between these influences, they are called “Iwanami Culture and “Kodansha Culture”.[3]

Radio was another means of disseminating mass information. Radio Tokyo began broadcasting in 1925. The basic characteristic of radio broadcasting was monopolism, since three state companies, established in Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya in 1925, later merged into one state company – Japan Radio Corporation (*Nippon hōsō kyōkai*, NHK), thus consolidating the work of all existing radio stations. It retained its monopolistic position until 1951 when, under the American influence, private commercial radio stations were opened. Therefore, radio broadcasting was initially used to promote the state’s interests and later the military regime.

The period 1920-1930 was characterised by modern literature and a significant rise of the proletarian movement and its literature. The development of material civilisation during the 1930s brought fast progress in mass communication technology which, in the aftermath of the depression, encouraged the atmosphere of erotic-grotesque-nonsense (*ero guro nansensu*). Labour force urbanisation linked to the development of Japanese capitalism and increased national coverage by the mass media diminished the conflict between the rural provinces and urban Tokyo, which was the main recipient of mass culture. Opposition to these trends emerged in the form of a fascist movement,²⁵⁷ which advocated the imposition of military rule. The coming into power of the military regime in 1937 marked the end of mass culture in the interwar period.

During the 1920s, mass literature of foreign origin, especially American and European one, included detective and romance novels, fantastic fiction and historical adventure novels, which did not exist in Japanese mass literature (*taishū bungaku*) on such a scale. Popular literature emerged as an entertaining genre in the Taishō period. It was published in high-circulation newspapers and journals, especially after the establishment of large and influential publishing companies and the emergence of new mass-scale non-fiction. Some authors who were previously associated with “pure literature”, like Kikuchi Kan and Kume Masao, also began to write for a broader public. At the same time, authors of historical novels adopted new topics in popular literature.

The development of mass culture was accompanied by the rise of popular literature, including historical novels, detective stories and the beginnings of science fiction. The best known historical-fiction authors were Shirai Kyoji and Naoki Sanjugo, while the best known writers of detective stories were Edogawa Rampo, as well as Shirai

²⁵⁷ It is necessary to explain the notion of fascism in Japan. In essence, there is a distinction between the notions of *fascist regime* and *fascist movement*. A *fascist regime* implies a totalitarian political structure based on ideological monism, in which absolute power is concentrated in the hands of its leaders. On the other hand, a *fascist movement* is an opposition nationalist movement which is usually terrorist in character and aspires towards a dictatorship in one form or another. In Japan, it was the question of a fascist movement, while Germany and Italy first had a fascist movement and then a fascist regime.

and Naoki. In 1925, they founded Club 21 and, in January next year, began to publish the journal "Popular Literature" (*Taishu bungai*). In May 1927, the *Shirai* publishing company began to publish mystery and detective stories as the enbon series (*Gendai taishu bungaku zenshu*).

Under the strong influence of American culture, Japanese mass culture assumed a number of characteristics common to mass culture in other countries. However, like many times in its history, Japanese culture absorbed only those foreign elements which were suited to the Japanese mentality, thus preserving its specifics. This especially refers to Japanese mass literature, while the culture of entertainment and leisure was adopted without any special critical framework, particularly by young people, since it was something that did exist in Japan before. This especially became evident after the Second World War.

The best known genres of this literature in the interwar period included historical and detective novels. The main characters in historical novels were the samurai who, at the beginning, were depicted as ideal figures, protectors of their lord and his family. Later on, under the influence of American Wild West literature, they were increasingly portrayed as robbers and bandits, who used to kill men and insult women. The best known novel of this kind was Nakazato Kaizan's novel "Daibosatsu Pass" (*Daibosatsu Toge*).

Detective novels were very popular because they offered widely varied entertainment. Apart from mystery, they also included fantasy, grotesque and horror. Only after the Second World War, the detective genre became confined to the European framework. Detective fiction was published not only in daily newspapers, but also in the specialised journal "New Youth" (*Shin seinen*), which was published by *Hakubunkan* during the period 1920-1950. It was an entertaining journal specialising in detective stories. The best known author of this genre was Edogawa Rampo (1894-1965).²⁵⁸ He published his first story "The Two-Sen Copper Coin" (*Nisan doka*) in the journal *Shin seinen*, in 1923. It was followed by "The Psychological Test" (*Shinri shiken*, 1925) and "Watcher in the Attic" (*Yaneura no samposha*, 1925), thanks to which he assumed the leading position in this genre. His best known story from this period is "Beast in the Shadow" (*Inju*, 1928). He later tried to switch to crime fiction with the mixture of the erotic and the grotesque, but his stories "The Spider Man" (*Kumootoko*, 1929-30) and "The Golden Mask" (*Ogon kamen*, 1030-31) were not so successful. Thus, he returned to detective fiction and, in 1936, published the novel "The Mystery Man of Twenty Faces" (*Kaijin nijumenseo*, 1936), which is considered one of his best works. After the war, he published the anthology "Forty Years of Detective Stories" (*Tantei shosetsu yonjunen*, 1961) in which he presented the development of the detective fiction genre.[10]

Literary critic Chiba Kameo dealt with the specifics of popular literature in his essay "The Essence of Popular Literature" (*Taishu bungaku no honshitsu*), published in the journal *Chuo koron* in July 1926.[11] In considering the essence of popular literature, Chiba gave three fundamental characteristics to this literature: romantic, instructive and entertaining. The first characteristic is contained in historical, detective and entertaining fiction, which directs the reader's sentiment toward rightfulness or an ideal world that can never be attained. As for the second characteristic, Chiba points out that popular literature appeals to human emotions and not to reason. The third characteristic implies that one must devote great attention to the way in which entertainment is offered to the reader – this must be done without sensationalism and vulgarity. In Chiba's opinion, this requires a special skill.

Mass culture in Japan in the interwar period created a basis for the development of mass culture after the Second World War, when Japanese popular literature adopted all genres of American light literature and culture, including detective novels, westerns, melodramas and musicals. However, a specific, purely Japanese genre – manga or comic books with light, serious and educational topics – also began to be developed.

Conclusion

The emergence of mass culture and popular literature was a major characteristic of this period. It was important for modern literature and avant-garde poetry not only because it increased readership and the number of sold copies, but also because of the possibility to highlight their role in society, literature and politics. In contrast to "popular literature", this literature declared itself to be "pure literature" (*jun bungaku*). Mass culture is not only the characteristic of Japanese society; it is part of world culture. Its roots lie in the aspiration to turn man's spiritual activity into a commodity and impose it on consumer society under the mass media influence.

References

²⁵⁸ His real name was Hirai Taro. He also used the pseudonym Edogawa Rampo, which is a Japanese rendering of Edgar Allan Poe's name.

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