

French Culture and French Language : Waning in Japan ?

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フランス文化とフランス語は衰退しているか？

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要旨

日本では、フランス語学習者（履修学生）の数は減少しているように見受けられるが、フランス文化に対する関心は依然として高い。最初に、日本におけるフランス語学習の歴史と現状を概観した後、フランス文化の特徴と重要性について考察する。最後に、理想の教育というものについていくつかの提言を行う。

Key words: French culture, Language in Japan, Historical review, Background history, Merit

While acknowledging that the study of French language is declining in Japan, French culture appears to be as popular as ever. We shall consider how this situation came to be. The first reason is that the birth rate is slowing down and more significance is given to the hegemonic language, English. The second reason is that, as second languages too, Korean and Chinese languages have been introduced and are more popular among the students due to the proximity of these two countries and the easiness to learn them due to some language similarities. A third reason is that in the world economic market, French language lags behind.

If we look at history, in the 19th century, French was the first international diplomatic language. While Japan was still isolating itself, French was introduced as a foreign language by accident, due to a letter from a Russian mission written in Russian and French. Since nobody could understand the letter, the Russians attacked the Sakhalin Island. The Nagasaki Dutch interpreters were then told to study French which became a necessity as well as English later on. Another reason is that France

offered its help to the Tokugawa towards modernizing Japan. Unfortunately, Napoleon in 1871 lost the war against Prussia and the Tokugawa fell. Then German became the new language to be learnt as well as English. The defeat of Germany and Japan in World War II made French popular again but in 1949, English became the first compulsory language in high schools and French became a second language in universities.

France has dominated the world scene thanks to the excellence of its writers, artists and musicians in the 19th and 20th centuries. However, the French specificity, due to globalization, attracts less public attention and the literature, still abundant, is translated less. The same decline is noticed in the movie industry which Godard and Truffaut had innovated though the number of produced movies is the highest in Europe every year. As for art, London, New York and Berlin have become modern exhibition centers as well as Paris. Regarding classical music, after Debussy, Ravel, Satie and Milhaud, it is not easy to quote names, but Jean-Michel Jarre is known around the world for his remarkable achievement

in the world of techno music. Pop music is rich but does not get past the borders of Europe and French speaking countries. In short, despite the wide and thriving popular market that exists in France, protected and subsidized by the French government, France has a Culture Ministry dedicated to preserving its culture, according to Donald Morrison, an eminent American thinker, France seems to have lost its prestige in the world.

I do not agree with his opinion because I do not recognize culture to be linked with commerce. In my view culture has the only objective of uplifting the human spirit instead of abasing it with coarseness and violence, which are anti-educational par excellence. French movies do not attract such a large audience as some American movies sometimes rich in profanity or violence but in my opinion the quality of a movie is much more important than mass producing projects and more than an entertainment or leisure, most of French movies make one think which is the main purpose of art. If French Rap and its branch “SLAM” are popular with Francophiles, it is because with chosen words, the singers express ideas, refer to sociological or political problems creating a kind of modern poetry. SLAM was originated in Chicago but since in America making a profit is essential, SLAM failed as its products did not sell well enough. Of course, language is the first condition, but we regret that French language which gives access to its culture is neglected for the sole benefit of languages which are commercial like. Even Madonna, a world star, who set up her success on her image has used French sensitiveness. For example, her stage costumes have been completed by French designers, she also chose French photographers and in 2000, a French revolutionary and innovative producer, Mr. Mirwais.

To return to the wane of French culture and language, I would like to say that more than waning, it is a loss of privilege, considering that Japan is nowadays a country opened to the world and that English is the first language to be taught everywhere in the world. I could add that English is the language of doing and French the language of being. Learning French has come to symbolize the act of getting out of a stereotyped world, thinking differently.

One example to show how different a language can be is that in Japanese, the verb, which does not change as much as in French with its 2145 verbal forms, means action, doing. With French, the presence of the personal pronoun which determines the form of the verb in the conjugation, shows the importance given to the individual. A language shows the sensitivity of its people and learning totally different languages allows one to be mobile and broadminded. As I said previously, Japan’s choice of English as a first language was historical. However, it may have been also because Japan has a better understanding of the American psyche. It is true that France may be seen as a troublemaker and a haughty and belligerent nation, if we consider the nuclear tests of 1995 and its approach to nuclear power, but France is also acting as a peace maker in some countries of the world.

Let’s see now what is left of French culture in Japan. The word “esprit” is often used, especially with French cooking. Even if it is reduced to a concrete meaning instead of an absolute value, at least it makes some Japanese appreciate France and its rich cultural past. In Japan, lots of French products are sold or imitated and often the French talent and its cuisine in Japan is as good as in France or even better as Japanese chefs invest a lot into research, cooking and presentation. However, France is not reduced to the “Art de vivre” that foreigners appreciate so much that they choose to live in France. In fact, there is a small town in the southwest region where there are so many English people that an English newspaper is published. France succeeds in various fields such as health, market penetration of high technological output and invests a lot in Japan. Today, competition is necessary and protectionism cannot resolve the problems of the actual economical crisis. Europe has made its borders disappear, French people have also a cosmopolitan instinct and this is how the Japanese culture is spreading in France. Every year the Japan-Expo which started 10 years ago takes place in Paris. Manga is very popular as well as sushi and kanikamaboko called “surimi” but apart from this young popular culture, the Japanese civilization captivates the visitors with its calligraphy, origami, ikebana workshops, martial arts

demonstrations and food tasting. The “Manga” in 2008 reached 40% of the sales of comic books. Teenagers can recognize themselves and the values the “Manga” conveys, suit them. Even if Japan and France have a different social background, the contradictions of industrialized societies are reflected. Besides the low cost, the attractive drawing style of Manga seems to entice French people. Sharing knowledge and mixing cultures creates a wealth and a means of growth for the future generations. Do they not ? History has proved us that cultures change due to absorption of outside influences. As an example, paintings of the 19th century, music of the 20th century such as jazz, rock and blues as well as literature has been enriched with the contribution of French colonies and overseas territories and departments. The lexis itself introduces words from other countries in Japan as well as in France, signs of cultural exchange and sharing. It could be considered as a gift which, with reciprocity and improvement allows building identities, a non- aggressive communication between cultures. French schools give children a chance to study what they like, what they are able to do or what they are good at. Lots of languages can be studied as well as subjects and they are aware of political and social problems of France and the world. Nevertheless, changes are also needed in France, especially in the university system to allow researchers to recover its first rate rank. A first step has been taken giving universities autonomy, knowing that an efficient system allows excellence regarding culture. If French culture is considered not as mercenary as it is in Japan where languages are chosen according to their financial results, we however acknowledge that French falls against English and now Chinese and Korean. One hundred fifty years of French-Japanese friendship are celebrated this year but the French language has lost its place, being more feminine than masculine anyway. It is obvious that France is seen as a country for tourism, fashion and food in Japan more than a country for innovation, originality and ideals. German, due probably to tradition, is still more often chosen by medical students even if it is reduced to a small area of Europe and is as difficult to learn as French. Though some data show that

the French language is in decline in Japan, I want to underline that French is still spoken by 115 million people as a mother tongue, 61 million master it in the 5 continents and 89 million learn it. The French speaking areas are not reduced to former colonies but also include Luxembourg, part of Belgium and Switzerland, Bulgaria, Romania, Quebec, New Brunswick, Polynesia, Haiti, Guyana and Louisiana on a small scale. Probably French would have actually been the universal language if Napoleon did not sell Louisiana to the United States in 1803. In Asia: Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia are countries where French is still taught and used even in parallel to English recently. It is how the Francophonie Organization was born in 1970 : 70 countries using French, respecting the universal values, the cultural diversity and at the disposal of Peace, long term development and promotion of French. This community organizes events like The Francophonies which mobilizes the actors of the Francophonie through artistic and cultural events with a humanistic purpose in which language is the cement.

French is considered a beautiful language because of its musical sounds, but its linguistic wealth is more important. Unfortunately, in a world which advocates straightforwardness instead of quality, French and its literature are vulnerable. I can regret it as being one way of learning about society. Fortunately, in the movie world, French directors are known. Through their productions, they show the values, problems and facts of French society. Singers too are politically committed, which is a long and consistent characteristic of French music.

There are two fields in which France dominates the world : food and fashion. These craftsmen are aware of foreign influences and use them added to their traditional knowledge. The market of the “Art de vivre” is powerful and does not suffer from competition. In Japan, when you walk along the streets, you can find plenty of French words, references to France, French brands, French pastries and bread. Apart from the pleasure of buying, if you conduct etymological research, you can learn interesting cultural facts. Apart from the language, the arts too can make you discover French specificity. To back up

this argument, I would like to quote the following as an example, a circus performance by a young French man. Besides his great dexterity on a pole, this artist by his choice of the song and his chosen poses added his soul to his performance. He was telling a story and moved the audience. Even my students who saw it in class and were asked to comment the performance by writing some sentences to express their feelings, understood the difference between a remarkable performance and art. Towns also make initiatives so that everybody can have access to culture. For instance, during the Angers Festival of theater which has been going on for 60 years, apart from the plays, activities take place in order to have the citizens discover the world of theater. Even the children have plays and can, after the show, meet the actors and talk to them. July and August, the holiday months in France and Europe are festival periods for all kinds of music. Many of these Festivals are free. All year long, there are numerous cultural events such as book fairs, comic strips and folklore events. Some very small towns have become famous thanks to young promoters for whom culture means a lot. To keep the beauty and the country artistic inheritance, there are specialized schools for the restoration of old crafts, others dedicated to old and new designs in textiles, furniture, glass, steel, plastic and recycled paper. Culture should be considered as a world of love instead of a domination weapon. The world “culture” has its root in Latin and it comes from “colere” with the meaning of farming or taking care of and preserving Nature too. Today developed countries have lost this meaning by producing too much. It is necessary to get back to an appropriate and reflexive way of living without excesses.

In its history, France was invaded and has accepted refugees and immigrants who brought a large diversity of cultures. The cultural influence is obvious just considering some museums like “The Quai Branly” recently opened to all cultures of the world, the “Guimet Museum with its collections of Asian arts, the “Institute of the Arab World” and the “African Art” section in “The Louvre”. Once more I insist that the wealth of culture should be pitted against profit as it is a qualitative

phenomenon, not a quantitative one. Some people denigrate the “navel gazing” of France, but today I see a more Anglo-Saxon Culture around the world reduced to its commercial value in clothes and fast food. English is indeed the first foreign language to be learnt in Japan but the second language should also be given more significance. Learning a language needs time and practice, it also means learning the civilization of the country where it is spoken. Japanese child learners are given too short a time to learn it and read books and newspapers and are not trained to express their opinion at schools or at home. When they enter Universities, most of them find it difficult to talk or write about world problems or to share their views if any, as they have been using memorization and ways to pass exams. In France, the “Bac” is an exam which shows how Education is to be understood. Children are trained to talk facing the audience and to write after reading and gathering information. The “Bac” written tests are given between 2 to 4 hours, according to the subject. Here are a few examples of this 2009 year. In Geography : “oriental Asia, an area of power in expansion” or “the Atlantic Coast of the United States; in History : the study of a document written by Henry Kissinger about the presidency of the General de Gaulle. In Philosophy : “It is absurd to wish for something impossible” or “Are they questions to which any science can answer ?” or “does the technical development change human beings ?” As for the French tests, all were about Theater, for instance: extracts of a play in a textual analysis or an essay about the part of the spectator who sees a play. This education makes the children more mature than their Japanese counterparts as it is evidenced by the fact that French adolescents reach adulthood at 18 y. old while Japanese celebrate their coming of age at 20y.old.

We would like to see real changes in the Japanese education. Liberal Arts which are coming back is a good initiative in order to give students a wider knowledge and to make them able to argue after they get the training. In fact, the educational reform should start from Junior high school, years of hard study but based on repetition, memorization, patience and silence. Exams should reflect

not only the degree of knowledge but also how this knowledge has been acquired and understood. In the new society of knowledge, prosperity has to be linked to education and education to Quality of life. Teaching human sciences linked to behaviors, economies, cultures, ethics, history, arts, religions, philosophies, psychologies, political systems and languages will help finding solutions to the new problems of humanity. Cultural exchanges are happening between Japan and France and the keyword is reciprocity. Both countries defend the same values of democracy and peace, freedom and human rights with the exception of the death penalty which I consider barbarian. In the economic sphere, trade has a long history. France is the second foreign investor in Japan and the first destination of Japan investment in the Euro zone. New paths of cooperation are necessary and in the field of aeronautics, high technology and medical research, Japan and France would benefit from making this bond.

To conclude I would like to insist on the fact that culture and literature give magnitude and depth to a language. They also give access to history and to various shapes of imagination, essential to open up the soul and heart.

Embarking on the end of my career as a French teacher, I hope that I have given students the desire to go to France and to meet French people. I know some of them did and some girls have married French men and are happy in France. I hope too that I have added to the mere teaching of a language, by my choice of materials, videos, opinions and sensitiveness, some of the values I cherish most and as a woman, some feminine ideals I consider important for life.