

AJC's contents industry forum aids region

The ASEAN-Japan Centre (AJC) convened its ASEAN-Japan Forum on the Development of Contents Industry: Fusion of Pop-Cultures from Nov. 11 to 13 in Singapore, in a new initiative to promote the contents industry in the ASEAN region.

The forum was implemented in association with the ASEAN Secretariat, the Media Development Authority (MDA) of Singapore and Dentsu Singapore, with the backing of the Japanese Embassy in Singapore and the Japan Creative Centre.

The AJC is an intergovernmental organization that was established in 1981 by an agreement between the member states of the Association of the Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Japan. All 10 ASEAN countries and Japan are now the members of the

AJC.

The AJC has been promoting exports from ASEAN to Japan while revitalizing investment and tourism from Japan to ASEAN through the exhibition of ASEAN products, organization of seminars and workshops, capacity-building activities, dispatch and invitation of experts and missions, and publications and information services, among others.

The forum in Singapore was organized at the suggestion of many ASEAN countries requesting that the AJC launch a new initiative to promote the contents industry in the region.

But why the contents industry and pop culture now?

With the dynamic development of the Internet, coupled with the increasing flow of tourists between Japan and

ASEAN, an increasing number of people, particularly young people, can readily access Japanese pop culture. Japanese "anime," "manga," music and fashion have dominated the market in many ASEAN countries. In Thailand in 2007, for example, the top 10 manga sold were all from Japan.

While Japan has shown keen interest to introduce manga, animation, games and music to ASEAN countries, ASEAN countries have also tried to create and develop ASEAN-based pop culture, which has become a growing reality in the light of new information and communications technology (ICT) industries and an increasing number of skilled workers in the region. Further, business networks among ASEAN countries have gained momentum to produce an ASEAN-based contents industry.

Against such a background, the ASEAN countries have suggested that the AJC launch a new activity to promote the contents industry in the ASEAN region. This is a new industry in the service sector and many players have already appeared in promoting the industry independently.

In order to coordinate with these players efficiently and effectively, the AJC needs to identify its specific roles and functions in the ASEAN countries. To start with, it is proposed that a regional forum be organized to share the Japanese and ASEAN experiences on the latest issues and developments of the contents industry and pop culture. More importantly, the forum was planned to offer opportunities not only of sharing experiences but also of establishing and strengthening business networks among forum participants and others.

The forum was held in conjunction with the largest Japanese anime-pop culture event

in Southeast Asia, known as the Anime Festival Asia 2010 (AFA-X). The event was initiated and championed by Dentsu Singapore.

Specifically, the forum had three main objectives:

a) provide insights on Japan's soft power, which has helped to elevate Japanese contents on the world stage;

b) share knowledge on the development of the contents industry and the impact of Japanese pop culture in the respective ASEAN countries; and

c) provide opportunities to network for business-matching and alliances between ASEAN and Japan and among ASEAN countries.

All the ASEAN countries were invited to participate in the forum. Representatives from the governments or public sector and professionals from the private sector with experience in the contents industry were invited.

Eventually, some 60 people, including observers and invited guests, participated in the forum.

The forum began with an opening ceremony with welcome remarks delivered by the AJC Secretary General Yoshikuni Ohnishi. This was followed by addresses from Yoichi Suzuki, ambassador of Japan to Singapore, Dr. Donald Tambunan, director of the Sociocultural Cooperation Directorate at the ASEAN Secretariat, and Thomas Lim, senior director of the Chief Executive Office, MDA Singapore.

Among the distinguished guests present at the opening were Lee Suan Hiang, executive director of the Arts and Culture Development Office of Singapore's Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (MICA), who also served as a moderator, and Ho Chee Yue, founder of XYZ Wave Private Limited, who assumed the role as facilitator-cum-moderator at the forum.

The three-day forum featured presentations by representatives from Japan and the ASEAN countries; panel and round-table discussions; and participation in AFA-X organized by Dentsu Singapore, which included participation in the business forum "Cool Japan Forum" (CJF), tours of exhibition booths and special dialogue sessions with keynote speakers of the CJF.

At the first-day session, four Japanese experts made the presentation describing Japan's soft power by providing examples of its significance and key achievements.

Daisuke Takayanagi, deputy director of the Media and Contents Division at the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI), made the presentation, titled "Contents Industry in Japan." He introduced the forum to the development of the contents industry in Japan, its contribution to the Japanese economy, the internationalization of Japanese contents, the future plans and opportunities for co-development, collaboration and production of contents between Japan and the ASEAN countries.

Akira Sakai, chief marketing officer of Dentsu Singapore and deputy chairman of AFA, explained the Anime Festival Asia. This presentation showcased Dentsu as a market leader in the contents industry in Japan. It described the continuing private-sector initiative in developing the industry, as shown by the organization of the AFA, which has been moved outside of Japan to Asia's regional centers with the most recent event being AFA-X in Singapore.

Yoshihiko Shinoda, director of the Contents Division at Asatsu-DK Inc., made a presentation on Japanese anime. He elaborated on the early development of the Japanese anime industry, delving into the supporting conditions and the hurdles early developers faced. The export of Japanese anime to regional countries was also illustrated.

Finally, Atsushi Ota, A&R at Lantis Co., made a brief presentation about the Visual Industry Promotion Organization (VIPO) and "anisong" (anime songs). Ota briefly explained the work of VIPO and the growth of music for anime in Japan and ASEAN.



Sharing information: The ASEAN-Japan Forum on the Development of Contents Industry: Fusion of Pop-Cultures was organized by the ASEAN-Japan Centre in November in Singapore.

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The presentations by the Japanese experts were followed by the paper presentations by each of the 10 member countries of ASEAN, presenting a variety of experiences and updates on the current status of development of the contents industry as well as the impact of Japan's pop culture in ASEAN.

Some observations from the deliberations at the forum could be summarized as follows:

1) Pop culture should not be taken simply as an emerging

and ephemeral social phenomenon among the younger generation but be considered as a national strategic industry that could generate favorable impacts on the national economy in terms of job creation, employment opportunities and income generation.

2) Japanese pop culture has impacted almost all ASEAN countries directly through Japanese contents in the form of film, anime and manga. It has influenced the ASEAN countries indirectly through its impact on Korean pop culture, which has gained a strong foothold in several countries within ASEAN in the last decade. However, the Korean wave in the ASEAN countries appears to have overshadowed Japanese pop culture of late. This was highlighted in the presentations by several ASEAN countries.

3) Japan-ASEAN contents industry cooperation should extend beyond the current distribution by Japan from production work to co-develop-

ment that is beginning to take place, training and education and participation in the ASEAN-Japan contents industry value chain.

4) While there are various forms of support given for contents industry development at a governmental level, the awareness level needs to be raised. Funding support and other resources for promising local contents providers could be made more readily accessible.

5) Skilled human resources and technology expertise remain key issues. Capacity-building would be of critical importance to further the development of the contents industry and to attract overseas collaborators and partners.

All the participants in the forum shared an acknowledgment that the forum was a good start not only to help ASEAN countries to develop animation and the contents industry but also to help Japan and Japanese companies to advance their businesses into the regional and international markets beyond Japan.



Putting on a show: Visitors photograph "cosplay" (costumed role playing) participants at the venue of Anime Festival Asia 2010 (AFA-X), the largest "anime"-pop culture event in Southeast Asia. The AJC-run forum was held in conjunction with AFA-X.