



## Third Time's a Charm: The Japan Boom

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Paris is in the midst of a Japan boom ... So why is the Japanese Embassy, etc. unable to be more proactive in adding to this phenomenon?”

**P** This quote came from the start of an article written fifty years ago. Writer Tamura Taijiro was in Paris at the time and he wrote about the Japan boom in Paris to lament the Japanese Embassy's doing nothing to take advantage of it.

“The Japanese Embassy remains nonchalant. They do not seem to have any plan to boost the Japan boom. They are doing nothing. Like a third party they are just standing by and watching this golden opportunity to advertise their country.” (*Chuokoron*, July 1957)



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The phrase “Japan boom” commonly appeared in magazines in the latter half of the 1950s. The trend began around 1954 in the United States and then about a year later in Europe. I had never known these facts until I saw an old magazine article. I suppose you never knew about it either. The fact that most Japanese people do not know of the previous existence of the Japan boom is evidence of another fact for which Tamura's concern became reality — the boom ended before becoming anything greater.

Some factors contributed to the emergence of the Japan boom in this period: Japanese films such as *Rashomon* (1951) and *Gate of Hell* (1953) won grand prizes at international film festivals in Europe as well as winning Academy Awards, attracting western intellectuals' interest. Azuma Kabuki, a Japanese dance company, conducted two western tours — in 1954 and 1955. Azuma Tokuho, its leader, even met U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower. The

boom led to the successive production and release of Hollywood blockbusters set in Japan, such as *The Teahouse of the August Moon*, *Sayonara* and *The Barbarian and the Geisha*. This speaks to the extent of the Japan boom of that time.



The boom also contributed to a rapid increase in export of assorted Japanese goods to the United States around 1955. By 1957, this accounted for 60% of the total value of Japan's exports to the United States. "*Nihon-cho boom kaibogaku*" [Study for analyzing the Japan boom] (*Chuokoron*, January 1958), one of the related pieces written in this period, says Japanese people domestically did not welcome the boom due to their deep-rooted sense of inferiority to westerners. To many Japanese, the fact that their handmade crafts and goods were internationally regarded as Japan's representative export items brought nothing but shame to their country as it was pursuing a course toward a modern state.

In fact, the boom also gave rise to seasonal and crude goods designed to look Japanese and emphasizing such trendy words as "Fujiyama" and "geisha." U.S. consumers preferred these. Still badly off at that time, Japan had to give priority to gaining foreign currency. It had no extra capability to raise cultural interest to a level of nation branding like many European nations did.

When Tamura was in Paris, the Japanese ambassador to France was a cultural figure who was a former chairman of the Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK). Fluent in French, this individual was popular among the French while he was also known to have rejected a request by Kishi Keiko to serve as a guarantor for her marriage with a French film director, saying he had no obligation to do such a favor to anyone at the level of a Japanese actress.

The ambassador authored many books about France, sat on the jury at the Cannes International Film Festival and was awarded the highest decoration that France can give to a foreigner. Needless to say, facilitating a friendship between two countries is an important role of an ambassador, yet his books scarcely make any mention of Japanese culture while they eloquently deliver the author's praise of French culture and his enthusiasm for introducing it to Japan. It seems the ambassador did not hear Tamura's words. The first Japan boom in the postwar era ended without leaving a trace.

This first boom was obviously based on exoticism. The second was completely different, occurring in the 1980s in western countries in parallel with the heightening of Japan's economic strength. This boom was characterized by a gap between economic strength and tradition, which stimulated interest in Japan; but not all this interest was positive. Negative views comprised a greater part of the interest and Japan was internationally portrayed as an "economic animal."

We are now about to witness the third Japan boom in the postwar era. This is coming neither from pity for a defeated country nor from the power of Japan's money. We need to learn from the past in order to prevent the coming boom from winding up as nothing more than a boom. The following quote is from a French diplomat, whose country has a long history of cultural strategy, in response to a question by a Japanese reporter about the Japan boom.

"Japan is hiding what it really is. It is willing to bring in old cultural properties when it comes to cultural exchange. It is wonderful to exchange *La Gioconda* for the statue of Jianzhen, but more importantly they should depart from the stereotypical way of exchange and show Europe the realities of the modernized country of Japan, including any contradictions that it entails." (*Komei*, February 1979.)

*Translated from an original article in Japanese written for Discuss Japan. [November 2013]*



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