

Japanese Television: How Different It Is!

Now facing its greatest challenge: going digital

By Bruce Dunning

When Americans first come to Tokyo or Osaka, they often think: Wow, this is just like New York, or Chicago, or Dallas. Tall buildings, crowded sidewalks, and every American franchise you've ever heard of: McDonalds, Wendy's, Pizza Hut, and Starbucks, Starbucks, Starbucks.

But very quickly they find that McDonalds features teriyaki burgers, Pizza Hut puts corn, tuna and pineapple on a pizza and calls it the "Hawaiian special," while the Starbucks menu may be written in an indecipherable language.

And when a visiting American sits down to watch Japanese TV, the reaction is much the same. It looks familiar, but the language is indecipherable and the end product is very, very different.

Media scholars call the Japanese the world's "most enthusiastic" TV viewers, and for decades the Japanese have been watching more and more television each year. Various polling and ratings services agree that the individual Japanese viewer now watches TV for an average of just over four hours a day. Children,

interestingly, watch least. TV viewing increases in a smooth upward curve as viewers get older. One poll in 2002 found that 84.6 percent of Japanese say TV is "indispensable" compared to 60.5 percent for newspapers. But, just as in the United States, TV viewing here may be peaking. Kathleen Morikawa, who writes a column on Japanese TV for the English-language *Yomiuri Daily News*, pointed out that ratings for the top shows this past spring "were dangling perilously close to the single-digit ledge."

In the average Japanese home, the TV is switched on for more than eight hours a day, even if no one is actually watching. Television is said to provide companionship for house-bound homemakers, and some Japanese friends tell me they sleep better with the TV picture flickering through the night.

So what are they watching? The four-and-a-half commercial networks plus the huge public broadcaster, NHK, are full-service networks offering a mix of news, entertainment, sports and public service programming not unlike the traditional U.S. networks, but the

content and the thinking behind the programming is very different.

Entertainment

Comedy is a staple of Japanese TV, but not the American-style situation comedy. Much Japanese comedy is heavy on slapstick and heavy on word-play because the language has what amounts to a super-abundance of homonyms. Many so-called “variety shows” feature panels of celebrities who keep the comic banter flowing. The concept behind *America’s Funniest Home Videos* came from a popular Sunday night show on which celebrity panelists try to guess what the climax of the home video might be; the celebrities try to out-do each other with outrageous and funny guesses and mis-guesses.

Cartoons are popular; the *Pokemon* phenomenon of a few years ago started as a TV animated series here.

Entertainment programming includes drama serials, both in the daytime and in prime time. Dramas set in hospitals or schools are popular, as are detective shows although they are not usually as violent as their American counterparts. But there’s no equivalent to shows like *LA Law* or *The Practice* or even *Ally McBeal*. Japan is neither a litigious nor a confrontational society; court cases drag on for years, and the aim, except in criminal cases, is to reach a consensus acceptable to all involved. Courtroom drama doesn’t interest Japanese audiences.

Most shows don’t last more than one or two seasons, but a few do go on and on. The samurai drama, *Mito Komon*, has been on TBS (the independent Tokyo Broadcasting System) since 1969, one of the few survivors among the once-

popular historical costume dramas. The plots are thoroughly predictable. A band of samurai following their high-ranking leader Mito Komon, heavily disguised, travels the land righting wrongs and rescuing damsels in distress. The climax is always a confrontation with the evil-doers, who fall to their knees in shock and awe when Mito Komon reveals his true identity.

Fuji TV has also had a 35-year hit with the animated feature *Sazae-san*, about a three-generation extended family living the life that Japan thinks everyone ought to live. Even now, it regularly pulls a 24-plus share.

Back on TBS, Thursday night means *Wataru Seken wa Oni Bakari*, a title that loosely translates “The World is Full of Devils.” This prime-time soap opera, launched in 1990, was on hiatus for a few years, hit its peak in the late nineties, but even in the spring of 2004, held a very respectable 18.3 share. It follows the trials and tribulations, the foibles and follies, of two inter-related extended families, both in the restaurant business. Most of the action takes place in one or the other eatery, or around the dining table at home.

And this brings us to two distinctly Japanese programming themes – eating and bathing. This country is obsessive about food and the quality thereof, while cleanliness is, if not next to godliness, certainly next to Japanese-ness. Dramas like *Wataru* revolve around eating. Cookery shows fill the airwaves in daytime and prime time, featuring professional chefs or celebrity cooks giving instructions for making dishes both practical and bizarre. Cookery shows are cheap to produce, and consistently draw audiences.

Food Battle Club pits contestants

trying to stuff themselves with as much chow as possible during a 45-minute pig-out. The winner is the one who adds the most to his body weight, usually 20 to 25 pounds, during the broadcast.

Thursday night at 9 on NTV brings

Master of the Best Cooking.

The newspaper TV listings give a hint of the festivities:

“East competes against West

as teams led by Hiroshi Sekiguchi and Yuji Miyake make gourmet Japanese *oinari-san* (sweetened rice wrapped in fried bean curd) and French croissants.”

Or on another evening: “Skewered meat and fish dishes from Tokyo and Osaka are on the menu in tonight’s cooking contest. Panelists sample and pass judgment.”

Travel shows are perennial favorites in Japan, and the celebrities who host these make sure their viewers get plenty of eating and bathing. *Dreamy Trip* airs at 8 p.m. Wednesdays. “Former sumo star Konishiki takes his wife on a trip. In Kusatsu they stroll among the hot springs and try a traditional stirred hot water bath, and in Niigata dine at a sushi restaurant that specializes in jumbo-sized portions.” On another *Dreamy Trip*, a well-known comedian takes his family to the seaside “where they sample tuna and sea urchins, and to a hot spring inn where they learn to make ‘soba’ noodles.”

Plumpies – named for the amply proportioned hosts – airs at 9 p.m. on Friday. Recently the pair went “on a treasure hunt in Atami with the aim of creating a new boxed lunch for the seaside resort,” and also reported on “an interesting local hot spring bath.”

On *Hong Kong Quiz Special*, two pairs of Japanese performers “play games” in Hong Kong: “Winners get to dine at a top

restaurant while the losers have to stomach fried scorpion.”

Late-night programs generally feature a lot of raunchy and risqué repartee, with near nudity quite common.

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Foreign programs are rarely successful on Japanese TV, though American movies, usually the more violent or mindless action flicks, are major staples of primetime. Older Japanese remember the early days of television when *I Love Lucy* and other U.S. programs dubbed into Japanese were popular but as Japanese networks began their own producing, interest in foreign programs dwindled. *Little House on the Prairie* has been a perennial favorite, probably because of its family values and nostalgic aura; so too has *Sesame Street*. On the other hand, *Dallas*, a huge hit worldwide, bombed in Japan. In the mid-1970s *Colombo* was such a primetime hit, at least in the Imperial Palace, that Emperor Hirohito asked to meet the star, Peter Falk, when he made his only trip to the United States in 1975. The *X-files* turned in respectable ratings in the mid-90s, but in general, foreign programs have been increasingly unsuccessful over the years.

One recent exception has been the South Korean drama series, *Winter Sonata*, produced by the Korean Broadcasting System. This sentimental saga of love lost and love rekindled aired in 2003 on one of NHK’s satellite channels and proved so successful that it was re-broadcast on the terrestrial general channel this spring. The program has launched a boom in

Korean-language study and in travel to sites in South Korea seen in the drama.

News

Japanese networks have a serious commitment to news, especially NHK, which likes to be thought of as the network of record. NHK devotes about 45 percent of airtime on its general channel to news, while the commercial networks devote about 20 percent. The Japanese networks all have large news staffs doing a lot of routine reporting for which the American networks would rely on wire services.

There is very little investigative reporting on Japanese TV, or in Japanese newspapers, for that matter. And unless there is a major scandal that simply can't be ignored, TV news rarely reports unfavorably on government actions. In May, just before Prime Minister Koizumi made his second one-day trip to North Korea, one network reported that he would pledge 250,000 tons of rice to that starving nation to obtain the release of the children of Japanese kidnapped by North Korean agents. Koizumi's staff was so enraged by the premature release of the story that the network was told to reveal its sources or be barred from the press corps traveling with the prime minister. At the last minute and under intense media pressure, the prime minister's office relented. The offending network's reporters made the trip, and Koizumi did announce the gift of 250,000 tons of rice.

The news anchors are usually men, frequently teamed with attractive young women whom foreigners often refer to as "hai-hai" girls. "Hai, hai" means "yes, yes," and traditionally a woman's role at

an anchor desk was to agree meekly with her knowledgeable male partner. This is changing and women are being taken more seriously on-screen and off.

Anchors are not the celebrities that such people are in the U.S., though there are a few exceptions. In 1985, TV Asahi launched a 10 p.m. news hour *News Station* with Hiroshi Kume, a popular variety and game show host, as anchor. The broadcast was so different from the staid, stuffy, "just the facts, ma'm" approach dominating TV news that people talked about the "Kume phenomenon." Reminiscent of Kume's *Best Ten* music broadcast, *News Station* featured the "Top Ten" news stories. The broadcast was glitzy, and not afraid to skewer important politicians, and Kume never left viewers guessing what his opinion was on any news topic. *News Station* ran for more than 18 years, and changed Japanese TV news more than any single influence.

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NHK airs a half-hour national news broadcast at 7 p.m., a 15-minute newscast at 9 p.m., and a full hour at 10 p.m. All the networks offer national newscasts at mid-day, and the commercial networks have major newscasts around 6 p.m. Morning news shows tend to be lighter with brief summaries of the main news, weather reports, daily horoscopes, and little features like the "pet of the day." On the morning newscasts, one tradition that seems odd to Americans is the practice of displaying pages from various newspapers with a newscaster summarizing and discussing some highlighted stories.

Most of these morning programs are

devoted to long reports on lurid crimes or celebrity news like engagements, weddings, or funerals of the rich and famous. One topic that became a morning news obsession last spring was a comment by the Crown Prince during a news conference before his May trip to Europe. When members of the Imperial Family hold a news conference, it is always a “staged” event. Questions are submitted in advance from the very tame imperial household press corps and the imperials recite their vaguely worded prepared answers by rote. The Imperial Household Agency controls everything the Imperial Family says and does, and all Japanese media acquiesce, so when the Crown Prince responded to a query about Crown Princess Masako, he apparently went “off script.”

Since early 2004, the crown princess had been in seclusion, apparently suffering from depression and other ailments brought on by pressure to conform to the isolated environment of the court and pressure to produce a male heir. The Japanese constitution says only a male can inherit the throne, and the current Emperor’s two sons have fathered only daughters.

At his news conference, the prince said he thought the princess had “completely exhausted herself” trying to adapt.

“There were developments that denied Princess Masako’s career as well as her personality,” said the prince, referring to his American-educated wife’s giving up a diplomatic career to marry him.

Such criticism of the Imperial Family minders was unprecedented. Japanese media called his remarks an “earthquake,” a “bombshell” and a “declaration of war” on the Household

Agency. The morning TV news shows, even prime-time specials, devoted hours to discussion and speculation as to what this all means. The Imperial Household Agency reportedly has let it be known that the prince will not be talking publicly any time soon.

Documentaries

Both NHK and the commercial stations are strong on long-form documentaries, although these almost never touch on controversial subjects. Typical projects include a three-part series on the Roman Empire or scientific broadcasts on the origins of life on our planet. In 1980, NHK and CCTV (China Central Television) collaborated on a major documentary series about the Silk Road, the legendary route of the first traders to link China and Europe. This highly-acclaimed series was sold to more than 40 countries. Now the two companies are developing *Silk Road 2005*, revisiting the fabled route and focusing on archeological discoveries in the quarter-century since the first series.

Typical of projects at commercial networks is the long-running TBS series on UNESCO’s World Heritage Sites, a well-photographed and sensitively-produced series.

Sports

All the networks broadcast sports extensively. Professional baseball is very popular with two networks actually owning teams; the Yomiuri group broadcasts the Yomiuri Giants on its NTV network and TBS owns the Yokohama Bay Stars. But professional baseball has been hurt by the departure of some of its top stars to the American

major leagues. Satellite broadcasts of U.S. games in which Japanese players like the Seattle Mariners' Ichiro Suzuki or the Yankees' Hideki Matsui are pulling viewers away from broadcasts of Japan's pro leagues. The biggest baseball event of the year, however, is the annual high school baseball tournament; the final games leading to the championship are carried nationwide.

Japan's traditional national sport, sumo, doesn't draw spectators the way it used to, either in the stadiums or on TV, but NHK still broadcasts two hours a day of the bouts every day during the six 15-day tournaments held each year.

Golf is a Japanese obsession and golf tournaments frequently hit the airwaves, especially as Japanese players are turning up on the international circuits. In 1972, TBS began broadcasting the Masters' tournament from Augusta, Georgia, and discovered that a respectable audience of golf devotees will wake up early for the live broadcasts starting at 5 a.m.

Sports that wouldn't make air in America are perennial favorites in Japan, like marathons and long-distance relay races. This past spring, when Japan's women's volleyball team was vying for a berth at the Athens Olympics, the final rounds were broadcast live and in prime time.

Advertising

When Japanese companies want to lure customers, television is their medium of choice. Television grabs more advertising yen than newspapers, magazines, and radio combined, nearly \$18 billion dollars in 2003. The "hard sell" is not common as advertisers go for the "feel good" factor. Sometimes it is almost impossible to tell what the

product is, so low key or "warm and fuzzy" is the sales pitch.

Foreign celebrities are frequently featured in commercials even if foreign programming isn't very popular. Brad Pitt is a hot pitchman right now. Many such celebrities do Japanese commercials with the stipulation that these are aired only in Japan. About 20 years ago, CBS News provoked the ire of one well-known Hollywood actress by including her commercial appearance in a story on this "foreign pitch-person" phenomenon. Sofia Coppola's movie "Lost in Translation" revolves around this theme.

Japan's television industry is structured differently from the America's. It appears to follow the British model, a mixture of a powerful, non-commercial or public network and several commercial networks. But the laws governing broadcasting were written in 1950 under the post-World War II American Occupation. The Civil Information and Education Section of the Occupation administration decreed that there would be one national public-broadcasting organization supported by user fees and locally based commercial broadcasters supported by advertising. And that is still the basic structure of the broadcasting industry.

The public broadcaster is Nippon Hoso Kyokai or Japan Broadcasting Association, a semi-governmental organization known worldwide as NHK. Virtually all of its revenue comes from license fees. These are supposed to be mandatory, but evading the NHK license fee collector is something of a national sport. Still, NHK subscriptions total about 38 million, one for every three or four Japanese. Those fees add up to about six billion U.S. dollars a year, or 97

percent of NHK's revenues.

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NHK has 57 stations around the country, almost twice as many as any commercial network, and broadcasts on two conventional channels, a general channel featuring diversified programming and an educational channel. NHK also operates three satellite channels and NHK World, for broadcasters around the world. It employs about 12,000 people on staff and thousands more work for independent production operations.

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The New Year season is traditionally a family holiday and for years most Japanese TV sets were tuned to this musical extravaganza pitting women singers against men in a competition known as *The Red and White Song Contest*, red and white being traditional colors of celebration. All types of popular music are included, traditional, jazz, rock, etc. One of the highlights for years was the competition over who would have the most elaborate dress and hairstyle, a competition between veteran songstress Sachiko Kobayashi for the women's team and for the men's team, Kenichi Mikawa, an enormously popular singer whose on-stage garb is either androgynous or totally feminine. So expensive was this competition becoming that reportedly the two called a truce a couple of years ago.

The 2003 *Red and White* show drew a 50.7 percent share, impressive sounding, but way down from years gone by.

NHK began TV broadcasting in February 1953 and the commercial stations started coming on air that fall. They were, as intended, locally owned and operated, but soon began grouping themselves into networks. Japanese law ostensibly does not allow for station groups or network owned-and-operated stations as in the U.S., but large media conglomerates built around Japan's major national newspapers have created de facto networks through cross-ownership and close affiliate relationships. The result is four major networks and one smaller, weaker group, listed here in order of their profitability:

Fuji – part of the Sankei newspaper group. It is the profit leader among the commercial stations, reporting net profits of over \$200 million in 2003; it was the only commercial network to increase profits over 2002. . 28 stations.

NTV (Nippon Television) – controlled by the Yomiuri organization, publisher of Japan's largest-circulation newspaper, Yomiuri Shimbun, and owner of the most prestigious baseball team, the Yomiuri Giants, among many other properties. 30 stations.

TBS (Tokyo Broadcasting System) – independent compared to other broadcast organizations but loosely affiliated with the Mainichi newspaper group with which it shares minority cross-holdings. 28 stations.

TV Asahi – controlled by the Asahi organization, publisher of what is considered the intellectuals' newspaper, Asahi Shimbun. It is financially much weaker than the other three. 26 stations.

The smallest is a group of six stations with the main Tokyo station, TV Tokyo, owned by Nihon Keizai Shimbun, or Japan Economic Newspaper, often called the Wall Street Journal of Japan.

Cable and satellite television have not had the same impact in Japan as in the United States. Only about 22% of Japanese homes subscribe to cable and there is nothing in Japan like TNT, CNN, or ESPN.

But now Japanese TV faces its greatest challenge since color bloomed on the cathode ray tube: Japan is going digital. Over-the-air, or terrestrial, digital high-definition broadcasting began December 1, 2003, in Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya. Although these are Japan's three largest markets, it is estimated that only about 300,000 digital TV sets are out there. The target for nationwide digital coverage is 2006. Parallel analog broadcasting will continue until 2011, but then the analog transmitters are supposed to be switched off

permanently. If you haven't bought your digital TV set by then, you probably won't be watching TV.

The costs will be phenomenal. The switch to digital will generate enormous profits for Japan's electronics industry, but already it is a serious financial burden to broadcasters. The cost may well force many stations in smaller markets to consolidate or to shut down, unable to afford the shift to digital. Just one of the commercial network "key stations" in Tokyo is estimating it will have to spend \$1.4 billion dollars before the 2011 deadline. Smaller market stations simply don't have resources for that kind of investment.

No one has a clear idea of where this is all headed. "It's a gamble," one Tokyo television executive told me. But certainly when – or if – the last analog transmitter is shut down seven years from now, the landscape of Japanese television will have changed more dramatically than it has in decades.

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