

NHK’s Visions of Asia

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2. Summary

The aim of this paper is to establish the breadth and depth of Asian coverage on Japanese television, with a particular focus on Japan’s public broadcaster NHK. NHK’s Asian documentary program series features the whole of geographical “Asia”, including Arab nations, Central and East Asia as well as those countries in the South Pacific. Asian

countries closer to Japan receive more attention than those on the Asian periphery do. Analysis of topics shows that there is a strong focus on personal stories, introducing individual people and their dreams and aspirations for their lives and futures. Economy is a major recurrent topic covered extensively on NHK's main Asian program of the late 1990s, *Meeting a New Asia*. This is not surprising given that the so-called "Asian economic crisis" had a major impact on the region during the second half of the 1990s. In contrast, political issues received far less attention over the same period of time. A general focus on economic and social issues and a limited interest in political issues was also re-confirmed by video samples taken over 2000 and 2001.

NHK's approach differs from the coverage of Asia presented on television in "Western" countries, such as Australia, where the coverage of political and often controversial topics tends to take predominance. The final discussion considers possible implications the different approaches taken by Japanese and Australian television may have on viewers' perceptions of Asia.

3. Asia on Japanese Television

Japan's "Asia discourse" is slowly making its mark on Japanese television, with an increasing number of fictional and non-fictional television programs featuring (non-Japanese) Asian people and Asian countries. NHK's media and audience research provides some evidence for popular demand for such programs. For example, a NHK public opinion survey on the way Japanese, Chinese and Koreans view each other (Hara and Shioda, 2000) found that Japanese audiences claimed they were interested in the two Asian neighbours Korea and China, while at the same time acknowledged a lack of knowledge about these countries. The survey also found that television is regarded as the most important means of receiving information about these countries. Apart from Japanese news programs – which tend to have a limited coverage of foreign affairs with a strong focus on issues directly related to Japan¹ – the survey named television documentaries as one of the most important genres for learning about other countries.²

Since the mid-1980s, NHK has been broadcasting regular documentary programs exclusively focussing on Asian issues to compensate for the limited coverage of Asia on television news programs. In 2000 and 2001, NHK broadcast three weekly documentary series on Asia, namely *Meeting a New Asia* (*Shin Asia hakken*) (on terrestrial TV), *Asia Crossroads* (*Ajia jôhô kôsaten*) and *Asia Who is Who* (*Ajia who is who*) (on BS 1). Of those three programs, *Meeting a New Asia* was NHK's flagship Asia program until early 2001, when it was superseded by a new, but similar program called *Asia Human Highway* (*Ajia ningen kaidô*).³ *Meeting a New Asia* (and later *Asia Human Highway*) are also the

only programs broadcast on NHK's regular terrestrial service which reaches a far greater audience than NHK's BS satellite broadcasters. Furthermore, *Meeting a New Asia* also features prominently on NHK's Internet site, where an archive with schedules and summaries of all 116 editions broadcast between April 1998 and March 2001 can be accessed.⁴ In addition, a similar web site was added in mid-2001 for the new program *Asia Human Highway*.⁵

NHK's documentary programs represent the public broadcaster's endeavour to educate Japanese audiences about Asia. Educational documentary programs tend to attract smaller viewer numbers than blockbuster programs combining documentary and entertainment.⁶ Hence the private stations are less motivated to produce programs with the intent of public service and public education and only broadcast the occasional ad-hoc programs which usually focus on food or travelling. NHK is the only network offering regular programs on Asia.

However, viewer numbers alone say very little about the follow-on effect such programs may have. For example, TV documentaries may well be used for school education purposes, which would create a significant multiplier effect. Unless we know who watches these programs and what audiences do with them, viewer ratings alone are only meaningful in a very limited sense. To date, such data is not readily available in Japan.

Therefore, I would argue that the programs discussed in this paper have the potential to play a significant role in shaping people's perceptions of Asian countries, particularly given that they are the only regular source of televised images on Asia. In addition, the significance that Japanese audiences attribute to documentary series in the survey quoted above is another good reason for media research to analyse the images provided on these programs.

4. Data

The data for this paper consists of official summaries of all editions of one of the documentary series, *Meeting a New Asia*, broadcast on NHK television between 1998 and 2001. In addition, all four documentary series produced by NHK were received via international satellite television and samples were recorded on video at the Department of Japanese Studies at the University of Trier, Germany, in May 2000, September 2000, October 2000, April 2001 and May 2001.⁷ There is some overlap in the data as *Meeting New Asia* continued to be broadcast throughout most of the sampling period. This does not affect the analysis as the two sets of data are discussed separately.

The summary data of all editions of *Meeting a New Asia* provides an insight into the overall coverage of Asia on one of NHK's flagship documentary programs by examining which countries were presented and how frequently they were covered. The paper will then focus on two countries, China and Korea, by examining both the summaries of *Meeting a New Asia* and the video tapes recorded during the sampling period.

To allow for an intercultural comparison, summaries of the weekly Australian foreign affairs documentary program *Foreign Correspondent*, broadcast on Australia's public broadcaster ABC between 1998 and 2001, were accessed and downloaded from the ABC Internet site.

5. Structure of NHK's Documentary Programs

Asia Who is Who as well as *Meeting a New Asia* and its follow-up program *Asia Human Highway* follow a similar format. They tend to focus on one main topic and conform to a relatively strict narrative framework. The individual stories usually start with a short introduction of the main topics, followed by a general overview with background information. The main topic is then exemplified in the form of a human interest story documenting the experiences of one or two individuals. In many stories, these individuals undergo a process of personal growth and development. As a result, the story format of these documentaries has some resemblance to fictional drama. Their strength lies in allowing viewers to identify with the main character and thus overcome cultural or national boundaries on an individual inter-human level.

Asia Crossroads, on the other hand, is a mixed documentary and news program in magazine format, which is presented and commented by an older, male presenter and a younger, female co-presenter. The program usually starts with a short conversation between the two anchors who discuss an "Asian object", such as a saxophone made from bamboo, or an Asian spice not commonly known in Japan. The introductory conversation is followed by up to three main features which, in contrast to the other programs, tend to focus on general issues rather than the fate of individuals. After the main features, there is a short news segment with approximately five news items from the Asia-Pacific region, followed by another short section with film footage and music, but without text. Most features in this section cover visually pleasing Asian events such as festivals or traditional ceremonies. At the end of the program there are one or two short general features, followed by a section called "Bazaar". "Bazaar" is presented by the anchorwoman and often includes a Japan-related topic, such as an "Asia festival" in Shinjuku, the visit of an Indian dance ensemble to schools in Tokyo or the work of a Japanese "fair trade" organisation in Nepal. In contrast, the great majority of the other

features in *Asia Crossroads* and in the other two programs contain no references to Japan.⁸

6. Quantitative Analysis of Data

6.1 *Regional Distribution of Coverage in Meeting a New Asia*

The complete set of summaries of all *Meeting a New Asia* programs broadcast between 1998 and 2001 allows an overview of NHK's coverage of Asia during that period. *Meeting a New Asia* covered almost the entire geographic region of Greater Asia from Asia Minor and the Arab world to East Asian countries. Not surprisingly, there was a significantly stronger focus on Japan's closer neighbours in East and Southeast Asia (Chart 1), with three quarters of all programs focussing on this region.

NHK's focus on East and Southeast Asia is in line with official Japanese foreign politics, as outlined by Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi at the "Future of Asia" conference dinner hosted by the Nihon Keizai Shimbun on 7 June 2001. In his speech, Koizumi said:

"In Asia, it is necessary to promote multi-tiered dialogue and bilateral or multilateral cooperation, taking into account the diversity that exists in this area. First, we have to develop and maintain even closer relationships with our nearest neighboring countries; the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Korea, in order to further our commitment to global friendship. As a partner for peace and prosperity in East Asia, Japan will make efforts to increase cooperation with ASEAN member countries, which have developed regional cooperation through diversity."⁹

Stories featuring Japan's three neighbouring East Asian countries (South Korea, China [including Hong Kong] and Taiwan) make up for 33 per cent of all programs. The eleven countries in the Southeast Asian region account for 42 per cent of programs. Among those, the northern, predominantly Buddhist countries of East Asia (Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia) make up a significantly larger proportion, namely 26 per cent of total coverage compared with 15 per cent for non-Buddhist East Asian countries (Philippines, Singapore, Indonesia, East Timor and Malaysia).

The remaining 25 per cent are shared by South Asia (9 per cent), Mongolia and Asian countries from the former Soviet Union (8 per cent), Arab countries (5 per cent), and island countries from the South Pacific (3 per cent).

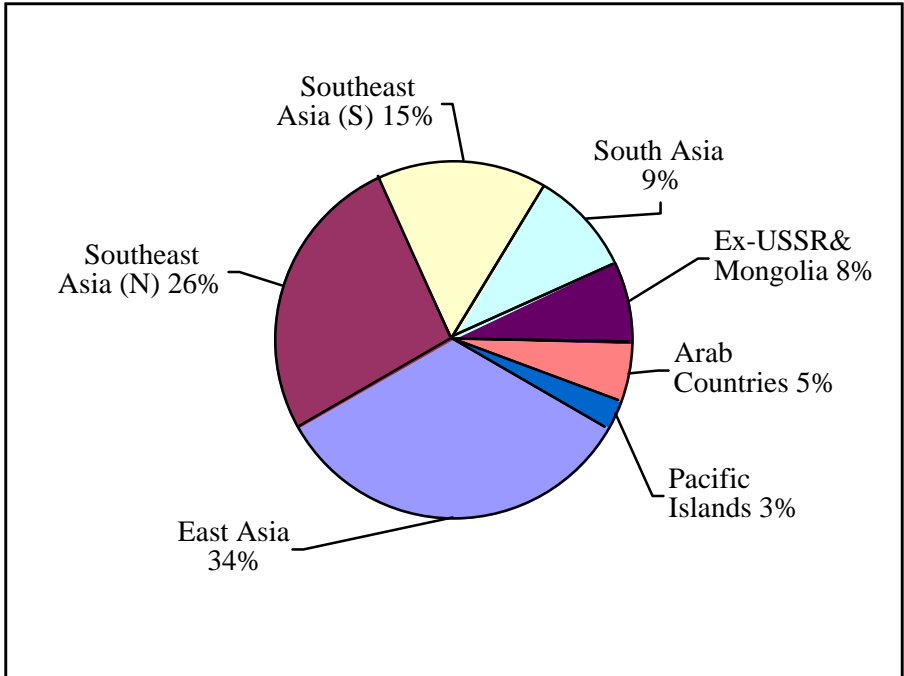


Chart 1: Regional distribution of Asian Coverage on *Meeting a New Asia*

6.2 Variation of Coverage within Sub-regions

Within the individual regions, some countries received more coverage than others. For example, among the countries in East Asia, more than half of all programs (21 of 39) focussed on China (Chart 2), followed by Korea (13 programs) and Taiwan (5 programs).

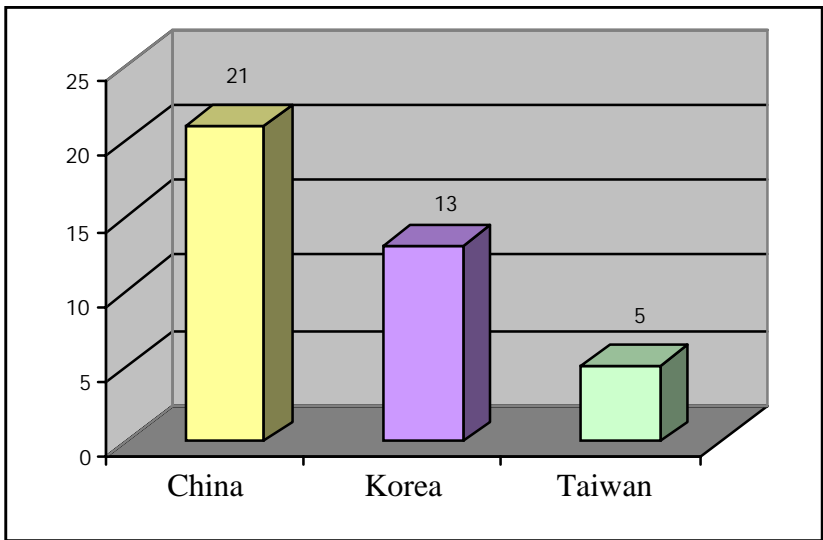


Chart 2: Coverage of East Asian Countries in *Meeting a New Asia*

A similar pattern emerges with regard to the two South East Asian regions, as shown in the following charts (Charts 3 and 4). Among the group of northern East Asian countries, Thailand receives the widest coverage with 15 programs (or approximately 47 per cent of South East Asian countries in that region), ahead of Vietnam and Cambodia (7 programs each) and Laos (2 programs). Burma (Myanmar), which would also fit into this category, was not covered at all.

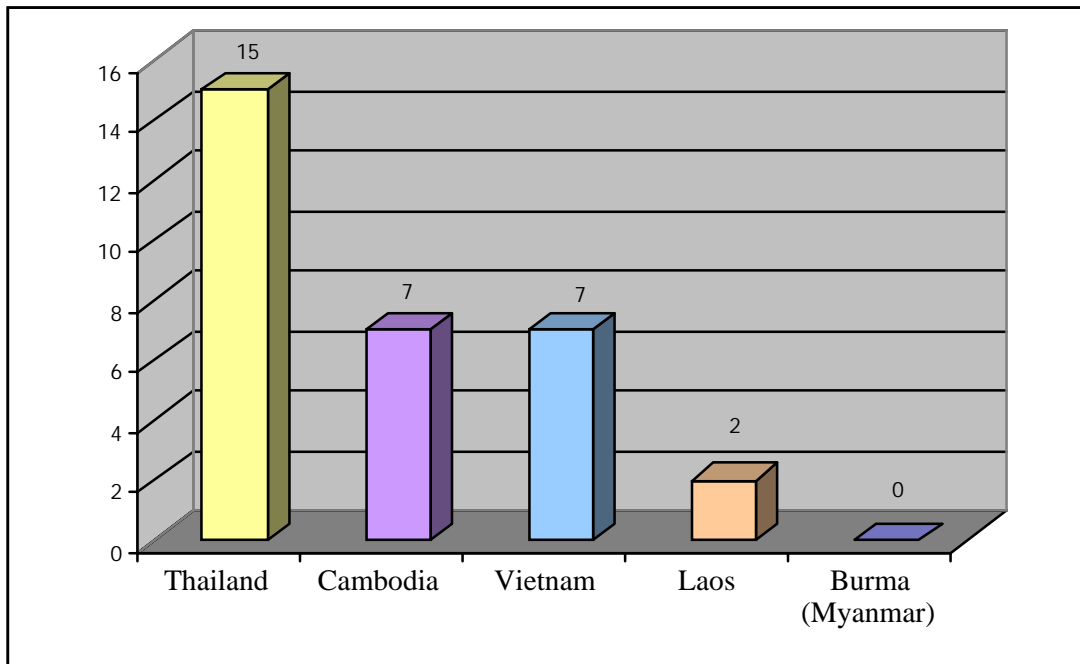


Chart 3: Coverage of Countries in the Northern Region of Southeast Asia

Among the remaining Southeast countries, the Philippines comprise 58 per cent (11 of 19 programs) of the coverage, followed by Indonesia (21 per cent) and Singapore (10.5 per cent). Malaysia and East Timor were each covered once, whereas Brunei received no coverage at all.

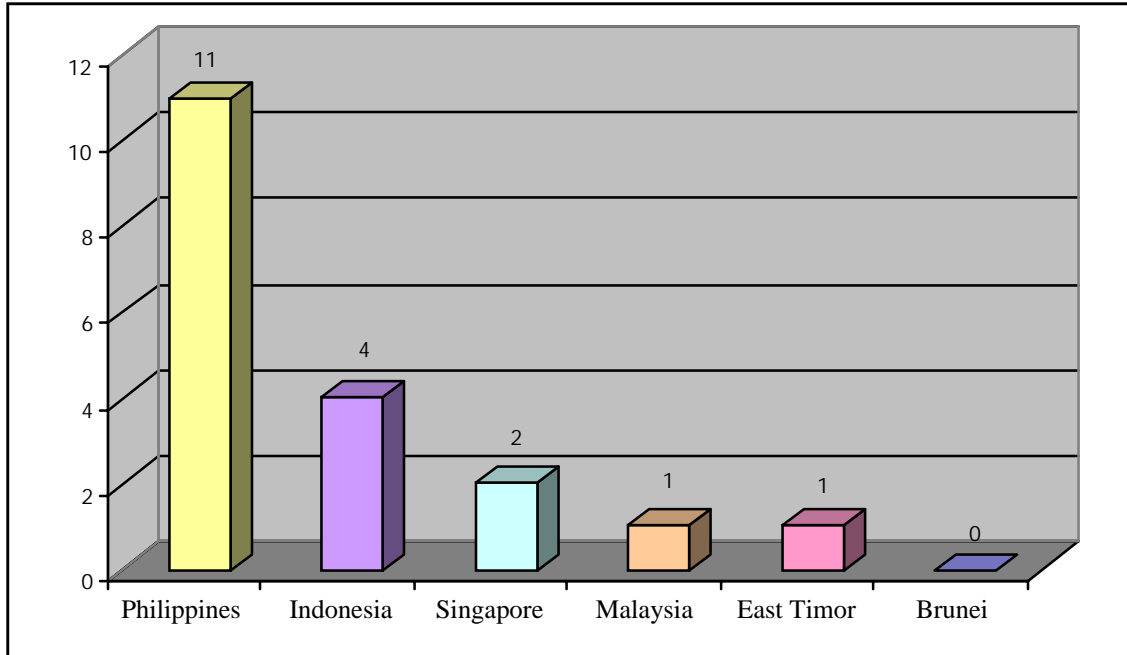


Chart 4: Coverage of countries in the Southern Region of Southeast Asia

There are no apparent reasons for the variation in the amount of coverage of different Southeast Asian countries, in particular for the high level of coverage given to Thailand and the Philippines¹⁰, although in some instances it may well reflect NHK's general reluctance to present controversial political topics.¹¹ For example, Malaysia saw the highly controversial trial of its former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim in 2000, yet none of the issues surrounding the trial nor the trial itself were mentioned in NHK's documentary programs.

7. Coverage of China and Korea

China and Korea receive a significant amount of coverage across all Asian documentary and magazine programs on NHK. The following paragraphs will outline the topics covered in *Meeting a New Asia* with regard to these two countries and then provide a more detailed summary of Chinese and Korean topics covered on NHK's Asian programs during the sampling period.

7.1 China

7.1.1 China Coverage 1998-2001 - *Meeting a New Asia*

On the whole, with approximately 38 per cent of stories (8 out of 21), social issues dominate coverage of China, featuring topics ranging from family issues such as marriage, divorce and older people (a total of 4 stories) to minorities, community problems and helping the poor (one story each). The second largest group of stories (28.5 per cent) related to the economy, mostly focussing on business opportunities in a “New Asia” (5 stories) and one story dealing with the effect of the Asian economic crisis on two individuals.¹² The environment featured in four stories (19 per cent), of which three stories described survival after environmental disasters and one story showed an example of environmental activism in China. The remaining three stories featured a range of unrelated issues from studying Western classical music in Beijing to women looking after live cargo on express trains to Hong Kong.

The issues covered provide a wide-ranging and multifaceted image of China. However, it is interesting to note that very few if any programs deal with political issues in relation to China. The extent to which political issues are left out becomes particularly evident when comparing NHK’s China coverage on *Meeting a New Asia* with the coverage of Chinese topics in documentary and news programs from other industrialised democracies. For example, between 1998 and 2001, Australia’s public television ABC focussed on several controversial Chinese issues in its program *Foreign Correspondent*, including:

- the fate of Chinese dissidents such as Harry Wu,
- the controversy surrounding the Falung Gong sect,
- the existence of an underground union movement in China,
- the tenth anniversary of the Tiananmen massacre of 1989, and
- the continued Tibetan opposition to the Chinese occupation of Tibet.

By contrast, none of these issues received in-depth attention from NHK’s flagship Asian documentary program, even in cases where the storyline would invite an examination of the broader political or social context. For example, the *Meeting a New Asia* series included a story featuring the Chinese-Tibetan town of Zhong Dian, which is predominantly inhabited by Tibetans (*Meeting a New Asia*, July 1999). According to the summary on the Internet, the story described how Tibetan folklore and costumes are successfully marketed as tourist attractions for the town, yet no mention is made of the political controversy and conflict surrounding the on-going Chinese occupation of Tibet.

7.1.2 China Coverage during Sampling Period (2000/01)

The collective China coverage of all NHK documentaries during the sampling period is dominated by four topics, namely urban society, modern life and modern culture (6 stories), tradition, exotic culture and beautiful scenery (5 stories), business and related economic topics (3 stories) and social issues (1 story). The following table (1) lists all Chinese stories broadcast during the sampling period.

Urban Society, Modern Life, Modern Culture	Tradition, Culture, Scenery	Exotic Beautiful	Business	Social Issues
New fashion show in aeroplanes (AC)	The secret of old age: a family of centenarians (AC)		End of internet bubble in Hong Kong (AC)	A travelling doctor looks after poor villagers in a remote area in far western China (AHH)
Police reality TV in Nanjing (AC)	The simple traditional life of a 109-year old woman (AC)		New business chances for Chinese/N. Korean border region (AC)	
New electronic billboard service to announce engagement (AC)	Dragon dance competition (AC)		The “Chinese dream” - a young man (16) is determined to become China's Bill Gates (AHH)	
New sea funeral service in Shanghai (AC)	Chinese fashion show as part of China's Olympic bid (AC)			
New “variety bars” open up (game bars, internet bars, pottery bars etc) (AC)	Travel documentary: The “Venice of China” (AC)			
Portrait of a Chinese pop singer (AWiW)				

Table 1: Chinese Topics covered during Sampling Period¹³

7.1.2.1 Urban society, Modern Life, Modern Culture in China

Most stories under the category “urban life”, with the exception of the portrait of a Chinese pop singer on *Asia Who is Who*, focus on unusual or exotic aspects of life in modern China, usually with little or no reference to historical or political issues.

For example, the short documentary on a popular police reality TV show in Nanjing on *Asia Crossroads* features the work of Mr Yo, who is not only a policeman, but also the cameraman and producer of a police show on Nanjing television. The police show is broadcast three times a week and has average ratings of around 15 per cent. The

documentary slowly builds up tension, first showing Mr Yo and his team in the studio, then (unsuccessfully) waiting for a criminal, until finally Mr Yo is called in to join other police in meeting with a blackmailer. The drama unfolds as the Chinese police and their camera team and the Japanese documentary crew reach the location where the blackmailer is expected. The commentary by the Japanese documentary maker, “It is him! No doubt! ... Watch out! He’s got a gun!” captures the excitement of the moment as Chinese policemen overwhelm the blackmailer in front of Mr Yo’s television camera. The documentary explains that corruption and the damaged public image of the police originally led to the development of the TV show. However, the topic of corruption is not explored in any further detail and remains a minor issue which is left aside in favour of presenting the excitement of making police TV shows.

Similarly, many of the other features in that section (see Table 1) highlight interesting snippets of life in China and are presented in an entertaining way. However, stories such as these may only provide limited insight into normal, everyday life in modern suburban China.

7.1.2.2 Tradition, Exotic Culture, Beautiful Scenery

The focus on somewhat “exotic” aspects of modern China in stories in the previous section is complemented by a romanticised view of Chinese traditional lifestyles. Two stories of centenarians bring home the renowned longevity of the Chinese which is being attributed to a pre-modern rural lifestyle, the local water and the consumption of traditional Chinese vegetables. Interestingly, no mention is made of the environmental problems faced by modern China, which include increasing water pollution, particularly in many urban regions.

Other stories in this category show the famous (and almost stereotypical) Chinese tradition of the dragon dance, the use of classical Chinese robes in a colourful fashion parade as part of the Chinese Olympic bid and a travel documentary with information on local foods. The coverage of China in stories within this category is comparable with Japanese television programs on “exotic Japan”.¹⁴

7.1.2.3 Business and Social Issues

By contrast, stories in the business section discuss modern China and the business opportunities the Chinese market holds for Japan. There also is a comparison of China and Japan in one story portraying a young Chinese computer expert who is hailed as the “Chinese Bill Gates”. In this story, China appears as a force which may well soon overtake Japan in the IT sector.

The one story in the “social issues” category focuses on the personal sacrifice and heroism of the main character. The story depicts the life of a doctor in a remote region of China who sacrifices his own health to care for the many poor patients who are often unable to pay for his services. However, there is no explanation as to why there is a severely limited health service in that region or why the people in the area have no access to state health funds or some kind of health insurance. The focus on the heroism of the protagonist thus hinders an understanding of the broader social and political context of his life and work.

7.2 Korea

As in the previous section, I will once again analyse the two sets of data separately, beginning with the coverage of Korea in the program series *Meeting a New Asia* (1998 to 2001). This is followed by the analysis of video data recorded in 2000 and 2001.

7.2.1 Korean Coverage 1998/2001 - Meeting a New Asia

The coverage of Korea in *Meeting a New Asia* is dominated by three topics, namely North-South related issues (4 stories), Korean contemporary art and popular culture (4 stories), and the impact of the Asian economic crisis (3 stories). The remaining two stories dealt with computer education in schools (1 story) and teaching Confucian values to Korean children (1 story). Two of these stories were broadcast during the sampling period and also appear in Table (2) below, indicated by the acronym “MaNA” for *Meeting a New Asia*.

It is interesting to note that several Korean stories have a direct connection to Japan. This is noteworthy given the relative lack of Japanese topics in the coverage of other countries, including China (with the exception of a total of three stories on *Meeting a New Asia* which feature “Japanese in Asia” and some shorter segments in the “Bazaar section” of *Asia Crossroads*).

7.2.2 Video Sample of Korea Coverage, 2000-2001

The video sample recorded over 2000 and 2001 contained a total of 8 Korean stories. The coverage during the sampling period was again dominated by three sets of topics (Table 2). Issues related to the relationship between North and South Korea dominated Korean coverage throughout the sampling period. The stories in this category provide a generally positive outlook for the future of inter-Korean relationships and focus strongly on

individual experiences in slowly overcoming some of the limits and restrictions that keep the two Korean states apart. The other two main topics were “tradition and modernity” and “life of young urban Koreans” (2 stories each). The one remaining story is listed in Table 2 below as “other”.

North-South issue	Tradition and Modernity	Life of Young Urban Koreans	Other
Live interview with a South Korean singer after she gave a concert in North Korea (AC)	Confucian summer camp to instil Confucian values in Korean children. (MaNA)	Efforts of a young female fashion designer to set up her own store in Seoul (MaNA)	A Korean woman runs a homestay boarding house for Japanese students. (AWiW)
A famous mountain range in North Korea is now open for limited and strictly supervised travel by South Korean tourists. (AC)	A blended family uses traditional music as a way of bonding. (AWiW)	Struggle of a young female professional Internet game player who had been successful until the IT bubble burst and there were no longer sponsors for playing Internet games as a profession (AHH)	
A South Korean meets his North Korean brother who was among those allowed to visit Seoul during the official family reunion visit organised by the two Korean governments in 2000 (MaNA)			

Table 2: Korean Stories during Sampling Period¹⁵

7.2.2.1 “Tradition and Modernity”

The stories in the “tradition and modernity” section are particularly interesting in comparison with stories on Chinese tradition. While the coverage of China tends to provide a romanticised view of exotic and pre-modern Chinese traditions, Korean traditions are shown as a means of overcoming modern problems. For example, the story about the Confucian summer camp begins with an introduction into the modern social problems emerging in Korea which are familiar to Japanese audiences: The young have lost respect for the older generation and children do not follow their parents’ advice any more. A summer camp run by Confucian traditionalists instils a strict Confucian moral and behaviour code in the children attending the camp. For most children, the experience is a very hard one, as they are forced to follow orders, cook their own meals and wash their own clothes, sit still and study for hours on end, with little or no opportunity to complain or contact their parents. Yet, the overwhelming message in the documentary is

that despite the hardship forced upon the children, it is a valuable and positive experience which helps them grow into more mature and responsible human beings.

In a similar way, the second story in this category first refers to social problems increasingly apparent in both Korea and Japan, namely the breakdown of families, a growing number of divorces and re-marriages, and an increase in blended families. One such family, whose children stem from previous relationships, the current relationship and from adoption, is portrayed in the story. To create a feeling of family unity, the father and the children play traditional Korean music together. According to the father, this music helps them to express their own individual feelings and at the same time creates a common sound. The family is now a successful music group in Korea.

7.2.2.2 “Life of Young Urban Koreans”

The “Modern Life” section portrays two young urban women trying to find their place in modern society. Both are struggling. One young woman is a would-be designer who has to overcome her lack of knowledge and experience to make a mark in Korea’s fashion world. The other woman, a professional computer and Internet game player, had a successful career start-up during the IT boom, but finds herself fighting against economic odds following the downturn in the IT sector both in Korea and internationally.

The story in the category of “Other”, about a middle-aged woman who runs a homestay boarding house for Japanese students, is rather unusual as it addresses the issue of Japanese-Korean relations and the need for Japanese to learn about and understand the Korean experience during the Japanese occupation. This is also the only story in which wartime Japan is referred to. The Korean woman takes her students to meet an older Korean woman who had suffered under Japanese occupation. In a key scene, the woman says, “If Korea had invaded Japan, then the Koreans would have done the same thing.” While other older Koreans interviewed for the documentary may not support this notion, the woman’s friendliness and openness towards the young Japanese visitors opens up a Korean-Japanese dialogue about the past. At the end of the documentary there is a consensus among the Japanese students that they need to learn about Korean history and the effect of the Japanese occupation on the Korean population.

7.3 *The Gender of Chinese and Korean Protagonists on NHK Documentary Programs*

One remarkable feature of NHK’s Asian documentary programs is the overall gender imbalance in the coverage of most Asian countries, including China and Korea. For

example, 61 per cent of Chinese stories on *Meeting a New Asia* focussed on male protagonists, 22 per cent on female protagonists and 17 per cent of stories featured both male and female central characters (see Chart 5). In the case of Korea, 50 per cent of stories presented men in the main roles, 37.5 per cent women and 12.5 per cent had both male and female protagonists.

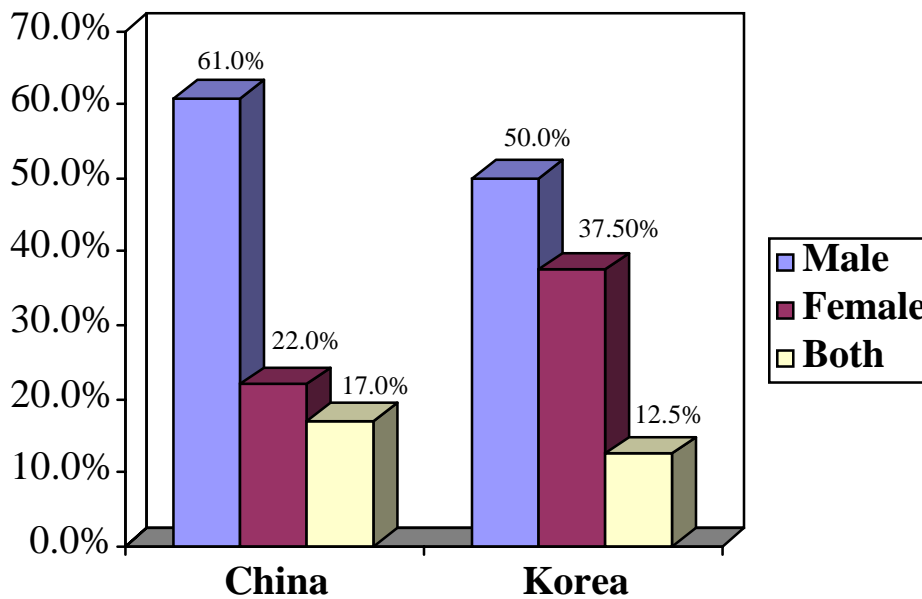


Chart 5: Distribution of Male and Female Protagonists in the Coverage of China and Korea in *Meeting a New Asia*

The gender imbalance does not necessarily reveal itself on a program-by-program basis, as there are many individual programs featuring women as protagonists. It is only when looking at the total number of programs that a clearly gender-biased pattern emerges. Whether the bias that is apparent on a numerical level also translates into a consistent bias with regard to gender roles requires further research and will need to be discussed in a separate paper.

8. Summary and Discussion

NHK documentary programs provide a variety of topics and images of Korea and China. China is depicted as a country with great diversity and a multifaceted cultural life. However, at least during the sampling period, there is a strong focus on unusual or exotic topics both in relation to Chinese tradition and to modern life in contemporary China. Men are featured more frequently than women. Overall, human interest stories dominate,

with comparatively limited information on broader social or economic issues. Also, there are hardly any stories about the life of the urban middle class and no political stories at all. As a result, the coverage of China may invoke interest and curiosity among viewers, yet it does not provide the kind of background information that may be necessary to understand the political, social and economic situation in China or China’s relationship with Japan.

By comparison, the coverage of Korea appears more in-depth, with less focus on exotic and superficial topics. The gender bias is slightly less pronounced than in the case of China. Tradition is seen as a way of addressing the problems that Korea and Japan have in common (e.g. young people, family breakdown etc.), rather than something exotic and foreign as in the sample of China stories. To some extent, coverage of Korea also includes political issues due to the inherent political nature of the stories about the relationship between North and South Korea. Some programs on Korea include general comments on government policies, mostly in the form of criticism voiced by the protagonists. However, overall political coverage is also limited, with little background information about government officials or internal political affairs that would highlight or explain the Korean political landscape.

One might argue that NHK’s choice of topics may be a reflection of viewer preferences. Audiences’ information needs were also of concern for NHK, and questions about viewer interests were included in the 2000 NHK public opinion survey quoted in the introduction to this paper (Hara and Shioda, 2000). The survey identified “scenic spots”, “way of thinking”, “politics”, “the economy” and “the military” as topics of high interest to Japanese viewers (Table 3).

Korean Topics of Interest to Japanese		Chinese Topics of Interest to Japanese	
Scenic spots	34.8 %	Scenic spots	43.1 %
Korean way of thinking	30.4 %	<i>Politics</i>	34.4 %
<i>Politics</i>	26.3 %	Chinese way of thinking	31.8 %
Economy	24.7 %	Economy	27.1 %
Military	21.0 %	Military	24.8 %

Table 3: Topics of Interest to Japanese Audiences, according to Hara and Shioda, 2000, Table 5.

A comparison of the topics of interest revealed in the 2000 NHK survey with the data analysed in this paper shows that NHK only partially meets viewer interests expressed in the public opinion survey. Topics covered extensively include “scenic spots”, “the economy” and people’s “way of thinking”. For example, there are several stories featuring “scenic spots”, such as the story about a Chinese city described as “the Chinese Venice” or the story about a trip to a famous mountain range in North Korea. The economy also receives proportionate attention in many NHK documentaries, both on

Asia in general and Japan's East Asian neighbours in particular. People's "way of thinking" is dealt with in many of the Korean stories. By contrast, the Chinese "way of thinking" was not explored to the same extent during the video sampling period, but the summaries of *Meeting a New Asia* suggest that this topic may have received ample coverage over the last three years.

The two topics where NHK does not meet viewer interests, at least with regard to China and Korea, are the areas of politics and the military. This is particularly true for the coverage of China, but also to some extent for Korea. By almost completely blending out political issues, NHK takes away a significant part of the framework in which the protagonists of its documentary programs live and work. As a result, NHK presents a somewhat distorted and sanitised depiction of these two as well as many other Asian countries.

As indicated earlier, the lack of interest in political and controversial issues evident in the coverage of China and Korea on NHK is the greatest difference between NHK's Asian documentaries and the television coverage of Asia in many other industrialised democracies. This is not to say that a single-minded focus on controversial political issues would provide a better understanding of those countries than NHK's approach. For example, Lowe (1995, pp. 90-91) criticises Australian media coverage of Asia for being overwhelmingly interested in controversy and political aberrations which he interprets as indicative of a cultural superiority complex:

"[Australian m]edia images of South-East Asia are crowded with the scowling visages of evil men and women. They are oppressive dictators, corrupt and greedy politicians, bellicose generals, murderous guerillas, vicious criminals. For each country in the region our media have particular antiheroes to rail at. [...]

By shining the spotlights on the bogymen [sic.] of South-East Asian societies the Australian media are informing their audiences that these countries are primitive and backward in their leadership and government; that they have a long way to go to catch up to us, the custodians of the proud and superior tradition of Westminster. And that the problem with leadership in Southeast Asia is also a moral one; those who climb to the highest rungs of power do so not to serve their people but to serve their own selfish ambitions for wealth and power."

By contrast, Japanese documentaries focus on individual stories which evoke identification with the main character/s. According to Kilborn and Izod (1997, pp. 231-232), "the appeal of [...] "personal documentaries", which have a long tradition in the history of the genre, lies [...] in that the wider social implications are deliberately downplayed and the human dimensions of the problem or situation emphasised [...]."

Through the means of personal documentaries, NHK takes on a leadership role in educating Japanese audiences about Asia by challenging the negative images Japanese hold of other Asian countries. According to NHK, “*Meeting a New Asia* is a program that will present a new, and more vivid Asia.”¹⁶ NHK’s new documentary program *Asia Human Highway* continues with a similar focus on a “new century” in Asia, “the voyage and challenge of the people”, and “pulsation of life [in Asia]”¹⁷. In contrast to the Australian media which, according to Lowe, tend to portray “Asia” as the morally corrupt and inferior other, NHK constructs an image of “Asia” as a multifaceted and colourful place with future-oriented and energetic people who work hard at fulfilling their dreams. This presentation of Asia is a reflection of what Iwabuchi (1999, p. 219) described as Japan’s “nostalgia for a (different) Asian modernity”. Through identification with the main characters in NHK’s documentary programs, Japanese viewers are invited to take part in Asia’s “vitality” and the “Asian dream”. However, the question is whether NHK’s depoliticised documentaries can provide Japanese viewers with the information and understanding needed to improve relations and co-operation in the Asia-Pacific region.

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¹ Cf Gatzten, 2001.

² The survey subjects were asked to name the kind of programs they had watched about Korea and China (multiple answers possible). 56.1 per cent of interviewees said they had watched news programs about Korea and 23.8 per cent had watched documentary programs. The numbers for China were similar for news programs (59.7 per cent) and somewhat higher for documentary programs (35.2 per cent), see Hara and Shioda, 2000, Table 4.

³ In fact, *Meeting a New Asia* is the follow-up program of an earlier documentary series called *Meeting Asia (Ajia hakken)*, which was transmitted from 1995 until 1998. The archives for *Meeting Asia* are also available on the Internet.

⁴ URL: <http://www.nhk.or.jp/asia/old02/english/top.htm>, accessed on 18-02-2002.

⁵ URL: <http://www.nhk.or.jp/asia/english/index.html>, accessed 18-02-2002.

⁶ For the challenges documentary makers face in targeting audiences, see Kilborn and Izod, 1997, pp. 215-239.

⁷ With the exception of a small number of programs, most programs were broadcast at approximately the same time in Japan and on international satellite television. The 2000 sample contained editions of *Meeting a New Asia*, *Asia Crossroads* and *Asia Who is Who*. The 2001 sample contained editions of *Asia Crossroads* and *Asia Human Highway*. There is some overlap between the two sets of data since those programs of *Meeting a New Asia* which were recorded during the sampling period in 2000 are also accounted for in the program summaries.

⁸ One edition of *Asia Who is Who* in the sample contained a story about a Korean woman who runs a homestay-style boarding house for Japanese overseas students in Seoul. No edition of *Meeting a New Asia* in the sample contained Japan-related stories, however, the Internet archives revealed that there was a series of approximately three programs featuring Japanese living or working in other Asian countries.

⁹ The text of Koizumi's speech is available online, (World Wide Web), URL: <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/future/remark0106.html> (Accessed 4 September 2001).

¹⁰ For example, while some of the frequently covered countries (e.g. Thailand and the Philippines) belong to the top ten countries receiving official developmental aid (ODA) from Japan – which could be seen as a possible ‘political reason’ for a special focus on those countries – the country receiving the most generous amount of ODA among Southeast Asian countries, Indonesia, gets comparatively little coverage. In 1998, the top ten countries receiving Japanese ODA were (in US\$ million): China (1,158.16); Indonesia (828.47); Thailand (558.42); India (504.95); Pakistan (491.54); Vietnam (388.61); Philippines (297.55); Sri Lanka (197.85); Bangladesh (189.05); Malaysia (179.1). Source: Japan’s ODA Annual Report 1998, (available online), World Wide Web, URL: http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/summary/1999/d_g2_02.html#c_2_3 (Accessed 4 September 2001).

¹¹ Cf Krauss, 2000.

¹² There are, of course, many overlaps between the different categories. In particular, economic issues also play a significant role in many stories on social and environmental issues, making the economy a central theme throughout the coverage of China on *Meeting a New Asia*.

¹³ The acronyms in brackets after each topic indicate the program they were broadcast on. AC stands for Asia Crossroads, AWiW stands for *Asia Who is Who*, MaNA stands for *Meeting a New Asia* and AHH stands for *Asia Human Highway*.

¹⁴ During the sampling period, China was predominantly covered by *Asia Crossroads* (AC). As indicated in the introduction, *Asia Crossroads* is a program which often features exotic and unusual topics. This may be one reason why there is a relatively strong emphasis on exoticism throughout many of the programs.

¹⁵ See endnote 13 for the acronyms.

¹⁶ <http://www.nhk.or.jp/asia/old02/english/top.htm>; (Accessed on 29.11.2001.)

¹⁷ See NHK’s promotional text for *Asia Human Highway* on <http://www.nhk.or.jp/asia/english/index.html>; (Accessed on 29.11.2001.)