

ON THE FORMS OF CULTURAL TRANSMISSION AND TRANSFORMATION

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文化移転と変容の型

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どの社会集団もその伝統文化形成の段階で他の社会集団からの文化の受容と変容を行っている。ここに収録されている論文では、「外来文化の受容と変容の型」が、歴史的な、また現在行われている「文化の移転と変容」という現象との関連で検討される。以下各論文での具体的な事例の検討に入る前に、本論文では「文化の移転と変容」に関する一般的な議論が展開される。まず、文化移転を送り出し側の社会から見た移転と受け入れ側の社会から見た移転に分け、さらに二つの社会集団間の対応の特色から「強制」「説得」「借用」「合成」という四つの文化移転の型が引き出される。次に、移転された文化は移転先の社会で何らかの変容がされた後受容されるのが常であるが、その変容の範囲や程度を決める要因は何なのか議論される。具体的には、文化を「自然環境、社会環境、精神環境との関係がどうあるべきかについて社会集団の成員がもつ考えを表象するシンボルの総体」として見る文化の記号論的な視点から文化変容の過程を検討することで、文化変容の範囲や程度が社会集団を取り巻く自然環境、社会環境、精神環境の特徴と関連していることが示される。

Every social group engages in adoption and adaptation of imported cultures in forming its traditional culture. The papers collected here examine this phenomenon of “adoption and adaptation of an imported culture” in its historical as well as contemporary contexts in relation to the general phenomenon of “cultural transmission and transformation”. Before proceeding to the examination of concrete cases of “adoption and adaptation of an imported culture”, this paper develops a general discussion of “cultural transmission and transformation”. By looking at the process of cultural transmission from the point of view of the sending social group and the receiving social group and by taking into account the nature of interaction between these two social groups, four forms of cultural transmission — “imposition”, “persuasion”, “borrowing”, and “amalgamation” — are derived. While every transmitted culture goes through the process of transformation in the hands of the receiving social group, the scope and extent of the transformation differ from one social group to another. By employing a semiotic approach to culture, it is shown that the scope and extent of cultural transformation depend on the characteristics of the natural, the social and the spiritual environment of the receiving social group.

Introduction

Cultural transmission is a process that involves transfer of a culture from one social

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group (the senders) to another social group (the receivers). That cultural transmission is a process that involves both the senders and the receivers means that it can take on a variety of forms, depending on the nature of contact and communication between the two social groups.

Cultural transmission is consummated when the transmitted culture is accepted and adopted by the recipient social group. However, to the extent that cultural transmission involves transfer of a culture that is initially foreign to the recipient social group, the transmitted culture is likely to go through the process of transformation before it is accepted and adopted. In addition to the question of why the transformation of the transmitted culture takes place, there are other related and equally important questions that the student of Intercultural Studies must investigate. They are: how the transformation of the transmitted culture comes about, what determines the extent to which the transmitted culture gets transformed and where in the various areas of culture is the transformation most likely to occur. We offer a general discussion of these questions in this paper in an effort to develop what might be termed the general theory of cultural transmission and transformation.

That the transmitted culture goes through the process of transformation means that, when the recipient social group accepts and adopts it, it is the adapted form of it and not the original form. Thus, from the point of view of the recipient social group, the process of cultural transmission is the process of adoption and adaptation.

While every recipient social group does the adapting of the transmitted culture, the degree to which it is adapted differs from one social group to another. What accounts for differences among different social groups in the degree to which an imported culture is adapted? Are there also differences among different social groups in the nature of adaptation, from faithful imitation to willful distortion? Specific cases of adoption and adaptation of an imported culture are reported in the papers that follow so that we may develop meaningful answers to these questions.

Cultural Transmission: Supply and Demand

Cultural transmission, by definition, involves both the senders and the receivers. In other words, there are suppliers as well as demanders behind the process of cultural transmission. It seems natural, then, to begin our discussion of different forms which cultural transmission takes in terms of whether it is suppliers-initiated or demanders-initiated.

Granted that there are demanders behind the process of cultural transmission, there is no guarantee that the people on the receiving end of cultural transmission are willing adopters of the transmitted culture. In fact, the history of intercultural contact shows that cultural transmission often takes the form of violent imposition by one social group

of their culture on another social group. Such violent imposition of a culture takes place when suppliers are conquerors, invaders or colonizers. Although complete annihilation of the existing culture seldom takes place, the people on the receiving end are forced to accept and adopt the new culture as it is imposed on them. Hence, this form of cultural transmission can be characterized as “cultural transmission by imposition”¹⁾.

Needless to say, “imposition” is not the only form in which suppliers-initiated cultural transmission takes place. The non-violent form of suppliers-initiated cultural transmission includes such diverse channels of transmission as missionaries going abroad to spread their faith, itinerant merchants transmitting their home culture as they come into contact with people in other lands, and immigrants spreading their native culture as they become a majority in their adopted land. Whatever may be the actual channel of cultural transmission, the people on the receiving end are not forced to accept and adopt the new culture unlike the case of “cultural transmission by imposition”. They decide to accept and adopt the transmitted culture only when they are persuaded that it replaces, or adds something useful to what they already have. Hence, this form of cultural transmission can be characterized as “cultural transmission by persuasion”²⁾.

As for demanders-initiated cultural transmission, demand for other cultures is generated partly out of necessity and partly out of curiosity. One social group decides to import the culture of another social group because, as is often the case, that social group finds themselves culturally less advanced and sees the need to introduce elements of a more advanced foreign culture — such as institutions and technologies — for the benefits they bring to them. This form of cultural transmission can be characterized as “cultural transmission by borrowing” to reflect the motivation on the part of the receiving social group to import some elements of another culture that are felt to be superior to, or absent in their own culture³⁾.

The importation of a foreign culture can also take place out of curiosity. Since curiosity about something new and something different is part of human nature, every social group engages in this form of demanders-initiated cultural transmission. The curiosity about a foreign culture may have resulted from members of that social group going abroad, from people with that culture visiting them, or from learning about it through books, magazine articles or media reports. Since this form of cultural transmission involves adding something new and something different to what the people on the receiving end already have, we can characterize this form of demanders-initiated cultural transmission as “cultural transmission by amalgamation”⁴⁾. Four forms of cultural transmission are illustrated in Figure 1:

Whether it is out of necessity or out of curiosity, what distinguishes demanders-initiated cultural transmission from suppliers-initiated cultural transmission is that it involves willing adoption, as opposed to forced adoption either by imposition or persua-

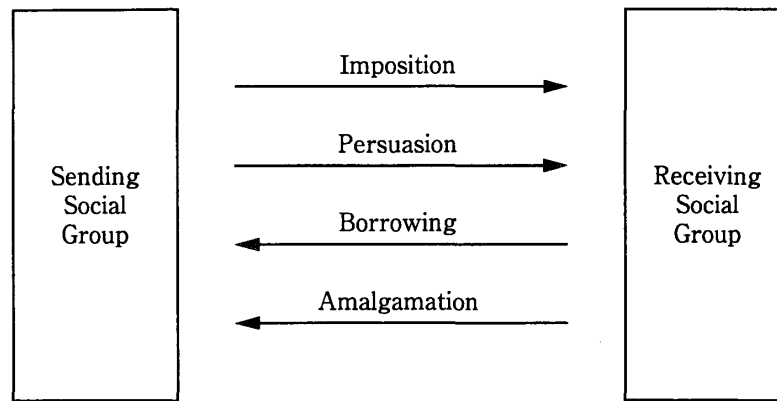


Figure 1. Four Forms of Cultural Transmission

sion, of the transmitted culture. What is important here is that the initiative for cultural transmission is taken by the people on the receiving end of the process of cultural transmission.

Transformation of the Transmitted Culture

Whether cultural transmission takes the form of imposition, persuasion, borrowing or amalgamation—or, for that matter, a combination of them (as in the case of colonizers bringing missionaries with them), it is rarely the case that the people on the receiving end accept and adopt the transmitted culture in its original form. The transmitted culture usually goes through the process of transformation as it interacts with the existing culture of the people on the receiving end.

Why does the transmitted culture go through the process of transformation? A short answer for this question is that the existing culture of the recipient social group, or the indigenous culture, has evolved in the context of a specific cultural environment that is usually different from the cultural environment of the sending social group. What this means is that the transmitted culture arrives in a new land always out of context and, more often than not, in bits and pieces, making it difficult to be accepted and adopted in its original form.

If the transmitted culture is destined to go through the process of transformation, how does that process come about? Here we propose to analyze the process of transformation of the transmitted culture as it comes into contact with the indigenous culture by appealing to a semiotic conception of culture: "Culture is a set of symbols—words, gestures, images, signs, physical objects—shared by the members of a social group that represent their ideas about man's relationship to the natural, the social, and the spiritual environment"⁵). With this semiotic conception of culture, differences between the senders' culture and the receivers' can be discussed in terms of differences in their natural, social and spiritual environment.

Consider, for example, differences in the natural environment. Two social groups,

leading their social life in different natural environments—one group leading their life in a harsh and hostile natural environment and the other in a mild and hospitable natural environment, for example—tend to develop different ideas as to what their relationship ought to be to the natural environment and, hence, different cultures. Differences in geographical characteristics of their living environment would lead to different designs of their cities and towns. And differences in the materials available—stone, clay or wood—and in the characteristics of climate—cold, temperate or hot—would lead to different architectural styles, structures and shapes. Different conceptions about the relationship between man and nature derived from different natural environments are one reason why a building that serves the same purpose—church, mosque or temple—takes on different shapes in different localities, even though the inhabitants there share the same faith. There are, of course, other reasons for differences in architectural styles, structures and shapes such as different conceptions among different social groups of the relationship between man and God and different conceptions of beauty.

Differences in the social environment among different social groups can be inferred from differences in their ideas about social ranking, their communication styles and their social ethics. The transmitted culture, once accepted and adopted by some, will be more readily accepted and adopted by other members of the recipient social group if theirs is a high-context, as opposed to a low-context, culture⁶). On the other hand, in a low-context culture that highly values autonomy and independence of individuals, it may take a strong persuasion, if not a forced imposition, before the transmitted culture is accepted and adopted by all members of the group. Even then, the adopted form can be quite different from the form that was initially transmitted, for each individual in such a social group needs to be convinced of the value of a new culture.

Differences in the spiritual environment among different social groups are reflected on the differences in the prevailing thought system, or religion, and are reflected on different ideas about self, or the sense of who I am. Historically, three traditions have evolved concerning the issue of self. One tradition, as represented by Judaism, Protestantism and Humanism, sees self, or the individual human being, as an autonomous being characterized by strong sense of individuality. Another tradition, represented by Confucianism and Hinduism in the East and Plato's ideas as expounded in his *Republic* in the West, sees the individual human being in the context of social relationships with other individuals. Then, there is the third tradition, as represented by Buddhism and other mystic traditions, that sees self as an illusion and therefore does not recognize the individual human being as a separate and independent entity. Considering how deeply the conception of self is ingrained in the religious tradition, it is not difficult to see why the transmitted culture has a difficult time being accepted and adopted by the people on the receiving end if it requires a whole-hearted conversion to another faith.

Adoption and Adaptation

Cultural transmission is a process by which the culture of one social group is transmitted to another social group — either by imposition, persuasion, borrowing or amalgamation, or by a combination of them. However, once a culture is transmitted, it usually goes through the process of transformation, for it is, after all, a different culture from the one the people on the receiving end cherish. This means that, when the transmitted culture is accepted and adopted by the people on the receiving end as their own, it is usually different from the form in which it was originally transmitted. In other words, the adoption of the transmitted culture is usually the adoption of an adapted form — adapted to the specific cultural environment of the recipient social group. This process of transformation of the transmitted culture is illustrated in Figure 2:

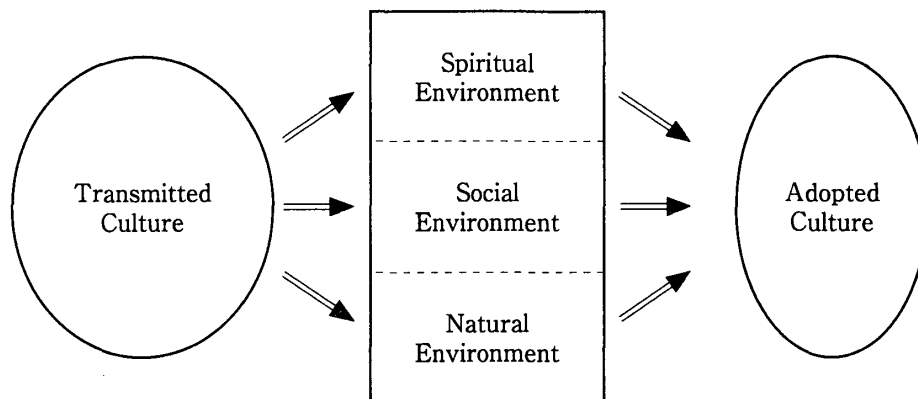


Figure 2. Transformation of the Transmitted Culture

How much adaptation will take place will differ from one social group to another, ranging from partial adaptation to total adaptation. Another point about adaptation is that it is usually a process that is spread over a long period of time, decades or sometimes centuries. Needless to say, the adaptation period in some areas of culture, like fashion, is much shorter today thanks to the availability of information technologies.

In addition to the degree of adaptation, there exist interesting differences among different receiving social groups as to the nature of their adaptation. One thing about culture is that it is something that the people tend to take for granted, having become so comfortable living with it like the “silent language”, as one anthropologist puts it⁷⁾. This means that the transmitted culture gets transformed until the people on the receiving end become comfortable with it. This explains why one cultural system, such as Buddhism, takes on such different forms in different regions of the world, from a fairly faithful rendering of the original teachings of the Buddha to a highly innovative interpretation of what the Buddha’s ideas were all about. This is certainly the case with Buddhism in such countries as China, Korea and Japan that share the same Mahayana tradition. There are such significant differences among these countries in their concep-

tions of what Buddhism entails that it is only meaningful to talk about Chinese Buddhism, Korean Buddhism, and Japanese Buddhism. Needless to say, differences in the conceptions of Buddhism become more pronounced as we examine Buddhism practiced in other Asian countries with the Theravada tradition.

Conclusion

Every social group leads its social life in a social system that is open to other social systems. Among all kinds of matter and information that a social group exchanges with other social groups as an open system are cultural products and ideas. This is where cultural transmission takes place.

Cultural transmission involves both the senders and the receivers. As such, it is a form of intercultural communication. And communication here, like communication in other areas of life, is a two-way process. In other words, while cultural transmission means transfer of a culture from one social group to another, it is usually the case that both the sending social group and the receiving social group end up learning from each other through the process. This is even the case when the initial cultural transmission takes the form of imposition by conquerors, invaders or colonizers. From the perspective of history, conquerors, invaders or colonizers, too, end up learning something about the culture of the people on the other end of what appears to be a one-sided relationship and a one-way communication. In short, cultural transmission, in the end, is a process of cultural exchange and cross-fertilization.

That the process of cultural transmission is the process of cultural exchange and cross-fertilization from the long-run point of view is a useful perspective. It is an important perspective because cultural exchange and cross-fertilization can be promoted for short-run benefits as well. Cultural exchange and cross-fertilization can indeed be said to be the form of cultural transmission we need to promote if intercultural contact is to lead to a peaceful coexistence, not a violent clash, among different social groups with different cultural backgrounds.

Notes

- 1) For historical examples of "cultural transmission by imposition", see Bentley (1993).
- 2) King Asoka of the Maurya Dynasty sending missions to neighboring countries to spread Buddhism is a classic example of "cultural transmission by persuasion".
- 3) Japan is a good example of a social group that has assiduously engaged in "cultural transmission by borrowing" throughout history in developing their national culture.
- 4) While there are so many examples of "cultural transmission by amalgamation", one recent example of Japanese culture being imported by other countries is the use of "oshibori" to make one feel refreshed. What is interesting here is that both the custom and the word are being imported.

- 5) See Geertz (1973), for example, for a semiotic approach to culture. The definition of culture given here is taken from Koizumi (2003).
- 6) For a discussion of “high context” versus “low context” culture, see Hall (1976).
- 7) See Hall (1959).

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