Features of Japanese Soundscapes Recognized by Foreigners: A Questionnaire Survey on Sounds for the Foreigners Living in Fukuoka

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Abstract: A questionnaire survey on sounds odd to foreigners living in Fukuoka was done to clarify the features of Japanese soundscapes recognized by those whose cultural background is different. The foreigners were asked to point out the sounds which they usually heard in Japan but never heard in their home countries and their impression, and the sounds which they usually heard in their home countries but less heard in Japan and their impression. The traffic sound signal for the blind, the exhaust noise by wild bike riders, the peddlers' cries, and the election campaign broadcast are the typical sounds only heard in Japan. The foreigners usually have good image of the traffic sound signal for the blind and the peddlers' call. In contrast, they have negative impression of the muffler noise by wild riders and speeches concerning election. The Japanese soundscape is characterized by a lot of these types of sounds which we hear in daily life. Comparison between the sounds usually heard in Japan and those less heard in Japan shows that there are too many public sounds, such as announcements using public-address system and music at the shopping centers, and few natural sounds and human voices in Japan.

INTRODUCTION

There are many sounds around us. Some of them are comfortable sounds. Others irritate us. Of course, one sound can be comfortable for someone and noisy for another. The same physical acoustical environment causes different impression on different people. Especially, if the people have different cultural background, the sounds may have different meanings.

The concept of soundscape is defined as "an environment of sound (sonic environment) with emphasis on the way it is perceived and understood by the individuals or by a society (Traux, 1978). From this point of view, cross-cultural approach to the sounds in the environment is needed.

The purpose of this study is to clarify the features of Japanese soundscape (sound environment) recognized by the foreigners living in Japan. Because they have the different cultural background, they may live in different soundscapes. They may notice typical Japanese sounds which Japanese do not notice that they are Japanese-like.

QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY

A questionnaire survey on sounds for foreigners living in Fukuoka city was taken to clarify the features of Japanese soundscape recognized by foreigners. The questionnaire consisted of three questions. The first is to point out the sounds they usually heard in Japan but never in their home countries and the impression of these sounds. The second one is to point out the sounds which they usually heard in their home countries but less heard in Japan and their impression. The last one is to describe the overall impression of acoustic environment in Japan.

Respondents are students or teaching staff of a university at Fukuoka city and their families. They are from USA (8), Korea (7), China (6), France (2), Taiwan, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Argentina, Germany, England, Holland, and Poland. Total number of them is 31. They are residents of Fukuoka city.

RESULTS

1. First Question: The sounds only heard in Japan

The most frequently indicated sound for the first question is "the traffic sound signal for the blind" (18). In Fukuoka, two alternate short melodies are used for the traffic sound signal for the blind. Impression of this sound is mainly positive: "happy (4), good (4), kind (2), and fun (2)." However, there are also a few negative answers like "noisy" (2).

The second most frequently indicated sound is "the exhaust noise by wild bike riders (Bousouzoku)" (13). For this sound, all the respondents have negative impression of this sound. Eleven of them wrote "noisy." Japanese citizens also hate "Bousouzoku" noise. Bad boys in Japan tend to be wild bike riders having their own fun. "Bousouzoku" is not only a noise problem but also a social problem in Japan.

The third sound is "the peddlers' cries" (12). There are also many kinds of peddlers in foreign countries.
However, the Japanese peddlers' cries have unique intonation: the cries of the peddlers of roast sweet potato is a typical example. They are like singing a song.

The fourth sound is "the election campaign broadcast" (9). Japanese election campaign basically based on the shouting of the candidate's name and "please vote for him" using public-address system. The impression is "noisy (6) and irritating."

The fifth sound is the "the chirping of cicadas (7) and the sounds of Japanese-style pinball (Pachinko) game parlors (7)." The chirping of cicadas is mainly indicated by American and European respondents. This answer reflects the climate difference. "Pachinko" is a popular amusement for Japanese adults. The combination of pinball sounds, electric sound effects, and loud background music makes unique soundscape.

2. Second Question: The sounds less heard in Japan

The most frequently indicated sound for the second question is "bird cries" (11). There are also birds cries in Japan. However, the respondents hear more bird cries in their home countries. Impression of them is "many (4) and natural (2)."

The second sound is "car horn" (8). Mainly, Asian respondents indicate this sound. Impression of this sound is "noisy (5) and bad-mannered (2)." The restraint on the use of the "car horn" is not enough in Asian countries.

The third sound is their "native language" (5). The fourth sound is "the chimes of the church bells, their countries' folk songs, playing children's voices, dog barkings, and their countries' musical instruments" (4).

The answers of native language, folk songs, and native musical instruments are taken for granted. Although bells of Buddhism temples are popular in Japan, we can hear a few bells from Christian churches.

3. Third Question: Total impression of Japanese Acoustic Environment

There are two major contradictory opinions for Japanese acoustic environment. One is "silent" (9) and the other is "noisy" (9). Also, there is a compromised opinion of "there are silent and noisy parts" (3). Generally, the American and European respondents answered "noisy," and the Asian respondents answered "silent." These results reflect the present status of the acoustic environment in Japan.

CATEGORIZED ANALYSIS

To discuss the features of Japanese soundscape more quantitatively, the categorized data of the answers of the first and second questions are compared. The categories are natural sounds, human sounds, mechanical sounds, social sounds, silence, and signal sounds. The percentage of each category is calculated.

We can see the Japanese features at the category of social sounds. The ratio of social sounds only heard in Japan is 47.9 % and that less heard in Japan is 22.6 %. This category consists of various kinds of public announcements and background music using public address system in the station, in trains and buses, in department stores, and during election campaign. Also, the ratio of mechanical sounds only heard in Japan is larger than that less heard in Japan.

In contrast, the ratios of natural sounds and human voices only heard in Japan is smaller than that less heard in Japan.

CONCLUSION

The questionnaire for the foreigners living in Japan points out the characteristic sounds in Japan. The obtained answers are the sounds which we hear in daily life: the traffic sound signal for the blind, the exhaust noise by wild bike riders, the peddlers' cries, etc.

Japanese usually do not recognized that these sounds are Japanese-like sounds. However, for foreigners, these sounds characterize the Japanese soundscape.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Masafumi Oka for his assistance in the present work.

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