

Greetings from the President's Office

2014.2.4 NO.3

Listening to Enka Songs in the Midwest Great Plains of the U.S.

It may not be of any surprise that the President of Akita International University, a university in Japan with a global standard, is fond of songs; however, what if I said he likes enka? As a matter of fact, I do like enka, and especially those written before the 80s. It might sound rather confusing to understand this, but let me mention one more puzzling fact, my favorite enka triggers an image of a highway in the middle of the Midwest Great Plains in the United States, on a hot summer day during a sunset. Why? My reasons are below.

In the beginning of the 80s, I was teaching as a faculty member at the College of Business of the University of Illinois. During this time in St. Louis, Missouri, about 370 kilometers (230 miles) southwest, I gave a 6 week intensive course every summer at the newly-established International Graduate School, which offered doctoral courses in business administration and education. Graduate students gathered from across the United States to St. Louis, staying in a big hotel, the Forest Park Hotel, including the faculty members. After the intensive classes and guidance, graduate students returned to their respective regions in the U.S. and enrolled in a correspondence course. Approximately 200 people took the course and most of them were already in teaching positions at a university as pre-doctoral fellows. Most were middle aged or older and aiming to finish their dissertation in this course and receive their Ph.D.

It is really hot during summer in St. Louis. Classes and guidance was held between 9 am to noon in each allocated classroom of the hotel, and afterwards there was nothing to do except for swimming in the pool near the hotel or jogging around Forest Park, the biggest park in St. Louis, which is about 10 miles (16 kilometers) around. When not teaching, my weekdays were quite boring. As soon as class finished on Friday's, I would jump into my car and drive home to Urbana-Champaign, about 370 kilometers (230 miles) away, like a flying jet. The more time I spent with my family during the weekends, the more difficult it was to leave home and head back to St. Louis in the early Sunday evenings by car. The moments of when my little kids saw me off remain in my mind. My drive starts from Urbana-Champaign and heads 100 miles (150 kilometers) south on Interstate 57. I take a right turn in a suburb of the city Effingham, and drive 150 miles (230 kilometers) southwest on Interstate 40. Except for the corner in Effingham where Interstates 57 and 40 intersect, the majority of the roads were straight. It took more or less four hours one way, and I repeated this every week. The Mississippi River can be seen right before reaching St. Louis, and the arch of "The Gate to the West" which is a 240 meter-high symbol of St. Louis, could also be seen.

The relationship with enka and I originated from the eight hour weekly drive between St. Louis and Urbana-Champaign during the hot summers. As mentioned previously, I had to leave my family and drive the straight highway toward the sunset through the Midwest plains in such languorous summer evenings while

images such as my children's laughter came to mind, which was heartbreaking. Driving on a straight road is never without its drowsiness, thus the radio and music encouraged me to stay awake, such as jazz, country-and-western, classical music, chanson, folk, and Latin music. However, western music did not work against my sleepiness, rather, I got sleepier and dispirited. One day I found a cassette tape with a Japanese title in my car and inserted it into the tape deck without knowing the singer. The song from the tape was "Inochi Karetemo" sung by Mr. Mori Shinichi. Probably this song would not have brought any emotions if I came across it in Japan. However, it was on the Midwest U.S. highway during dusk, just when the sun was nearly under the horizon, and my heart sank with sorrow and loneliness because it was right after I left home. With the melody of this song, Mr. Mori Shinichi's husky voice, and the setting, nothing could have been a more suitable situation, and it captivated my heart. Once his voice reached my ears, I started singing along to the tape as if I were him, even though I was driving at a speed of more than 100 km/h (60 mph). I do not know the reason, but I could not stop crying. Presumably, the total atmosphere mixed with the enka melody and quality of his voice made me emotional. Since then, I played this enka song in my car again and again. Afterwards, not only this enka song but also folk ballads of the Tohoku region became my favorites. These were my companions for weekend trips in the Midwest. After I moved from the US to Japan in 1986, the trend of enka in Japan changed from the generation before, such as the lyrics, melody and tempo; it was not inspirational anymore. Therefore, this is why enka up until the early 80s are my favorite.

Note:

The "International Graduate School" mentioned in this essay has turned into "Greenleaf University." I wish them success from the bottom of my heart.



鈴木 典比古