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In 2,000 Years, Will the World Remember Disney or Plato?

As the unrivalled global superpower, America exports its culture on an unprecedented scale. From music to media, film to fast food, language to literature and sport, the American idea is spreading inexorably, not unlike the influence of empires that preceded it. The difference is that today's technology flings culture to every corner of the globe with blinding speed. If it took two millennia for Plato's *Republic* to reach North America, the latest hit from Justin Timberlake can be found in Greek (and Japanese) stores within days. Sometimes, US ideals get transmitted - such as individual rights, freedom of speech, and respect for women - and local cultures are enriched. At other times, materialism or worse becomes the message and local traditions get crushed. "The US has become the most powerful, significant world force in terms of cultural imperialism and expansion," says Ian Ralston, American studies director at Liverpool John Moores University. "The areas that particularly spring to mind are Hollywood, popular music, and even literature." But what some call "McDomination" has created a backlash in certain cultures. And it's not clear whether fast food, Disney, or rock 'n' roll will change the world the way Homer or Shakespeare has.

America's pre-eminence is hardly surprising. Superpowers have throughout the ages sought to perpetuate their way of life: from the philosophy and mythology of the ancient Greeks to the law and language of the Romans; from the art and architecture of the Tang Dynasty and Renaissance Italy to the sports and systems of government of the British. "Most empires think their own point of view is the only correct point of view," says Robert Young, an expert in postcolonial cultural theory at Oxford University. "It's the certainty they get because of the power they have, and they expect to impose it on everyone else."

Detractors of cultural imperialism argue, however, that cultural domination poses a totalitarian threat to diversity. In the American case, "McDomination" poses several dangers. First, local industries are truly at risk of extinction because of US oligopolies, such as Hollywood. For instance in 2000, the European Union handed out 1 billion euros to subsidize Europe's film industry. Even the relatively successful British movie industry has no control over distribution, which is almost entirely in the hands of the Hollywood majors. Second, political cultures are being transformed by the personality-driven American model in countries as far-reaching as Japan and the Philippines. Finally, US domination of technologies such as the Internet and satellite TV means that, increasingly, America monopolizes the view people get of the world. According to a recent report for the UN Conference on Trade and Development, 13 of the top 14 Internet firms are American. No. 14 is British

A main problem is that culture is no longer a protected species, but subject to the inexorable drive for free trade, says Joost Smiers, a political science professor at the Utrecht School of the Arts. This means that it is increasingly difficult for countries to protect their own industries. Another danger, detractors say, is the consolidation of the communications industry into a few conglomerates such as AOL-TimeWarner, Disney, and News Corporation, which means that the "infotainment" generated for global consumption nearly always comes from an Anglophone perspective. "You can't go on with just three music companies organizing and distributing 85 percent of the music in the world," says Smiers. "It's against all principles of democracy. Every emotion, every feeling, every image can be copyrighted into the hands of a few owners."

American, with a twist

A backlash is being felt in certain places. In Japan, locals have taken US ideas like hip-hop and fast food, and given them a Japanese twist, says Dominic al-Badri, editor of Kansai Time Out. In Germany, there is still strong resistance to aspects of US pop culture, though there is an appetite for its intellectual culture, says Gary Smith, director of the American Academy in Berlin. In France, resistance is growing partly because of frustrations over the Iraq war - but partly because Americanization is already so advanced in the country, says Mr. Kaspi. He notes one interesting anecdotal sign of US influence - and the futility of resistance. France has repeatedly tried to mandate the use of French language in official capacities to check the advance of English. "But most of the time, the law is impossible to apply, because if you want to be understood around the world you have to speak English," Kaspi says.

In the Philippines, even the best US ideals have caused complications. "The pervasive American influence has saddled us with two legacies," notes respected local commentator Antonio C. Abaya. "American-style elections, which require the commitment of massive financial resources, which have to be

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recouped and rolled over many times, which is the main source of corruption in government; and American-style free press in which media feel free to attack and criticize everything that the government does or says, which adds to disunity and loss of confidence in government."

Meanwhile, for all the strength of the US movie industry, sometimes a foreign film resonates more with a local audience than a Hollywood production - and outperforms it. For instance, Japan's *Spirited Away* (2001) remains the top-grossing film in that country, surpassing global Hollywood hits like *Titanic*. In addition, British TV has influenced and served up competition to US shows, spawning such hits as *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, *The Weakest Link*, and *American Idol*.

1,000 years from now

So how much good does American culture bring to the world? And how long will it last? Ian Ralston cautions against sweeping dismissals of US pop culture. British television may be saturated with American sitcoms and movies, but while some are poor, others are quite good, he says. "British culture has always been enriched by foreign influences. In some ways American culture and media have added to that enrichment." Others note that it is not all one-way traffic. America may feast largely on a diet of home-grown culture, but it imports modestly as well: soccer, international cuisine, Italian fashion, and, increasingly, British television.

As to the question of durability, some experts believe US domination of communication channels makes it inevitable that its messages will become far more entrenched than those of previous empires. "The main difference now in favour of American culture is the importance of technology - telephone, Internet, films, all that did not exist in ancient Greece or the Mongol empire," Kaspi says. "American influence is growing, it's so easy to get access to US culture; there are no barriers. "Disney is known worldwide now," he adds. "Plato is more and more unknown, even in Greece."

But not everyone thinks American culture will stand the test of time. "It remains to be seen whether the Monkees and Bee Gees are as durable as Plato," says Professor Young, with a dab of irony. "Let's have another look in 4,000 years' time."

(by Mark Rice-Oxley, *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 15, 2004)

Exercise 1. Answer the following questions.

1. The author believes that the process of cultural domination has
a) only positive effects b) only negative effects c) both positive and negative effects
2. What is McDomination? The domination of
a) American pop culture b) American eating habits c) American music
3. The text implies that the process of cultural globalization is
a) inevitable b) insidious c) resistible
4. People who oppose cultural domination believe that it
a) is linked to economic and political aspects
b) cannot be resisted
c) does not pose a serious threat to democracy
5. The resistance to the spread of American culture has led some countries to
a) adapt imported culture to their own
b) reject American films and music
c) sustain their indigenous cultures
6. According to Mr Ralston, British culture has
a) been subdued by American culture
b) gained from contact with American culture
c) aided the spread an Anglophone dominance

Exercise 2. Say whether the following are True/False: if false, write the correct answer

1. The process of Americanization is hindered by a resistance to new technologies.

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2. The roots of America's cultural imperialism can be in its being a superpower.
3. Detractors of cultural imperialism believe that it will not succeed in killing local cultures.
4. The Filipinos are happy about American influence.
5. Mr Ralston believes that the spread of American culture cannot be halted.
6. The author shares the view that it is impossible to stop the spread of American culture.

Exercise 3. Linguistic analysis: choose the most appropriate meaning for the following words as they are used in context.

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|-----------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. flings: | a) shoots | b) sends | c) discharges |
| 2. majors: | a) military authorities | b) biggest corporations | c) subjects of specialization |
| 3. drive: | a) ride | b) urge | c) initiative |
| 4. saddled: | a) put on | b) bent | c) burdened |
| 5. outperforms: | a) is more successful | b) is less successful | c) is equally successful |
| 6. entrenched: | a) embedded | b) infringed | c) dug in |

Exercise 4 : The following is a list of synonyms for words/expressions which appear in the text in the physical paragraph indicated in brackets and in the order given on the list. Find the corresponding words/expressions and write them down:

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|-------|
| 1. to be overwhelmed (par. 1) | _____ |
| 2. reaction (par. 1) | _____ |
| 3. superiority (par.2) | _____ |
| 4. to finance (par. 3) | _____ |
| 5. unrelenting, unyielding (par. 4) | _____ |
| 6. diversified companies (par.4) | _____ |
| 7. to command, order (par. 5) | _____ |
| 8. givings, bestowals (par.6) | _____ |
| 9. that earns the most money (par. 7) | _____ |
| 10. breed, produce (par. 7) | _____ |
| 11. extensive, wide-ranging (par. 8) | _____ |
| 12. a bit (par.10) | _____ |

Exercise 5. Match each connective below with the function it performs in the text by filling the corresponding blank with either a (for Additive) b (for Temporal) c (for Causal) or d (for Contrastive). Pay attention to the reference line.

- | | |
|--------------------------|-------|
| 1. At other times (l. 7) | _____ |
| 2. But (l. 11) | _____ |
| 3. And (l. 11) | _____ |
| 4. However (3.1) | _____ |
| 5. Finally (3. 7) | _____ |
| 6. but (4. 1) | _____ |
| 7. Meanwhile (7. 1) | _____ |
| 8. So (8. 1) | _____ |
| 9. As to (9. 1) | _____ |
| 10. But (10.1) | _____ |

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Exercise 6. Read the following extract and choose the most appropriate word to complete the text.

Over the past few decades, American capitalism has rapidly taken over the (1) world. Not even the most communist nations of China and Russia are (2) to this rapid invasion of American culture. China's youth today can not only watch *The X-Files*, *Baywatch*, and the newest films from Tom Cruise for entertainment, but also go to the American Dream Park,(3) park in Shanghai which duplicates typical American attractions. When they get hungry, the Chinese can eat at (4) 130 McDonald's restaurants or get takeout from Boston Chicken and Domino's Pizza. Russia, too, has been having its(5) of American culture. In 1996, a new McDonald's opened across the street from a government building in Minsk. As it happened, the opening (6) with a protest being held to call for a referendum on the president's use of power. Tim Snyder writes, "On my side of the street, militiamen videotaped those(7) to speak. Across the way, their colleagues kept the hamburger line in order. Here, someone spoke of the eternity of the Belarussian nation. There, someone ordered Always Coca-Cola. I left(8) at ease". Canada is also having problems with Americanization. American companies now control(9) Canadian industry, causing many people to (10) how long it will take before Canada becomes part of the United States. It goes without question that American globalization is very evident in today's world.

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| 1. a) whole of | b) all | c) entire |
| 2. a) exempt | b) immune | c) free |
| 3. a) an amusement | b) an entertainment | c) a fun |
| 4. a) any of | b) each of | c) every |
| 5. a) part | b) share | c) allotment |
| 6. a) coincided | b) matched | c) corresponded |
| 7. a) too brave | b) enough brave | c) brave enough |
| 8. a) ill | b) sick | c) not well |
| 9. a) many | b) many of | c) most of |
| 10. a) think | b) wonder | c) ponder |

Exercise 7: Write ONE paragraph (approx. 200 words) illustrating commonly held views about Americanization in your country.