

IMPERATIVES FOR GLOBAL CULTURAL CO-OPERATION

By Soedjatmoko

Japan Foundation Symposium on Ideas and Policies
in International Cultural Exchange
Tokyo, 16 March 1981

President Hayashi, Ladies and Gentlemen...

It is a great honour to help launch this international symposium of the Japan Foundation -- a body dedicated to the vision of a more mutually understandable world. You will be concerned here with what I believe to be one of the most perplexing challenges of our time: How to develop a single global sense of human solidarity without losing our rich and distinctive cultural birthrights.

Culture, it has been observed, is acquainting ourselves with the history of the human spirit. The essence of culture is defined by its responses to the ultimate questions of human existence: death, hope, tragedy, love, loyalty, power, and the meaning and purpose of life.

Culture thus defined will steer us away from the too frequent notion of cultural exchange as a round of chamber music concerts and afternoon teas -- and toward a true perception of cultural sharing as a fundamental tool of human advance.

To those of us who see cultural co-operation as something far broader and more fundamental than the exchange of cultural artifacts and manifestations, the task we face is two-fold. This task, President Hayashi, was defined admirably by your distinguished predecessor, Hidemi Kohn, as "basically a process of discovering both the distinctive characteristics of one another's culture and the characteristics we

have in common."

It strikes me that Japan is a particularly fitting site to discuss ways to foster global cultural co-operation -- a co-operation that I believe is imperative if we are to guide humankind wisely and safely into the 21st century. The human creativities it can unlock may be our last, best hope for survival in that fragile, insecure and perilous future world.

The one non-Western, non-white nation to have joined the ranks of the affluent, Japan has both deep cultural ties to the ancient civilizations of Asia as well as a vast network of economic and scientific links with the industrialized world. It is thus a superb vantage point from which to ponder a definition of cultural identity in contemporary terms -- and how, having arrived at that definition, we can reach out towards a new world view in creative partnership with other civilizations and cultures.

No country has approached Japan in its capacity for cultural assimilation. One looks in vain for significant literature elsewhere in the world which has not been translated into Japanese. All this has enriched Japanese culture immeasurably without destroying or changing many of its basic traditions.

But now Japan -- long the borrower and consumer of other cultures -- is seeking to express its own culture to others. In this endeavour, the Japan Foundation is proving to be an extremely important and effective agent.

Japan came to modernization and industrialization relatively late in history -- and achieved these goals in an amazingly short span of

time. On the millennial scales by which we generally measure human progress, the century or so since the Meiji Restoration is really a very short time. It is, in fact, this astounding pace of Japan's transformation from a closed and feudalistic society to one of the world's leading industrialized powers that has so intrigued third world development thinkers in recent years.

But while recognizing Japan's undeniable economic successes, it must be equally conceded that they have come at high human and social costs. The environmental ravages, the increased alienation, and the drift away from cultural moorings are more and more viewed as unacceptable side effects of modernization and industrialization. From many quarters and from many levels of Japanese society, one detects a growing questioning of the notion that Toyotas and transistors are sufficient to buy true human happiness.

I think, therefore, that one can see Japan today at a turning point in her history. For the past century or so, she has emphasized economic growth -- and projected to the rest of the world an economic and trade image. The time has now come to project a different image and to give new meaning to the imprint, "Made in Japan."

This speaks forcefully, I believe, to the need to stimulate and encourage new and more innovative forms of cultural exchange -- and, of course, not only in Japan. What we are addressing really is the need to enhance the capacity of all humankind to get to know itself better. For -- by almost any projection -- we are heading into a baffling, troubling and hazardous future, and doing so at a time when our institutional capacities to come up with new ideas seem to have run out of steam.

We need to find new ways to listen to one another, to co-operate together, and to draw on each other's wisdom and values. Cultural exchanges will certainly be an important component of this process, and they will grow in significance over the next two decades as we seek to prepare ourselves for the 21st century.

But the exchange will be meaningless unless we ensure that we export only that in which we truly believe. That is to say that we must first clearly define our own cultural identities and basic values and goals. This calls for a process of redefinition -- and possibly reinterpretation -- that will permit us to see more clearly the potential strengths and spiritual resources that lie within all our civilizations.

We will need to draw on everyone of those strengths and resources, for even the most cursory survey of concerns on the 21st century agenda can't help but leave one disquieted and troubled and questioning of our ability to come to terms with the future.

- How will we be able to cope with a world of 8 billion people -- double the number that already sorely taxes the food and energy resources of this planet?
- How can we adjust to the continuing stagnation and slowing down in the world's economic scene -- a process in no way helped by the present out-of-date and shaky international monetary system?
- How do we manage a world whose power structure is in a state of diffusion -- with no single country or group of countries able to command or impose their own views or values?
- What can we do to reverse the rapid convergence of global food and fuel supply and demand -- which threatens economic chaos and

- ever more human suffering, particularly in the third world?
- How can we accommodate the surging aspirations of hitherto marginalized sectors of society -- their rightful, but sometimes unsettling, assertions of self-identity?

These and many other questions about the future underscore the importance of enlarging our capacity to understand each other, to be more sensitive to the interests of others, and to develop a willingness and ability to adjust according to changes in circumstances.

This speaks directly to the need to foster greater understanding and appreciation of the globe's many cultures -- and how they could interact and draw on one another to enable civilization to advance both in increasing unity and enriching diversity.

In this task, each society will have many valuable contributions to make. Consider, as just one example, the insights that Japan might offer a world whose population is bound to double in the next two decades.

One of the many consequences of such a quantum population jump will be the need to live under conditions of extremely high densities. This will require that we develop a greater capacity to manage, in a humane and efficient manner, high concentrations and large numbers of people.

Learning to live in areas of high density, with some degree of harmony and civility, will require major cultural adjustments for most people. Density, for instance, is bound to reduce personal space. To survive in such an atmosphere, people will have to learn to develop a corresponding sense of inner space -- through heightened perception of beauty, artistic creativity, or religion as an inner experience.

Here one thinks logically of the well-known Japanese ability to create and maintain privacy in an over-crowded atmosphere. What new cultural lights might we derive from Japan that could help us all survive and lead a life of relative congeniality and serenity on an over-crowded globe?

I offer this as one example of how one society might have useful wisdom to offer others. But at the same time, I would caution against any scatter-shot approach. For all of this wisdom will go for naught unless it is incorporated and digested and redeployed through completely new institutional and social frameworks.

The present global institutional infrastructure is badly in need of an overhaul -- and overhaul may be too mild a diagnosis -- in at least three important areas.

First, we need to fashion new instrumentalities for improving our capacity to listen to and learn from one another. We must develop better ways to deepen the level of understanding between cultures. These new modalities will have to be sensitive to the values and aspirations of all societies. They should take advantage of, and use appropriately, both the latest advances in communications technology as well as traditional local systems that channel information flows.

This need presses in on us urgently at a time when, sadly, in many parts of the world we seem to be engaged in dismantling some of the very instruments that could help serve the cause of improved listening ability -- in, for example, the decreasing emphasis in some formal education systems on area studies or language facility. We should seek to halt and reverse this trend.

A second area that urgently needs institutional renewal and reform is international co-operation. We are heading into a world in which interdependence will be total. All societies, the strong and the weak, are already exposed to many forces and processes beyond their control, and all national boundaries have become permeable to the transnational impact of economic and political decisions taken somewhere outside one's country. All nations and societies are now vulnerable.

This calls for new infrastructures that will permit unprecedented levels of international co-operation far beyond any of the agreements we have devised to date. Limiting our exchanges to tourists and trade will simply not engender the understanding that is required. For what is needed is no less than the world's peoples and their leaders learning to think of the human species as a single and indivisible unit comprising the global society in all its diversity.

The third -- and undoubtedly the most important -- change required is in the area of the production and dissemination of knowledge.

To put it bluntly, we don't really know enough about a great many things -- at a moment when global interdependence asks for more hard and relevant knowledge and for much more finely tuned perceptions of the world around us.

We cannot escape the recognition that the explosion of knowledge that has taken place in the last few decades has not necessarily added to our capacity to solve some of the most urgent problems faced by humankind.

In part this has been the result of an absence of political will. But any attempt to lay all our problems on that doorstep is too easy a

cop-out. More importantly, we need to recognize that the knowledge that we have gained has often been irrelevant to these problems. Our knowledge base is seriously lacking. Greater specialization has also led to greater fragmentation of knowledge. Here perhaps is the greatest of all needs for new kinds of institutions -- ones deliberately shaped with a world-wide view to deal with global problems of great complexity and of unprecedented scale.

Thus the three new institutional infrastructures which I believe we must build to knit us together in human solidarity. They call for radical change and reordering in our social systems and priorities, and if this is to be accomplished with a minimum of disruption and disorder, it will need some very hard and innovative and creative thinking.

We are unlikely to get this, I think we all realize, from governments for they are inevitably caught up in the daily response to perceived public pressures. That is part of the nature of the process of governing.

Where I think we can look for important agents of change is in foundations like the ones represented here -- where creative thinking and innovative ideas can be welcomed and supported. The very name, "foundation," suggests precisely what we are after: the bedrock on which to build new instruments of understanding, co-operation and knowledge.

Foundations are, or should be, dedicated to the long view -- to seeing what may lie over the horizon. They could thus serve as an important counter-cyclical force to pressures that demand immediate solutions with no thought to the larger and long term problems that such solutions often create.

Foundations could provide significant arenas for discussion and debate, dispassionately and without political pressures, of the roles

that each of the world's many societies have to play in a new and pluralistic world order.

How, for example, can we lay the groundwork for weak and strong societies to co-exist in some form of equity -- and what can they offer one another beyond the patently unacceptable roles of protector and vassal? What new instruments of management must be devised and employed in a world that has no one in command?

These are the sorts of questions that urgently need answering, for already one can see a historical process unfolding that could lead to the emergence of alternative, non-Western, modern civilizations -- possibly the Sinitic, Hindu and Islamic, and probably others. At some point they will take their rightful place side by side Western civilization on a basis of rough parity.

In the process, these civilizations will bring into the world mainstream different modes of being and different concepts of relating the sense of the transcendent to autonomous reason. They have much that is rich and original to contribute to the notion of global interdependence undergirded by global morality.

But all of this is going to demand ~~some~~ deep thought and reflection, and empirical research, by people willing and able to take the long view. That is a luxury denied the bureaucrat or government servant whose desk is piled high with today's demands. It could be welcomed and promoted here, however, and in other major foundations of the world -- which is why I believe foundations can be one of the most important instruments society has to help guide it into a worrisome and baffling future.

Surely that future can be less worrisome and less baffling if we

work together to promote and encourage a shared sense of cultural values and perceptions. This belief lies at the heart of the work of the United Nations University where we are seeking to bring together the wisdom and perspectives of many cultures and disciplines. The University is trying to play a catalytic role in mobilizing the intellectual potential and conscience of the world. That is a large order -- indeed a mind-boggling one -- and we have no illusions about being able to do the job alone.

The University must seek to work hand-in-hand with many others, all engaged in the task of improving the world's understanding of itself. Scholars and scientists like yourselves -- and far-sighted and dedicated adherents of global cultural co-operation like the Japan Foundation -- are our natural working partners.

President Hayashi, I began this discussion with some thoughts of your predecessor about the nature of our task. Let me close by indicating my total agreement with some stated beliefs of your own: that there is no simple path to successful cultural co-operation, that it demands the recognition of deep cultural differences among the peoples of the world, a sense of the relativity of one's own culture, and a willingness to appreciate and nurture our differences.

This path, if followed with your map in hand, can lead us to new moral foundations on which a viable international order can rest. Clearly, the answers we are looking for cannot be found by any single culture alone. They can only be found together.