Japan's New Cultural Push Toward Asia: Partner, Hegemon, or Perpetual Outsider?
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The Kiriyama chair for Pacific Rim Studies at the USF Center for the Pacific Rim and its Ricci Institute presented "Japan's New Cultural Push toward Asia: Partner, Hegemon, or Perpetual Outsider?" by Ivan P. Hall as a "Kiriyama Distinguished Lecture" on April 18, 1996.

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We gratefully acknowledge the Kiriyama Chair for Pacific Rim Studies for funding this issue of Pacific Rim Report.

There has been much talk recently, and some evidence, of what has been heralded as Japan's impending "re-Asianization," or return not only to older, non-Western cultural roots, but also to greater involvement in its own neighboring region. For several decades, thanks to Cold War exigencies, Japan was cut off from nearly all of its opposing Asian littoral, running thousands of miles from Kamchatka through Pyongyang to Indochina. It was as if the Iron Curtain for Britain had run down the North Sea and English Channel rather than through Central Europe.

With the Cold War over, the rapprochement we are now seeing is above all a natural phenomenon, long delayed. The economic manifestation of this change -Japan's creation of a well-knit economic sphere - has received considerable attention, and the future of the political and security equation at this particular moment is difficult to read. Thus, we will here confine ourselves to the less explored cultural side of Japan's reengagement with Asia, including cultural diplomacy, public attitudes, and intellectual and ideological ambiance. The question being asked by many Asians, by Japanese of a liberal persuasion, and by the West regarding the cultural aspect of rapprochement is whether Japan will "get it right" this time: whether it will come up with an attitude of genuine partnership toward its Asian neighbors; whether it will revert to its earlier hegemonistic ideology, however subtly stated; or whether it will remain aloof, the perpetual outsider, in important cultural ways despite all the talk of a deeper engagement.

Partner?

Since the mid 1980s Tokyo's premier arm for overseas cultural work, the Japan Foundation, has turned from its almost exclusive initial emphasis on America, and then Europe, to beef up its presence in Asia. For years, Japan had been reluctant to push culture too hard there for fear of a political backlash. As a Japanese embassy information officer in Bangkok reported in 1971, "If we tried to bring Kabuki here, the Thais would simply see the face of Toyota written all over it"

By fiscal 1992, U.S. projects still received more than 3.6 billion yen - about $36 million, or almost 29 percent of the Japan Foundation's total program budget. However, China, for many years in second place, together with five other Asian recipients received almost 20 percent. By program area, the arc encompassing East, Southeast, and South Asia and Oceania received almost 50 percent of the total expenditure for Japanese language and Japanese studies programs, 31 percent of the expenditure for exchange-of-persons programs, and 43 percent of the expenditure for exhibitions and performing arts programs. The Ninagawa Theater Company was dispatched to Southeast Asia, a contemporary Nihonga exhibit toured China, and China's Qin Opera was invited to tour Japan. Indeed, unlike America's cultural arm, the U.S. Information Agency, the Japan Foundation has long had a secondary, two-way, mission of introducing Asian cultures to Japan.

There is also a fresh emphasis on Asia in Japan's popular and media culture, revealed, for example, in the current surge in student, arts, and sports exchanges; in two-way travel between Asia and Japan; in new Asian-language electives in Japanese schools; and in prime-time television programming on everything from Tibetan burial customs to market activity on the Sino-Burmese border. Over time, these activities may gradually transform "Asia" from a mere slogan into a compelling human reality for the Japanese. Sometimes, however, the hype grates, as in the too obvious prearrangement of Fuji Television's pan-Asian singing contests, where young Asians in traditional dress are cheered along in English - the only language they all understand - by a breathlessly bilingual emcee, who then turns to analyze the event for the television audience - in Japanese.
More significant, perhaps, is a recent Japanese poll in which 60 percent of the respondents expressed the opinion that Japan should place equal emphasis on Asia and the West (the United States and Europe), with only 6 percent favoring the West while 28 percent favored a tilt toward Asia. This nearly two-thirds vote for equidistance, with Asia Firsters approaching one third, already represents a major shift away from the westward-looking postwar orthodoxy and is a trend that is likely to continue. However, whether this shift, and the new Asia boom, promises a road to partnership is unclear. The jury is still out - and two more problematic possibilities remain.

Hegemon?

There has been a recent recrudescence, in some circles in Japan, of an older, hegemonistic focus on Asia. This view takes us into the area of pan-Asianist ideology, which has a strong prewar pedigree, mainly as a projection of Japanese domestic chauvinism.

One of the central tenets of Japan's prewar ultranationalism was the nation's destiny, as the first non-Western people to "modernize," to lead the rest of Asia and, having learned from Europe and America, to serve as a cultural bridge between East and West. For years after the end of World War II, however, barely a peep was heard of this old self-appointed mission as postwar Japan repeated the Meiji Period's embarrassed flight from poor and fumbling Asian relatives and sought political and cultural alignment with the West. This it achieved, in spades, with its own seat at the rich nations' club symbolized by the OECD and the Trilateral Commission. The successful Sapporo Winter Olympics of 1972 were, indeed, the culmination of the government's image-formation campaign, promoting Japan as "an industrial country with snowfall." Posters, for example, showed high-speed bullet trains streaking against a snow-blanked panorama of Mt. Fuji. The subliminal intent of this public relations gimmick was to undermine the frequent Western misconception of Japan as a semitropical, and therefore less developed, country: to portray Japan as "not Asian."

Times have changed now, and drastically, with the end of the Cold War, the advancing economic integration of East and Southeast Asia through trade and investment, and Japan's growing emotional estrangement, in certain areas, from the United States. Americans who talk to Japan need to be especially attuned to the nuances and implications of a reviving pan-Asianism, the prewar version of which was virulently hostile toward the West and essentially inward and self-contained with respect to Asian neighbors, whom Japan simply sought to incorporate into a vertical trust, a hierarchical downward extension, so to speak, of its own self.

As Japanese enthusiasts for a warmed-over pan-Asianism gain a stronger voice in cultural diplomacy and the definition of national identity, we must all hope that the new strength and self-esteem of the other Asian peoples, and Japan's own position in an increasingly transnational post-industrial civilization, may push Tokyo toward a mode of cultural dialogue that reflects a view of its Asian neighbors based less in terms of superior versus inferior, a view of East versus West based less on an either-or dichotomy, a view more in keeping with its genuinely global needs and responsibilities.

Regrettably, we are now witnessing the latest replay of an unproductive, six-part cycle that Japan has yet to break. First, Tokyo's leaders dissociate themselves from a "backward Asia," seeking to emulate and join the "advanced West." Second, this exercise in impersonation provokes a nationalistic reaction and Western condensation. Third, Japan's intellectuals and political leaders expound the singularity of their country and its divergence from the West. Fourth, Japan's Western counterparts avidly concur that, indeed, Japan is different. Fifth, Japan turns emotionally and ideologically to a condescending and largely unsolicited "leadership" of Asia and to a resentful anti-Westernism. Sixth, this approach becomes a dead end, so it's da capo, all over again.

One macro-cycle ran from the forced-march Westernization of the 1870s to the traditionalist counterthrusts of the 1880s and 1890s and then through a series of perceived rejections by the West in the 1920s - Britain dropping its alliance in 1922, and America slamming the door on Japanese immigration in 1924 - to the dalliance with Greater East Asia during the 1930s and World War II. We are today approaching stage five in a mini-cycle prompted by trade issues and spanning the past quarter century. This cycle began with Tokyo promising Western-style standards but pleading for time. As the United States and Europe began to lose patience and as domestic resistance built up in Japan in the 1970s, Japanese intellectuals spun their theories of "uniqueness" to justify special treatment for their country. However, when European and American revisionist writers in the late 1980s joined this exploration of Japanese dissimilarity, Tokyo cried "Foul!" and complained of Western cultural absolutism. The upshot, from the early part of this decade, has been a Japan turning to the notion of "Asian values" - an expansion of the earlier "uniqueness" gambit - as a common regional shield against further U.S. trade-related pressures, an outcome that has more to do with economics than culture.

Japan's periods of identification with Asia have typically expressed themselves in grandiose, holistic, pan-Asianist terms more reminiscent of America's postwar appointment of itself as defender of Western Civilization against the Stalinist menace than of the quiet, steady, flows that defined America's earlier view of cultural relations across the Atlantic. Japan's recent pan-Asianist paradigm, simply expressed, is that of two posts and a lintel: On one side is a solidified Asia, much put upon and brimming with resentment; on the other is an equally monistic but predatory West; and between the two is a cultural gap that can be spanned only by Japan, which towers above the Orient and serves as its cultural spokesman to the Occident. The Japanese sense of draconian alternatives was first honed, and needlessly aggravated, by the early Meiji Period slogans of "Escape from Asia" (datsu-A) and "Joining Europe [the West]" (nyu-O), terms still very much in use along with their increasingly fashionable inversions, datsu-O and nyu-A (escape from the West and join Asia), with the visual finality of their Chinese ideograms, like red-or-green traffic lights, further impeding the conceptualization of more nuanced, intermediate choices.

Geographically speaking, although Japan's economic power is now felt throughout the Asian continent, the psychologically intimate "Asia" of the Japanese mind encompasses mainly China, Korea, and Southeast Asia, closely fitting the area marked in prewar ideology for the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Leaving out the "white" nations of Australia and New Zealand (despite strong economic links), as well as the
Indian and other peoples of South Asia (despite ancient cultural ties), these boundaries betray a natural but powerful fellow-Mongolian racial consciousness.

Historically, Japan's past flings with pan-Asianism have been marred by three factors: (1) its failure to assume a more egalitarian posture toward the rest of Asia, (2) its hyperbolic rejections of the West, and (3) the sterility of a strictly intra-Japanese monologue. Although certain Japanese liberals over the decades have envisioned the nonexploitative nurturing of an Asian comity of nations, Japanese nationalism has always intruded to provoke its counterpart elsewhere, anti-Japanese nationalism in Asian countries, as the Janus face of worship-the-West and eschew-the-East simply switches its Asian mask from the side that calls for rejection to that which displays imperious orchestration best expressed by the "flying geese" development model in which Tokyo, at least, imagines a very long if not permanent Japanese lead. Even the selling of the Pacific War and the old Co-Prosperity Sphere as a struggle for the liberation of Asia did not come into play until the severe military setbacks of 1943, having until then been couched in terms of Japan's self-defense and resource needs - the expansion of its own empire.

Japanese pan-Asianists also find it difficult to reenter Asia without denigrating the West, or to celebrate the rise and creativity of its own region without invoking Occidental decline. The inflation of cultural threats is suggested by the odd way in which some Japanese still put the argument in terms of resistance to Christianity, a force that has achieved less than 1.5 percent penetration in Japan and has long been on the defensive in a secularizing West. In his 1976 call for a return to Buddhism, philosopher Umehara Takeshi characterized Christianity as a "blood-stained" religion and its civilization as one of "power, assault, and combativeness." Right-wing writer Kase Hideaki complained to foreign journalists in 1988 of a century's onslaught by Christianity on Japan. In 1944, political scientist Yonosuke Nagai traced the U.S. containment of communism to the antiheterodox impulses of Christian theology. What all this hides is probably less concern about Christian religion, in which Japan has very little interest, than vexation with the pressure placed on traditional values by Western rationalism and industrial society; it recalls the yearning of Japan's prewar ideologues for "overcoming modernity" (kindai no kokufuku).

More serious conceptual barriers to the real Asia persist in three areas: (1) Japan's approach to regional cultural diplomacy, (2) its advocacy of allegedly shared values, and (3) its legacy of wartime bitterness.

The old pan-Asianist touch was evident in the cultural policy recommendations for Northeast and Southeast Asia presented at the Second Asia Pacific Conference in May 1991, after a year's preparation by a panel of scholars under the aegis of Japan's Treasury and Foreign Ministry Departments. The emphasis here was on creating a new "organic cultural sphere." This appeal to unity was based on anticolonialist and anti-white resentment, the old dichotomy of "Eastern spirit" versus "Western technology," the put-downs of Western rationalism and "modernity," the same solipsistic insensitivity to Japan's neighbors (once again, apparently not consulted), and the presumptuous proposal for an American press center in Tokyo to "deliver the ABC's of Asian coverage" to Western journalists. Calls for the construction of imposing pan-Asian cultural centers in capital cities and the staging of flashy events betrayed an expectation that powerful initiatives by Japan could produce the sort of regional cultural blend that, in other areas of the world, has been the product of centuries of unprogrammed development.

Tokyo's cultural stance in the broader trans-Pacific Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) region emerged with its proposal, just before the November 1993 Seattle summit, for an Asia-Pacific exchanges conference that would help remove an alleged psychological wall separating the United States and developing Asian nations. Echoing the government's new theme of American insensitivity was a press cartoon featuring Bill Clinton on a dogsled, whip in hand, stunned as America's leaders break out of husky harness to scamper away muttering, "Can you really expect him to understand Asia?" American negotiators and opinion leaders should rebut Tokyo's concoction of a mid-Pacific cultural divide as a means of enlisting its entire region against U.S. market-opening pressures and posing as the guardian of Asian economic chastity. Compared to Japan's tightly hoisted cultural and ethnic drawbridges, lowered only to let the economic samurai out, American political, intellectual, and human ties in the postwar period have spanned the region like a freeway cloverleaf - in immigration; intermarriage; refugees; university ties; and professional opportunities for Asian artists, scholars, and journalists. Japan should be asked to forge its long-overdue Asian links on its own merits and stop trying to gain points by painting the U.S. as a common economic and cultural threat.

The immediate objective of Japan's harping on a "cultural gap" may be to encourage and amplify the recent postulation by certain Asians of a monolithic set of common "Asian" values under attack by Western cultural absolutism. After fighting in Korea and Vietnam to save Japan and Southeast Asia for democracy and capitalism, what an irony it would be if America now watched the region link arms to reduce American influence pull South and Southeast Asia more to the west - toward Mecca and London, so to speak - than north toward the Confucian orbit, which protrudes southward only into Vietnam and the overseas Chinese communities. Malaysian Muslims and Filipino Catholics have Creator-centered, Western-style religions doctrinally incompatible with this-worldly Confucianism or Japan's group absolutisms. Buddhism, long since extruded from its Indian birthplace by an enduring Hinduism, still supplies in its stricter Theravada form the core of social life and national identity in Thailand, Burma, and Sri Lanka, while its broader Mahayana version has yielded primacy to Confucianism in traditional China (and "ultra-Confucian" Korea) and has been heavily infiltrated by Shinto in Japan, where eclectic assimilation has given a unique
Japanese twist to every Asian import.

The second theme, within the narrower circle of Northeast Asian values, concerns the celebration of Confucian continuities. Here, a distinction needs to made between the so-called Little Tradition of ancient and extraordinarily stable Confucian popular ethics - still alive in education, the workplace, and family life - and the Grand Tradition of Mandarin-led, theoretically benevolent, bureaucratic government with its rationalization of political autocracy. The late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Chinese and Japanese reformers who viewed the Confucian legacy of agrarianism, anticommunalism, xenophobia, bureaucratism, and imperial authoritarianism as the greatest obstacle to modernization must be turning in their tombs, along with Japan's Edo Period Shintoist scholars who reviled the rigid Confucian canons as the bane of Japan's native literary and human sensibilities.

What sets Japan apart most strikingly from the rest of Asia in its national values has been its centuries-long warrior ethic - and what one could call its lengthy modern projection in the absolute quality of loyalty to company, nation, and group. It is surely this samurai ethic, which comes on top of all those other broadly Asiatic sources of the Japanese mind and spirit, that has made Japan so different even from its closest neighbors, China and Korea, with their traditional elevation of civilian over military mores and of family values over those of the state.

As for the third conceptual challenge facing Japan in Asia, one could very well argue that the greatest cultural gap of all, in psychological terms, certainly, remains Japan's reluctance to liquidate the emotional residue of its past aggression in Asia and dissolve suspicion among its former victims regarding its true intentions in moving toward greater political leadership in the region, including armed Peace Keeping Organization (PKO) participation and a permanent Security Council seat.

Korea (for now, the South) will be the litmus test of Japan's willingness to surmount its past. Nowhere do grudges run deeper than in Japan's cultural sibling: closest in race and language, in corporate and educational ethos, and in joint intellectual inheritance from China and the West. Unprocessed rage at Japan's colonial attempt to eradicate Korean cultural identity continues to break out: in the decision to tear down the massive former Japanese capitol building in Seoul, in the barely lifted ban on performing Japanese popular music, and in the vandalizing not long ago of a Japanese art exhibit intended as a small step toward cultural exchange. Christianity, in part a riposte to Japan, now commands a third of the population, and anti-Americanism among certain younger Korean intellectuals does not translate into follow-Japan sentiment. Some pragmatists in Seoul now call for a more normal emotional tie, but Tokyo seems to be counting on its economic leverage to bring this about without any gestures toward atonement signifying a genuine change in Japanese attitudes that is psychologically credible to the Koreans.

Perpetual Outsider?

We have dwelt at some length on various aspects of the hegemon scenario because of the strong pull of past patterns of thinking when an old, familiar international order comes unstuck. One can never go all the way back, but as Japan tries to move forward, toward a more genuine partnership-as-equals with its Asian neighbors, the old lure of hegemonistic pan-Asianism is one ideological penchant that it will, somehow or other, have to work out of its system.

A more likely possibility right now is the relative dominance of the third scenario: Japan as outsider - not necessarily in perpetuity, but perhaps for the short to medium term, for the next few decades at least. If Japan follows this course, it will do so partly in response to several external factors that keep Tokyo from committing itself full-tilt to Asia culturally, intellectually, and emotionally in either a partner or hegemon mode.

These external trends include a continuing reliance on the U.S. security umbrella over a prospective period of political, and perhaps military, instability in the East Asian region; a significant, if relatively declining, dependence on the American market as well as Japan's growing interdependence on globally based trade and investment; the unabated enthusiasm at both the popular and (so-called) high cultural levels for all Western arts and quite a number, still, of Western ideas; and most important of all, the rapidly progressing empowerment of Asia. Initially, in the opening years of the 1990s, the "rise of Asia" as a concept triggered a certain Japanese euphoria over their "manifest destiny" to lead. However, the very success of the "little tigers," or newly industrializing economies (NIES), in following the Japanese development model, and the historically unprecedented self-confidence of these smaller regional states - to say nothing of the looming power of China - may be giving Tokyo second thoughts about proclaiming a grand cultural sponsorship of an area that shows signs of sprouting alternative centers of political - and economic - clout. In other words, what may be occurring is the empowerment of Asia - but of an Asia beyond and to some extent apart from Japan.

Even more than these external considerations, what may pull Japan back a bit from Asia is its own deepset cultural and intellectual insularism vis-à-vis others in general - not Japan's energetic reception and assimilation of foreign arts, artifacts, and ideas, both Asian and Western, but its reluctance to open its society and its intellectual institutions to direct, full participation by foreign journalists, scholars, lawyers, and other professionals, to say nothing of genuinely opening its markets. Barriers that have been maintained by Tokyo throughout the heyday of its postwar ties with America and the West are not likely to be dismantled as a favor to fellow Asians on the sheer strength of a slogan called "re-Asianization."

For example, the exclusive reporters' clubs (or kisha kurabu) have been as closed to the Asian media in Tokyo as they have been to the Associated Press. Asian scholars with Ph.D.'s from the top Western universities (or from the University of Tokyo, for that matter) have been barred along with Western academics from tenured positions at Japan's prestigious national universities, on the simple and totally functionally irrelevant ground of citizenship. This restriction applies even to Korean scholars born and educated solely in Japan. Another example, closer to
daily life, is the Japanese effort, even in the high-demand labor market of the 1980s, to repatriate Thai and Pakistani foreign workers, for example, and replace them with ethnic Japanese from faraway places such as Brazil and Peru - perhaps the clearest proof that any genuine shoots of pan-Asian brotherhood will be strangled by the pervasive underbrush of ethnocentric Japanism.

The real test for Japan may come with those Asians who have done the most to master the Japanese language and assimilate its culture: the Asian undergraduate and graduate students, who make up the largest contingent of foreign ryugakusei, almost 90 percent of the 42,000 foreign students in 1994. Many of them have come for degrees in science and technology and would be happy to join Japanese firms, either in Japan or at affiliates in their own countries. Will they be allowed to rise to top management and enter the inner loops of research and development? Based on Japan's strategic reluctance to permit the transfer of cutting-edge technologies through Asian researchers and engineers employed at Japanese affiliates throughout the region, the preliminary prognosis is not promising.

Indeed, Japan's new power may incline it, in cultural terms, to sit back, so to speak, in its own plush armchair and enjoy both "Asia" and "The West" at a comfortable distance: to pay the equivalent of $200 to $300 for a second-gallery seat to hear Wagnerian opera imported directly from Bayreuth; or to watch, Kirin or Suntory beer can in hand, a beautifully filmed and heart-wrenching TV documentary about family life under booming mortar bombardment in Kabul, Afghanistan.

Unfortunately, the ideological buttresses of such insularism have been strengthened, not weakened, during Japan's quarter century of spectacular economic growth and affluence.

From the mid 1980s the new buzzword in Japan, heard almost incessantly, was kokusaika - translated into accurate, if ungainly, English as "internationalization." It is heard less frequently, and certainly spoken less enthusiastically, a decade later. The world took it to mean a gradual opening of Japan's markets and society to the outside world. There was some marginal truth to that advertising, but to many Japanese it meant a steeling up, a retooling to meet not only the opportunities of markets abroad but also the challenges (and threats) of market liberalization and a greater accompanying foreign presence at home.

Japanese still tend to view kokusaika as an internationalization of things: of railroads and jets and hamburgers, of modern legal and educational institutions, of foreign languages and Mahler mastered to perfection. That is all fine as far as it goes, but it omits what most of the outside world was looking for in Japan's announced kokusaika: namely, an opening up of Japan to non-Japanese people - to bankers and lawyers, not just Kabuki and karate devotees.

Perhaps what has been missing most from Japan's historical conceptualizations of itself in respect to both the West and Asia, and what would seem to be a prerequisite for a genuine leadership role in today's drastically shrunked world, is a capacity to think in terms of horizontal relationships among equals: to express a greater sensitivity to universal human traits and needs and interests, to override the rigid verticalities of superior-inferior power relationships and deemphasize the precipitous intercultural chasms that still dominate the Japanese view of the outside world. Having climbed to the top of the pile, Japan has difficulty deciding where to go next, since it cannot imagine simply going sideways, toward a relaxed collegiality.

In short, what may be blocking Japan's assumption of an enlightened leadership role more than anything else is its overblown particularism. Great powers in human history have all predicated their mandates (however presumptuous or self-serving) on some sort of universalism, on some sort of shareability. In Japan, the fluent foreigner seems threatening and intrusive, whereas the complete linguistic and cultural ingenue is welcomed - with sighs of relief. In Japan, anxiety over the acculturation of others to the Japanese culture, together with the conviction that it simply cannot be done, leads most Japanese to view the effort less as a compliment and a sharing than as an unwanted prying into their national psyche.

Thus, the human door is as likely to remain as firmly shut to the East now as it has been to the West - leaving Japan, as it always has been right up to now, an outsider to both.

Notes

1 Private communication with the author. BACK TO TEXT
2 Poll conducted by the Asahi Shimbun, August 23, 1994. BACK TO TEXT