

“Asia Is One: Asian Cultures & Mind” – a Joint Symposium by Soka University & Japan SPOTLIGHT

By Rajesh Williams



Prof. Ryohei Tanaka



Prof. Mukesh Williams



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Prof. Cyril Veliath



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Dr. Rabinder Malik



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Dr. Aditya Pratap Deo

Organized by the South Asia Research Center (SARC) of Soka University and *Japan SPOTLIGHT*, a joint symposium on the topic “Asia Is One: Asian Cultures & Mind” was held on Nov. 20, 2020, in Tokyo. Experts in various fields presented insightful papers during the event.

The idea for this symposium was rooted in the question whether and how Asia could contribute to stable global governance. Whereas urgent political and economic questions are dealt with by various international fora, the founders of the symposium thought that cultural interaction would have a long-term impact on international relations as well. So they thought that tracing the cultural interactions among Asian nations in the past and discovering cultural commonalities in Asia could benefit peace and stability in the region and at the same time contribute to global peace and stability in the long run.

Opening Remarks

The symposium was opened by Prof. Ryohei Tanaka, director and executive vice president of Soka University, who said he hoped the participants would have fruitful sessions. “I would like to thank you all for being here, and please have a great symposium,” he said.

Theme of the Symposium

The theme of the symposium was succinctly stated by Prof. Mukesh Williams, advisor and professor at SARC, in his keynote address: “Can the loaded ideas inherent in the concept of ‘Asia Is One’ be used to create global governance, decenter the discourse of global capitalism, and bring global stability? In recent decades, muscular nationalism, populism, and social inequalities have intensified conflicts between nations and are forcing them to decouple from the world economy. Can the harmony of Asia, despite its historical divisiveness, become a model for global peace and

stability? These are some of the questions the symposium wishes to unravel. Okakura Kakuzo, alias Tenshin (1863-1913), believes that if there is both tolerance and curiosity between the two great civilizations of the world, the Asian and the European, it is possible to develop an Asiatic thrust in global governance, commerce, and culture.”

Asia’s Soft Power

Speaking on the relevance and purpose of the symposium, Naoyuki Haraoka, editor-in-chief of *Japan SPOTLIGHT* & executive managing director of the Japan Economic Foundation, said, “In this symposium, we will try to find an answer to an important question: Why is the concept of ‘Asia Is One’ so important for global governance today – in the age of divide and confrontation among nations and people? The purpose behind organizing this symposium is to highlight the importance of Asia’s soft power in the context of today’s international, political, and economic situations.”

He felt that the most significant factor in the context of international political economy was the lack of leadership in global governance. “It is true that we cannot depend upon US leadership anymore,” he said. “Pursuing multilateralism is a difficult task for the US government in today’s times, as many Americans still support an ‘America First’ policy. Globalization would most likely continue without the leadership of the United States or any other nation,” he argued.

He also pointed out that globalization and the Fourth Industrial Revolution were widening the gap between the rich and the poor. It was seen everywhere that inequality was increasing and political divides and confrontation among the people were intensifying accordingly; and without any clear and consolidated leadership in the global community, the divides and confrontation in domestic politics have started to hinder international collaboration, as those who are disadvantaged by the competition caused by globalization tend to

support more nationalistic policies and become more anti-globalization in their sentiment.

“The pandemic has exacerbated this trend,” he said. “Nationalism has grown and inequality has increased. Divisions and confrontation have been seen not only among nations but also among people within nations,” he added. “In order to contain the pandemic, we need to pursue social cohesion. Nations need to trust their leaders and follow instructions to contain the virus given by the leaders and supported by experts unanimously. Trusted leaders and social cohesion will be the pre-requisites for overcoming the virus,” he said.

Haraoka maintained that as the virus infection differed significantly by region, we needed to pursue regional community-based policies to contain it. “We also need a diversity of knowledge and wisdom to cope with the uncertainty of the pandemic which is quite new to us. In this light, hierarchical decision-making would not work well but decentralized decision-making would work better. To achieve social cohesion under such circumstances, humanism must be the leading philosophy of our trusted leaders rather than material values based on money or GDP. Humanistic leaders would not leave anybody feeling left out of the social or economic trends or excluded and discriminated from the winners in the globalized competition. Their political philosophy must be based on the thought to maximize human happiness rather than GDP. They see human happiness in high morality rather than material success. This is how trusted leaders would be successful in achieving social cohesion in a society facing a serious ‘divide and confrontation’. In this regard, our capitalistic thought is also faced with the challenge of a paradigm shift,” he said.

He believed that Asia’s soft power could contribute to such a paradigm shift from Western thinking, namely individualism – often not consistent with social cohesion – to community-based thought.

“Asia is the area of diversity consisting of nations with a variety of historical and cultural backgrounds. While Europe is a region sharing cultural commonalities such as Christianity, Greek philosophy, linguistic commonalities, etc., Asian nations do not share a common religion or language... Today, American influence is more significant largely in this area, as most Asian nations pursue American capitalism and the American presence in Asia has been significant since World War II. However, we cannot interpret today’s Asian civilization as an Americanized civilization.

“There is still a unique thought and philosophy to be shared by many Asian nations, that is, respect for harmony – a useful concept for achieving social cohesion. Against this background, we should come back to the thought envisaged and supported by Okakura Tenshin and Rabindranath Tagore in the 19th century, that is, ‘Asia Is One’,” he said.

Tagore & Tenshin

In his keynote address, Prof. Williams said that if there was both tolerance and curiosity between Asian and European civilizations, it was possible to develop an Asiatic thrust in global governance, commerce, and culture. He claimed that Tagore felt that the voracious appetite of the West for material wealth, untruthful diplomacy, and colonialism must give way to the cosmic humanity of Asia; the West needed Asia to be complete. Tenshin realized the spiritual unity of Asia and felt it must prevail in the world, he added.

According to Prof. Williams, both Japanese and Indians believed that when individuals overcame their self-centeredness, they could unite with the universe and become one with every creature in it. “This is the Asiatic Mind that Tenshin talked about. Tenshin introduced the concept of *gotenjiku* or the Five Indies, which was a Sino-Japanese-Buddhist concept. He placed India at its center and gave a prominent place to China and a smaller place to Japan, Southern islands, and Europe. In his book *The Ideals of the East* (1903), Tenshin begins with the phrase ‘Asia is one’. This concept is a fusion of Chinese Confucianism and Indian Vedantic thought that gives rise to the ‘Ultimate and Universal.’ The ‘ultimate’ in Confucian thought is to live with others and become happy. The ‘universal’ in Vedanta is the universal self or the consciousness which identifies with everything in the universe. It is the universal consciousness that must prevail,” he said.

Concluding his speech, he pointed out that as economies were undergoing structural reforms in the wake of the pandemic, more and more people were realizing how important it was to cooperate with each other and rebuild national and global institutions. “In the shadow of the pandemic, the expansive ideas of Tagore and Tenshin bringing together Asia and finding its complementary uniqueness for the West acquire greater significance,” he said.

China & India – Historical, Cultural & Religious Linkages

Speaking on the topic “The Asian Giants China and India – Their Historical, Cultural, and Religious Linkages”, Cyril Veliath, professor emeritus of Sophia University, said that according to British author Graham Hancock, many of our ancient monuments were built by people of a highly advanced civilization – a civilization that probably began after 4000 BC. The Sumerian and Egyptian civilizations began around 3000 BC, and after these came the civilizations of the Indus Valley and China, he said.

Prof. Veliath maintained that China’s earliest dynasty was the Shang, which heralded China’s Bronze Age and ruled from about 1600 BC, while India’s earliest civilization, the civilization of the Indus Valley, probably existed between 2500 BC and 1000 BC.

Peeking into Indian and Chinese histories, Prof. Veliath said that in the 14th and 15th centuries, Tamerlane or “Timur the Lame” who ruled vast areas of Central Asia, was a link between India and China. Babar, the founder of the Mughal Empire, was a descendant both of Timur and Genghis Khan, the Mongol emperor of China. The Mughal emperors took great pride in the fact that they were descendants of Genghis Khan, he added.

“However, the greatest interchange between China and India was initiated by Buddhist monks, who journeyed from China to India and India to China as pilgrims, scholars, and evangelists. They were pioneers who conveyed their faith and culture. Of those traveling from India to China the most outstanding were Kumarajiva and Bodhidharma, while of those who journeyed from China to India the most famous were Faxian, Xuanzang, and Yijing, The Tang emperors of China and Emperors Ashoka and Harshavardhan of India contributed towards establishing linkages between India and China,” claimed Prof. Veliath.

Yoga – The Glue for Harmony

Speaking on the topic “Yoga as the Glue for Harmony”, Mohan Gopal, representative of The Art of Living, Japan, said that Yoga, a panacea for the ills of the body and mind, emerged in India several thousands of years ago and that the word *Yoga* in the Sanskrit language literally meant the ultimate union. “Yogic practices are a holistic composition of posture and breathing, meditation and mysticism, lifestyle, and wisdom,” he added.

Gopal maintained that Yoga created a powerful synergy between the body and mind; it connected the physical system with the emotional system through breath. He said that Yoga eliminated physical stress and improved circulation and various other biological functions; and for the mind, it eliminated mental stress and increased awareness. “The mind calms down and the decisions we take from a centered mind and the way we interact with people undergo a fundamental change. Breath regulates energy flow which happens within the body and reduces the thinking overflow. What is thinking overflow? We know that our brain or mind is an ever-active unit which is churning out thoughts. In one day, our mind goes through a variety of different states. A lot of it often results in overflow – you are confused or get upset. Breath regulates our mind and thoughts and helps us to control our mind. So, the basis of Yoga is the power of the breath. What is this power of the breath? If we observe our breath, we will notice that when we experience different emotions, such as anger, sadness, and excitement, our breathing pattern changes.

“Stress impacts us. It results in speeding up cellular ageing, cardiovascular disease, exhaustion, depression, anxiety, harmful coping behaviors – the way we interact with people – and in

weakening our memory and learning and our immune function. Now, as we know, the five sources of our energy are food and drink, sleep, breath, beauty, such as nature, flowing water, and a mountain, and meditation. Meditation can bring tremendous power to the body and mind. It is the ultimate kind of relaxation. Meditation is often mistaken for concentration. Concentration can be an outcome of meditation, but meditation is ‘letting go’. You fall asleep when you let go. Similarly, meditation is sleeping with a sense of awareness,” he added.

He claimed that Yoga was complete and that it was the ultimate wisdom that led to harmony within the individual. When this wisdom was practised across nations, it led to the harmony of society and countries. According to Gopal, “from ancient times, yogic concepts made their way from India into the rest of Asia. These concepts have embedded themselves in the subconsciousness of Asia. Drawing upon this invaluable inheritance can be a catalyst for peace in Asia and beyond.”

Concluding his speech, he said, “Whether we take Buddhism, Shintoism, Hinduism, and even a lot of the local practices of Asia, we find the subconscious basis of Yoga in them. So, Yoga can unite the whole world. It is for Asian harmony. Political considerations keep people apart. Yoga unites people; it can create harmony among people; and Asian harmony can be expanded to global harmony.”

Gandhi’s Message of Non-Violence & Harmony

Speaking on the topic “Mahatma Gandhi’s Message of Non-Violence and Harmony”, Dr. Rabinder Malik, president of Discover India Club (DIC) and coordinator of The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI) of Japan, said that Mahatma Gandhi was the preeminent leader of Indian nationalism in British-ruled India and that he was trained in law in London. “He became famous by fighting for the civil rights of Indians in South Africa, using new techniques of non-violent civil disobedience that he developed. Employing non-violent civil disobedience, Gandhi led India to independence and inspired many leaders in their respective movements for freedom across the world. Gandhi’s greatest contribution to humanity was his message of non-violence as the way to harmony and peace,” he added.

Dr. Malik claimed that Gandhi was much ahead of his time, as he was already deeply conscious of the environmental concerns that the world currently perceives. He said there were many lessons that could be learnt from the life and writings of Gandhi in resolving the many challenges that the world currently faces, such as preserving the planet, rooting out terrorism, preventing natural disasters, peacefully resolving conflicts, and alleviating extreme poverty.

“There is a need for a major rethink on social, economic, environmental, and basic values in all parts of the world. Based on

my own long experience of working for the United Nations in different countries, I believe that the life of Mahatma Gandhi is a message for action by the world as a whole to improve the lives of people living everywhere on this planet,” he said.

Seeking Intellectual Foundation for Inter-Asian Collaboration

Speaking on the topic “Seeking an Intellectual Foundation for Inter-Asian Collaboration: The Sino-Japanese Historical Experience”, Associate Prof. Andrew T. Kamei-Dyche of the School of Global Studies and Collaboration at Aoyama Gakuin University, said that issues in inter-Asian relations were often portrayed in terms of vast cultural divides, with the tensions that had largely characterized Sino-Japanese relations since the latter 20th century seen as one example. However, for many centuries, even during times of conflict, Sino-Japanese relations were characterized by active economic, cultural, and intellectual exchange.

Prof. Kamei-Dyche’s paper briefly sketched this history, uncovered the intellectual foundations that enabled such exchange, and asked what lessons the Sino-Japanese historical experience could offer for contemporary efforts seeking a basis for connecting cultures more broadly across Asia.

He said the lessons we could draw from the Sino-Japanese historical experience were that regardless of whether it found its origin in Buddhist, Confucian or other foundations, a mutual respect for each other’s culture and identity was necessary. “Contrary to the CCP’s claims to represent a single Confucian perspective, inter-Asian collaboration can only truly blossom when no one country is permitted a position of ideological authority, irrespective of the economic power of the actors involved. Official relations and state involvement in intellectual and economic exchange, on the other hand, have been shown to be the exception rather than the rule in Sino-Japanese history, which is not to deny the importance of state actors, but rather to point out that they are not strictly necessary to successful relations among peoples. In other words, just as we must avoid the trap of cultural reductionism, we must also avoid the tendency to count on governments to manage inter-Asia relations. Depending upon government actors not only goes against the Confucian tenet of self-responsibility, but also the very real Sino-Japanese historical experience,” said Prof. Kamei-Dyche.

One Asia, One World: Meditations on Plural-Universalism

Speaking on the topic “One Asia, One World: Meditations on Plural-Universalism”, Dr. Aditya Pratap Deo of the Department of History at St. Stephen’s College in Delhi, India, said that in a world

that had been turned upside down, and when we were bound to confront fundamental questions about the future of humanity sooner rather than later, the project of One Asia must look beyond the ideas of exceptionalism, regionalism, and nationalism that had historically influenced the continent’s self-perception. “Even though Tagore spoke of spiritual affinities that unified Asian peoples, his vision of the world was based on his deep belief in the universalism of the core human values of love and friendship, values that are our only chance of survival in the future,” said Dr. Deo.

Dr. Deo’s paper briefly surveyed the various sentiments that the idea of Asia in the modern period had been animated by and argued that Asia could be one only if Asia itself was one with the world.

Elaborating on the topic of the symposium, Dr. Deo said that the phrase “Asia Is One”, with the verb in the middle, carried an element of anxiety. “It hints that if there is something like ‘One Asia’, it is not quite coming together as it should; therefore, some work needs to be done to return Asia to itself. In a world increasingly beset by strife and crisis of existential kinds, the latest being the pandemic, this is indeed a laudable call, for it is only if we stand together in love and friendship that we can pull back from the brink,” he said.

Highlighting the purpose of his paper, Dr. Deo said it sought to unsettle the idea of “Asia Is One” not so much to reject it as to recast it within the idea of “Asia is one with the world”... “By reading the formulation ‘Asia Is One’ as a desire to foreground the shared destiny of humankind, the essay asks for it to be rephrased in a way that truly reflects that sentiment,” said Dr. Deo.

Conclusion

Tenshin recognized the spiritual expansiveness of Asia and felt it could balance materialism and competitiveness, which seem to be dominant worldwide today. Asian thinkers have always been wary of the relentless pursuit of a self-centeredness that thwarted the natural flow of kindness to others. Tenshin was able to grasp the Asiatic concept of emotion over intellect and the expansive altruism it generates for all living beings in the cosmos. In our world today riven by conflict and selfishness, Asiatic values of cooperation and fellow feeling have acquired deeper significance. We should promote those values in the relevant international fora. **JS**

Rajesh Williams is a professional editor and a writer with a background in instructional design, technical writing, technical editing, and teaching.