



# The Best Goals for Japan in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

By Fujii Hiroaki

THE issue of identity for modern Japan has always been problematic. Japan has been constantly isolated in international society since it came into contact with the Western powers in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and opened itself up to the world. Prior to World War II, Japan was the only country in Asia that ranked with the Western powers in terms of military might. Once it achieved the Meiji Japan vision of *fukoku kyohei* (rich country, strong army), Japan went on to reveal its incompatibility with greater international society. Japan set its sights on becoming the leader of the Asian nations, advocating unity to end Western control. However, unable to win the support of Asia or the world, Japan ended up embroiling both itself and other countries in a world war. In the Cold War years, Japan assumed a position of stability alongside the developed Western nations. The end of the Cold War has, however, led to the reemergence of Japan's identity problem.

Recently, this issue has again become the focus of debate in Japan. For example, in a discussion in which I took part, the Japan Junior Chamber (JC) dedicated all 12 months of 2004 to a debate of the issue.

WHY is Japan's identity an issue now? One reason is the progression from one generation to the next. At a time when Japan's society and economy are about to undergo great change in the context of globalization, it is entirely appropriate that a group such as JC, made up of young executives in their 20s and 30s, should ask what aspects of Japanese culture and tradition should be upheld as worth preserving in the future. An even more fundamental issue for individual Japanese is to establish what goals Japan should pursue within the global community.

The clear threats posed by the military menace of the imperialist powers in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century that provided the driving force for the Meiji Restoration, and the destruction and starvation of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century that drove postwar economic growth, no longer exist. Postwar Japan's objective of economic parity with Western nations was also achieved in the 1980s.

At the same time, as we move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the military and economic dominance of the world by the United States is becoming increasingly pronounced, as is the rise of states with great population such as China.

What role Japan should play in this context is at the core of the current identity issue? There is no easy answer to this question. As history from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century proves, it is possible that Japan could make the wrong choice. For this reason, we need to give a great deal of thought to this matter, and set Japan's global goals accordingly.

Will Japan's isolation deepen in this century, caught between China and the United States? I think not. The following three points, at least, are important here. First, the vast majority of countries in the world today are concerned about the establishment of their own identities in the face of the relentless advance of globalization. Japan's ability to maintain its old culture and traditions even at the very forefront of technological and economic development is a good model for many countries. In that respect, Japan has a surprisingly large number of friends among the smaller countries of the world. Second, while the existence of the Soviet Union as the common enemy used to justify the Japan-US Alliance, the relationship is deepening recently because of shared fundamental values such as democracy and human rights. The same can be said for the relations between the countries of Europe, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Third is the fact that movements are afoot to establish an East Asian Community that includes the ASEAN countries plus Japan, China and South Korea. In addition to closer economic ties in terms of trade, investment, FTAs (Free Trade Areas) and currencies, it will require sustained effort to deepen mutual understanding of our different cultures and societies. For the first time in history, we are starting to see relations based upon equality emerging among East Asian countries. Even so, one of the key issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be how China develops as a country, and there is no doubt that this will involve Japan to an ever-increasing extent.

**I**N addition to the above-mentioned international conditions, an important matter concerning Japan's identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can be found in the characteristics of its own culture and traditions. In the first half of the last century, the world saw Japan as a military power, and in the second half as an economic power. Both reflect Japan's reaction and adaptation to the world situation at those times. This in itself indicates how these were identities borrowed from overseas, rather than manifesting something inherently rooted in Japanese tradition or culture.

Japan should return to its traditional stance of advocating issues motivated by internal imperatives rather than external. One of these is an extension of an existing philosophy, namely the desire for peace, so deeply embedded in the Japanese psyche due to past experience. Peace has prevailed in Japan for many years, but as stated by the Singaporean writer Kuo Pao Kun, Japan was not only one of the greatest perpetrator of war in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but also one of its greatest victim. Even if Japan were to amend its constitution to allow more flexible use of military force, it is unthinkable that the nation would then seek to become a military

power. On the contrary, it would do its utmost to maintain peace.

The tone of Japanese culture and tradition was set during the Jomon Period, which lasted for approximately 10,000 years, starting about 12,000 years ago. Jomon people developed small villages and lived in one place, but because agriculture had not developed, their lifestyle was essentially based on hunting, gathering and fishing. They crafted beautiful works of pottery, and lived on nature's bounty. While all of humankind experienced the Neolithic Age, it lasted for a particularly long time in the Japanese archipelago.

One feature of the Jomon Period was its harmony with nature, something that has deeply affected Japanese traditional culture. In this respect, it is not unrelated with one characteristic of Japanese aesthetics, "simplicity." Before Edo was renamed Tokyo in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, it was a metropolis than London or Paris, with a population of over 1 million, and was a recycling-oriented city. In the process of economic growth during the postwar period we started to forget such features of Japanese culture. However, in this century, such ecological issues as the global environment, energy and water will emerge as the world's greatest problems. In this context, a strong standpoint on ecological issues should comprise one aspect of Japan's identity.

"Nature's Wisdom," the main theme of EXPO 2005 AICHI, JAPAN illustrates Japanese awareness of the problem of maintaining a balance between the needs of advanced science and technology, and nature.

**A**NOTHER aspect of Japanese tradition that has tended to be forgotten, despite of its long history, is that of tolerance toward foreign cultures. There is a myth that the Japanese are a homogeneous ethnic group, but the truth of the matter is that a myriad of ethnic groups from both the North and the South emigrated from Asia, eventually resulting in what we know as the Japanese ethnic group. Japan has incorporated much in the way of culture from China, India and the West. While one can question whether Japan is currently sufficiently tolerant within its borders toward people of different cultural backgrounds, tolerance of cultural diversity should become one aspect of Japan's identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

We are now faced with change on every front, but for the most part, Japan has done well to develop the technology to allow people to coexist with nature in such a crowded set of islands.

This century will no doubt see the global village become even more crowded as populations increase and the scope of economic activities dramatically expands. In that context, I think that the maintenance of peace, coexistence with nature and tolerance toward other cultures are fundamental tenets of life that must take their place alongside democracy and human rights. It is my belief that Japan will look back on its tradition and culture, and see the value of making it a goal to take the initiative in building the global village. Such efforts, I believe, will see Japan freed from the solitude it has experienced since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. **JS**

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