

Breaking Away from an Overemphasis on Economic Ties – Japan as Seen from Indonesia –

By Kamimura Jun

TO a majority of Indonesians, Japan is, more than anything else, the most familiar and conspicuous “economic superpower.” It is a technologically advanced country whose sophisticated products dominate Indonesia’s consumer market of nearly 220 million people, who make up the world’s fourth largest population.

When Japanese visitors walk about the countryside in Indonesia, children and youths often call out “Toyota,” “Honda,” “Panasonic” or “Ajinomoto.” This is because for a long period, bilateral relations were expanded with a lopsided emphasis on trade, aid and investment. While both sides have since endeavored to broaden ties through exchanges in the sociocultural field and other areas, the road to a diversified bilateral relationship is undoubtedly long because of the different state of affairs in the two countries.

Of course, Indonesians have not forgotten the Japanese occupation during World War II before the former Dutch colony gained its independence. The lasting image of Japanese of that time – on the whole, regardless of feelings toward individual Japanese on a personal level – is that of arrogant and ruthless rulers.

I asked former Foreign Minister Ruslan Abdulgani how Japan was perceived half a century ago during Indonesia’s initial period of national development. This 90-year-old statesman was a close confidant of the late Achmed Sukarno, Indonesia’s independence hero and the first president. Abdulgani laughingly remarked, “No more *Kimigayo*, *Aikoku-no-hana*,” before reminiscing about the days when the Japanese delegation was invited to the 1955 Asia-Africa Conference in Bandung. (*Kimigayo* is the Japanese national anthem and *Aikoku-no-hana*

or Flower of Patriotism is a military song that many elderly Indonesians can recall from the era of Japanese military rule)

“Actually Japan was not allowed to come to Bandung. To many people, Japan was an arrogant enemy state,” he said. “But Sukarno said Japan is not an enemy. Without Japanese occupation, Indonesia should not be free. Because when Japanese occupied Indonesia, it was also against the Dutch. That was the historical role of Japan. They gave us two things, one is military training, the second is how to run a country, which we learned from the Dutch.”

“Of course, we had to pay dearly,” he added. During WWII, with the exception of the island of New Guinea and other eastern areas, most of Indonesian soil was spared fierce fighting. What many people remember even today is that the Japanese army drafted many young people to engage in construction work in Burma (now Myanmar) and elsewhere. Most of them never returned.

In fact, the Japanese word for a laborer, *romusha*, has been directly adopted as an Indonesian word meaning a forced laborer. At the National Monument in the center of Jakarta, a diorama representing the Japanese occupation era portrays romushas forced to labor under the gaze of a Japanese soldier. Schools teach that a number of romusha were conscripted, and died of hunger or disease. Some believed more than 200,000 died. Some movements still continue in which former romushas and former comfort women (sex slaves forced to serve Japanese soldiers) demand compensation for their ordeals.

To the great majority of Indonesians, Japanese military rule is an episode in history, something from the distant past, whereas the inroads made by

Japanese business since the late 1960s are much fresher in their minds. Still, they absolutely repudiate – from a nationalistic standpoint – the argument advanced by some Japanese that “the Japanese army liberated the Indonesian people” or that Indonesia “owes its independence to the Japanese occupation.” They have fierce pride in their people having secured independence by themselves in the four years of war with the Dutch that followed Japan’s surrender.

Take, for example, the Japanese film *Merdeka 17805* (*merdeka* is an Indonesian word meaning independence) released in 2001. It tells the tale of a Japanese lieutenant who, along with other soldiers, remained behind in Indonesia after Japan’s surrender and participated in the anti-Dutch war for independence. The film portrays the Japanese army being welcomed as liberators by women on Java Island. One problematic scene, in which an Indonesian woman was shown kissing the feet of a Japanese officer, was edited out by the filmmakers after the Indonesian government protested – mildly, however – that it distorts historical facts and wounds national pride.

In the years following independence, Sukarno, the “star” of the Third World’s anti-colonialism movement, drilled into the minds of his multiethnic citizens the concept of “one people.” Meanwhile, Japan reentered the Asian diplomatic stage at the Asia-Africa Conference, and money spent as war compensation served as a springboard for Japanese business activities in Asia.

It can be said that Japan’s economic advance in Asia really began in earnest after 1965, at around the time when Sukarno began steadily losing real power. Mohammed Suharto, who took his place in becoming Indonesia’s sec-

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ond president in 1967, switched course by pursuing a pro-US, anti-communist line, and the full-fledged introduction of foreign capital was realized.

With Japan in an era of high growth, its manufacturers and trading companies eyed Indonesia for its oil, natural gas, timber and other natural resources, as well as for its cheap and plentiful labor, and its potentially huge market. They flocked to Indonesia to set up operations, preceding their full-fledged expansion into North America.

For more than 30 years, Japan has almost consistently been Indonesia's largest trading partner and its most generous aid donor. Despite a decrease in Japanese direct investment amid the shift to China in recent years, Japan continues to top the list of foreign investors in Indonesia in terms of accumulated Foreign Direct Investment (FDI).

When then Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei visited Indonesia in 1974, massive anti-Japan riots broke out in Jakarta, which stunned the Japanese people. It was later revealed that the violence was at least partly orchestrated by figures engaged in power struggles within the Suharto administration, but the incident spurred the Japanese government to go beyond mere economic linkages with Southeast Asian countries like Indonesia by invigorating people-to-people exchanges. Fukuda Takeo, who succeeded Tanaka, employed the Indonesian catchphrase "*dari hati ke hati*" or "from heart to heart."

There has continued to be a deep-rooted dissatisfaction with the Japanese for their seeming reluctance to embrace their fellow Asians. Japan has long been showered with criticism that it merely seeks cheap labor and is unenthusiastic about technology transfers.

Abdulgani put it this way, "Japan should give us opportunities to learn modern technology. But Japan is not open to us. The door is not widely open. I understand that maybe Japanese must think about their safety, but..."

On the other hand, many Japanese



working for Japanese companies operating in Indonesia grumble that Indonesians "fail to grasp the importance of basic technology and mistakenly believe they can leapfrog to the manufacture of high-tech products." Such gap in perceptions about technology will take a long time to bridge. Yet, in recent years, Japanese manufacturers have positively appraised Indonesia's technological advancements. Toyota is using Indonesia as a base for exports to the Middle East and other regions. These developments may gradually help to the perception gap.

The younger generation of Indonesians, having experienced neither the Japanese military occupation nor the initial influx of Japanese business, show some interest in Japanese pop culture. The animation character *Doraemon*, the TV drama series *Oshin* and pop singer Utada Hikaru are familiar here, for example.

Compared with countries like Singapore and Thailand, however, the influence of Japanese culture has not been all that conspicuous. One factor may be that 80% of Indonesians are Muslims (a very moderate and flexible strain of Islam for the most part, with keen interest in the cultures of advanced countries). Long years of strict regulations on foreign investment in the ser-

vices sector and strongly nationalistic cultural policies must also be taken into account. In 1990, when the Japanese department store Sogo expanded to Jakarta through a joint venture with local partners, the company got mixed signals from the Indonesian authorities on whether it would be allowed to manage merchandise-stocking or whether it could use its logo.

Recently, however, changes can be seen. The Gramedia Group has been publishing a monthly compilation magazine of Japanese *manga* comics, such as *Nakayoshi*, *Shonen Magazine* and *Shonen Sunday* for Indonesian readers since 2003. Behind such changes, aside from the democratization and increased freedom for publishing that followed the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998, is the popularization of the Internet.

At a Japanese-language debate contest held in Jakarta in March this year, 15-year-old high school student Kinarti Fitri Asli remarked, "I wanted to learn Japanese after I came across a Japanese animation by searching the Internet."

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