

# Japan and the Creation of an Asia-Pacific Future

By Monte Cassim

I came to Japan from Sri Lanka as a Japanese government sponsored student, and I have now spent more than 30 years here. While still a student I married a fellow British student whom I met in Tokyo, and we have two children. My family is at home with Japanese culture, and we often communicate in Japanese.

Today, I live in Beppu City, Oita Prefecture, working at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU), while my wife and children live in the United Kingdom and my mother lives in Sri Lanka. In the course of a year I travel between these three countries to meet my family. In this sense, I believe I am in a position to view Japan objectively, though of course I cannot help favoring the country to some extent. My country of origin, Sri Lanka, did not seek reparations from Japan after World War II, and argued for Japan to be speedily re-admitted into the world body of nations as an equal partner. I believe this was the right decision, both for the people of Sri Lanka and of Japan. This, too, has helped shape my view of Japan.

I have been asked to comment on the theme of “Japan from an Asian Perspective,” but for me, this very question seems extremely strange. Japan is part of Asia too, isn’t it? This is what I honestly feel. However, the theme of this article implies that Japan stands outside, rather than inside the Asian bloc. This may be understandable since the Japanese have many Western elements in their lifestyle and there are substantial flows of information from Europe and the United States at every conceivable level.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is being touted as the “Asian century.” Surely this means that world politics and economic activities will revolve around the Asian region. Or perhaps it means that we will look to Asian culture as our cornerstone. If we think in terms of countries, it seems that Japan must take due cognizance of its position and role in Asia.

Since Japan was forced to open up by



the “Black Ships” in the late Edo period, it has taken the lead among other Asian countries in promoting internationalization while embracing “civilization and enlightenment.” It tore down the national isolation and actively adopted Western civilization at all levels, from social systems to everyday lifestyles. The country was devastated during World War II – the biggest tragedy of the last century – but recovered in just 20 years to surpass its pre-war power, entering the ranks of the developed nations and very quickly became the world’s second largest economy. Despite several economic and social upheavals during this process, Japan is now a world economic superpower. Buttressed by its social strengths, it has achieved remarkable progress through a development paradigm that has, in many ways, inspired other Asian countries and territories.

Meanwhile, Japan, or the Japanese people today, are focused on Western culture and although curious about the diverse cultures of Asia, do not get really believe that there is much to learn from these cultures. Asia has had maritime and con-

tinental cultures from ancient times; its people have lived by farming, grazing, hunting and fishing, and it has cultures based around these and a rich tradition of artisanship, the roots of Japan’s manufacturing ethos. During their long history, the people of Japan once learned many things from Asia. Now the “Asian century” has come, I believe it is more important than ever for the Japanese to understand the diverse and rich cultures of Asia, to recognize each other’s values and to learn from each other. It will then become clear what position Japan should take and what role it should play in promoting peace, economic development, harmonious coexistence and mutual prosperity in the Asian region in the future.

It is my fervent wish that Japan will become a “full member” of the Asian region in every sense of the word and that the Japanese people will become conscious and proud of being Asian. APU is in many ways based on a concept that can contribute to this.

The university was established in April 2000 with the cooperation of Oita Prefecture and Beppu City, as well as the

Photos : Beppu City Hall



APU students taking part in various events at Beppu City



support of Japanese economy and industry in the form of more than 250 companies. It was founded on the ideals of “freedom, peace and humanism,” “mutual international understanding” and the “creation of an Asia-Pacific future.” Our educational concept is the “development of individuals befitting the Asia-Pacific era, who are able to make the most of a multicultural, multilingual environment.” Around half of the students and teaching staff are from overseas. Currently, we have about 1,900 foreign

students from 75 countries and regions. The population of Beppu City is approximately 124,000, making a high ratio of foreign students to citizens. We greatly appreciate the contribution of the citizens of Oita Prefecture and Beppu City who are like a foster family to APU’s overseas students. Five years after the university opened, it appears that the local residents truly appreciate the value of living alongside people from different cultures. Many APU graduates have already started out into the world from Japan, and are

on their way to becoming leaders in the countries and regions of Asia as well as in other areas of the world. I believe that such contributions to human development constitute a major role that Japan, as a part of Asia, should continue to play over the coming years. **JS**

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