

The Crisis in International Understanding

By Jun Eto

Next year, the Japan P.E.N. Club will host an international conference in Tokyo on "Literature in the Nuclear Age—Why Do We Write?" This will be the second such conference under Japan P.E.N. Club auspices, and the contrast with the first one eleven years ago is striking.

Eleven years ago, Kyoto's International Conference Hall was a gala site for a resplendent affair. Scholars from all nations met in the corridors, exchanged bows and cards Japanese-fashion, and generally contributed to an atmosphere of understanding and common purpose. Happily, I had the pleasure of attending this conference and chairing a panel discussion on "Problems Involved in Japanese Studies in Various Countries of the World," and I remember being both impressed and gratified by the profound understanding which everyone showed, not only in this panel discussion but throughout the week-long affair. Kicked off by a keynote address titled "A Historian's View of Japanese Culture and Modernization" by Dr. Edwin O. Reischauer, former United States Ambassador to Japan, it was closed with an eloquent presentation in Japanese by the Soviet Japanologist Igor F. Vardul.

Much of the credit for this conference's success must, of course, go to the organizers, who performed almost superhuman feats of fund-raising and organization. The effort was first led by Yasunari Kawabata (the only Japanese to win the Nobel Prize for literature) and then dedicated to his memory following his suicide in April 1972.

Yet these efforts were also blessed with a favorable economic environment. The year 1972, of course, was the last year of rapid growth premised upon inexpensive and abundant energy supplies. The world economy was in a growth phase in all industrialized nations, and no one could have then predicted that cheap oil—and with it rapid economic growth—would be cut off late the following year. The future looked bright.

Yet just one year later, the abrupt quadrupling of oil prices crushed the hopes of the industrialized countries and inaugurated a decade of inflation and recession worldwide. Lest there be any lingering optimism, this was followed by a second oil crisis in 1979, and the world economy has only just recently begun to recover. Oil prices have recently gone down somewhat and the Western democracies are emerging from the depths of recession. However, it is too much to hope that we

will ever regain the growth momentum which was lost in 1973.

As recession has wracked the Japanese and global economies, it has also generated increasing international trade and other economic friction. This has been especially true for Japan, given the Japanese economy's almost exclusive reliance on exports.

This trade friction carries grave risks over the long term and underscores the urgent need for international understanding—not just Japanese understanding of other nations but other nations' understanding of Japan.

It is precisely at this juncture that the Japan P.E.N. Club is scheduled to host the International P.E.N. Club Congress in Tokyo next year. Yet, as I said, the differences between this year and eleven years ago are striking. Especially striking is the difference in the way industry is responding.

Eleven years ago, industry was generous with its support. I do not remember the exact amount, but the endowment was generous. This year it is niggardly. Publishing is certainly doing more than its part, but other industries' efforts can only be described as inadequate.

Japan P.E.N. Club Chairman Yasushi Inoue and the rest of the organizers are certainly working just as hard this year, but business is unreceptive. The money just is not there—even though this kind of cultural understanding is basic to international business relations.

Nor is this phenomenon restricted to Japan. Looking overseas, Cambridge University, long a leader in Japanese studies, has been so beset by financial difficulties that it is reduced to slashing the staff to one tenured professor. Moreover, even this chair is in danger of disappearing.

Now, when it is even more important than ever to enhance international understanding, we face the discouraging specter of a drying up of the funds needed to enhance international understanding. This can only be termed a crisis.

There are, of course, a number of Japanese companies which have established public-service foundations to promote cultural activities as a complement to their commercial activities. Laudable though this spirit and these efforts are, however, they sometimes seem to lose sight of the fact that "cultural activities" is not just another advertising tool.

It is all very well for these foundations to invite famous scholars to participate in

cultural symposiums, yet it would be even more significant if some of the foundations' money were earmarked for projects such as assisting Cambridge and other deserving universities. The amounts involved need not be that much. It does not cost all that much to help endow a chair in Japanese studies at a university in Europe, North America, Australia-New Zealand, or the developing countries. While the short-term publicity value of such continuing assistance may not be great, I would argue that it has long-term value in enhancing understanding.

The Japan Foundation is a major coordinator for these Japanese efforts to subsidize and assist Japanese studies, but business has been notably tardy in its support here, too. As originally chartered, the Japan Foundation is to be funded half by the government and half by the private sector. The government money is in, but the contributions from industry have been negligible.

Whether in its support for next year's P.E.N. Congress or in its funding for Japanese studies overseas, business has displayed a woeful ignorance of the importance and long-term necessity for international understanding. Now, more than ever, we need to promote international understanding among all peoples, and it is most discouraging that support for these efforts has been so wanting just when it is most critical. With the Japanese economy so deeply involved in the international marketplace, we would expect to see Japanese industry anxious to promote understanding, if only to facilitate this global presence. Sadly, just the opposite has happened as Japanese business, troubled by the same recessionary difficulties that plague all businesses everywhere, has apparently decided to eliminate such "frills."

At the risk of repetition, this can only be termed economic myopia of crisis proportions.

(This is the last of six parts.) ●

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