

# The Global Village People

—The 21st Japan-American Conference of Mayors and Presidents Chamber of Commerce in Sendai—

By Bradley Cox

In Japan there are 11 designated major cities. These are cities that have finances and legislative powers almost equal to that of a prefecture. Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto and Kobe are all familiar city names and all are located in the west of Japan. In the north only Sapporo, on the island of Hokkaido, would be well known. Between Tokyo and Sapporo lies the Tohoku district. This district encompasses six prefectures and is the largest district in Japan, covering the northern part of Honshu.

This region in the past was described by haiku master Matsuo Basho (1644–1694) as “The Deep North,” and until recently it has only been known for its agricultural produce, such as the famed Sasanishiki rice. The capital and hub of this great northern region is Sendai city which is located in Miyagi Prefecture. Its population is almost 1 million and two years ago it became the 11th designated major city in Japan.

For the last two years this new major city has been rapidly preparing for its international debut. With the completion of Sendai's impressive new International Center in September 1991, the stage was set. “The 21st Japan-American Conference of Mayors and Presidents Chamber of Commerce” was to be the opening event for the International Center and naturally it was the perfect chance for Sendai to show itself off on a world stage.

From October 2 to 5, 145 U.S. and 199 Japanese delegates gathered in “*Mori no miyako*” or the city of trees. Sendai has been known by this name since the early 1600s when retainers of feudal lord Date Masamune (1567–1636) planted many trees around their houses, located across the Hirose River from Aoba Castle. This area is now the site of Sendai city center and is still lined with lush zelkova. Indeed Basho, coming from Tokyo (then Edo), was so surprised and delighted by the natural aspects of this area that he wrote his most famous haiku in and around Sendai. Complementing these surroundings, the



Participants in the Japan-American conference meet local volunteer citizens. They are wearing *jinjaori* medieval field jackets copied from one favored by Date Masamune.

theme selected for the conference was “A New Global Age—Creating Harmony between Cities, Humanity, and Nature.”

The mayor of Los Angeles and head of the U.S. delegation, Tom Bradley, pointed out that, “Sendai is a city that has clean streets, wonderful nature and the people are genuinely happy living here.” This does not seem much of a compliment until you try to apply it to some cities in the more industrialized parts of the U.S. or Japan. Delegates at the conference, using Sendai as an example, discussed ways to preserve nature in their cities and at the same time improve amenities.

## Thinking locally

By preserving nature in their local areas, delegates wished to contribute to the global trend of environmentalism. Moreover they acknowledged that 2.5 billion people live in the cities of the world;

cities which are the powerhouses for economy and the source of much of the global pollution. The governor of Miyagi, Shuntaro Homma, neatly reversed a familiar comment on the environment, saying “Now is the time to think locally and act globally. Each region must first gain a deep understanding of itself.”

U.S. delegates were surprised not only at the beauty but also the sophistication of Sendai. Disembarking from the Shinkansen bullet train, after only a two-hour ride from Tokyo, the U.S. delegates were amazed at the scale of the station's facilities and at the spotlessly clean subway. The American guests were again amazed that their beautiful hotel and the modern International Center were connected by a leafy stroll through the middle of the city. Sendai, its history, lifestyle and potential were thoroughly unknown to any of the Americans. In most Americans' knowledge of Japan, regions such as

Tohoku are simply great blank spaces like those which existed on early world maps.

At the end of the conference the mayor of Sacramento, Anne Rubins, confessed, "These regional areas aren't known by Americans. We need to get together at these conferences and establish social and human contact with people from Sendai and other areas." Rubins went on to explain that it is difficult for many Americans to learn about Japan in the U.S., but the sister city program and other exchange programs are a good place to start. Indeed, many of the mayors and representatives from other U.S. cities agreed that the sister city plan was the best chance to establish contact and gain knowledge about Japan.

A professor of the Faculty of Law at Tohoku University, Hideo Otake, commented during the panel discussion that local governments in Japan are receiving bigger budgets and are becoming increasingly powerful in domestic and international affairs. He used as an example the sister city relation between Minsk and Sendai. When Minsk began its clean-up after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, it directly contacted Sendai through their sister city program. A delegation was sent and within a few months agreement was reached on significant medical assistance.

Peter Loan, a director of Sister Cities International, observed that the way Japanese and U.S. cities run their sister city programs is different, and is an extension of their cultures. The Japanese tend to promote the program from the mayor's office or the top of the local government, whereas the U.S. cities look to community input in directing the program. Based on his experience in Sister City International, Loan sees the Japanese "consensus-building style" and the American "go ahead style" as leading the two cities to seek different benefits from their relationship.

"Internationalization" is a rather cumbersome expression and the buzzword for many of the regional cities in Japan. The concept is a mix of improving the city infrastructure to allow both citizens and foreign residents to live comfortably and to also create direct links with other

countries. It is a way of emulating the multiethnic culture of countries such as the U.S. and maybe keep up with a world trend. Ted Dang, chairman of Oakland Chamber of Commerce, said that by the year 2000, minority ethnic groups combined will represent the majority of the population of California. The face of business in California is changing rapidly and Japanese businesses should become aware of this trend.

### Air links important

Date Masamune created the beginnings of Sendai's internationalism. It was Masamune who tried to establish ties with Rome by sending Hasekura Tsunenaga, as one of Japan's first envoys, to seek an audience with the pope. Today, connecting new international air routes to regional cities is seen as an initial step in breaking the Narita monopoly and internationalizing these centers.

In just the last two years since the opening of Sendai's international airport there are already services to South Korea, Guam-Saipan and Singapore. At the closing press conference, representatives from Seattle, Los Angeles and Sacramento felt that an air link to their cities would be Sendai's next best move in bringing closer ties between the U.S. and Japan.

Barry Conolly, president of Tacoma-Pierce County Chamber of Commerce, also mentioned that a direct sea link to Sendai port would support trade with the large lumber companies and Boeing Co., which are based in Tacoma. Henry Pratt, executive assistant to the mayor of Anchorage, pointed out that 50% of the Alaskan fish that are sold to Hokkaido must first pass through Tokyo. After the conference, Pratt planned to visit Anchorage's sister city Chitose on the island of Hokkaido, to discuss the establishing of an air link.

The U.S. consul general in Sapporo, Roger Dankert, noted that major cities across the U.S. are rather self-reliant and have particular identities. Companies in the U.S. tend to move away from the bigger cities, and are continuing to seek new regional locations. Dankert went on to



Fostering friendship: Tom Bradley, Los Angeles mayor and head of the U.S. delegation, and Tokyo's Governor Shunichi Suzuki.

say that in Japan, the central government is increasing its spending on regional cities, trying to decentralize away from Tokyo. However, most companies in Japan, even Sapporo Breweries whose home is in Hokkaido, are still headquartered in Tokyo.

These observations give the impression that the regional cities in Japan are becoming stronger, but at the same time are increasingly dependent on Tokyo. Sendai's status as the 11th major city has brought new financing almost equivalent to that of a prefecture. Sendai's commitment, then, of \$100 million to the completion of its new International Center, in time for this conference, seems to be a definite step toward identifying itself as the capital of Tohoku.

Toru Ishii, mayor of Sendai, was confident in telling the conference that the people of Sendai would be pleased in this decision, as the expense will mean greater contact with people from around the world, and a chance for local people to consider the future identity of Sendai.

For this conference, 500 Sendai people volunteered to be interpreters, guides and assistants, most having a high level of English fluency. They also seemed to have no trouble finding the time to work 10 to 12 hours a day, for the four days.

During the conference's concurrent sessions there was talk about overseas businesses' responsibility to the society in which they are located. Ronald Shelp, president of New York City Chamber of Commerce, referred to the importance of bringing Japanese businesses into philanthropic programs that contribute to welfare and amenities such as housing and schools in American cities. Shelp said any businesses, including those owned by Japanese, were expected to put some kind of contribution, especially financial, back into the American city where they operated.

It was interesting to contrast this with the genuinely warm welcome and almost embarrassingly great effort that the local Sendai people put into making the U.S. delegation feel relaxed and at home during the conference. Indeed, it is hard to imagine an American company located in Japan being asked by a city government or community group to finance a local civic center or a school. Outside the conference room Donald Kummerfeld, representative to the mayor of New York City, commented, "There are no mechanisms for foreign companies to contribute in Japan... I feel sorry for Japanese companies in the U.S., everyone thinks they are Santa Claus."

## Harmony with nature

Sendai is fortunate to be host to many universities and colleges. It is second only to Kyoto for its percentage of university students to citizens. Professor Junichiro Nishizawa, president of Tohoku University, is known locally as "Mr. Semiconductor" for his world-renowned research into semiconductors and optical fibers. Again with the conference theme of the city in harmony with nature, it is interesting to note that clean air and unpolluted fresh water are essential in the research into semiconductors, and this has given Sendai an advantage. Foreign companies such as Motorola that are interested in the areas of hi-tech research or other "soft" style industries are certainly looking to benefit from these natural assets.

Motorola has already established Nippon Motorola, with Sendai as its cen-



Sendai is expanding the scale and facilities of its airport to handle international flights.

ter for research and production. The decision to choose Sendai as its base was mainly taken after consideration of the high cost and great shortage of labor in the areas next to Tokyo. As Kummerfeld bluntly stated, "There's a new layer to be tapped, that of doing business in low-cost areas (of Japan). If you're not IBM don't go to Tokyo, go to Sendai." In a new industrial park set up in Izumi, in the northern part of the city, Motorola has founded two factories and has space reserved for one more in the future. At present Motorola is developing and producing cellular phones and in joint partnership with Toshiba is engaged in semiconductor research.

Motorola is now discovering what it is to become part of a different culture and probably, just like the U.S. delegates, it has found there are still great gaps in Americans' basic knowledge of Japan. To see an American delegate's wife screw up her face when she discovered that rice grew in mud. To watch as Japanese fluently gave their opinions in English,

and not to meet one American delegate who could say more than sushi or kimono, these are a little disheartening and betray the superficial, hospitality-diplomacy that weaves through occasions such as this conference.

However, just like the haiku master Basho the American delegation braved "The Deep North," came to Sendai, discovered something surprising and learned something new. Friendliness and human warmth, urban sophistication and modern industry all in harmony with a natural setting. Just as it will be a challenge for Sendai to maintain its local balance of nature and city, the mayors and other representatives of Japan and the U.S. must continue to foster their symbiotic relationship, to maintain harmony as part of the global village. ■

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