

Individualized Cultural Exchange

By James L. Stewart

International cultural exchange today is in a state of feast, not famine.

But before governments, businesses, foundations, and academic institutions pour more money into international conferences, study and travel grants, it may be well to examine accomplishments to date, and perhaps think of more effective ways to establish the international amity to which we all subscribe.

The Japanese government and people, to their great credit, are inviting more and more students from the Third World to learn of the Japanese experience in modernization. But more attention, including financial support, must be given to educational institutions and facilities within Japan to create an infrastructure capable of giving visitors the individual attention they need. The educational and business community must plan more carefully to make sure that the Japanese experience for representatives of the developing countries is appropriate to their needs and aspirations. If visiting students are dissatisfied with the experience, the basic purpose of cultural exchange is undermined.

Cultural exchange is a labor-intensive industry. The assembly-line technique does not apply.

From apathy to over-enthusiasm

In earlier years, those of us who labored in the vineyards of international exchange had to face public apathy and an attitude on the part of governments and corporations that such activities were frills, not the real business of life.

Now we face a different problem. Suddenly, international-mindedness and cultural exchange have become popular fads—a signal of modernity and sophistication. The danger now is pomposity and over-ritualization of individual and group exchanges.

The problem of famine has been eradicated but the feast has not been digested properly.

Three categories

Aside from governmental and specific business dialogues, the cultural intercourse of nations may be divided into three areas: individual travel for study and research; exchanges in the fine arts; and conferences. The middle category—Kabuki abroad, the Mona Lisa and London Symphony Orchestra to Japan—will not be covered in this analysis.

International meetings

Since conferences will receive my more critical remarks, I will take them up first. The civilized world has gone crazy over conferences, conventions, symposia and colloquia, both domestic and international. It passes belief that the return in academic and professional excellence or international goodwill can justify the enormity of time and money spent on conferences, yet the trend is ever upward. International gatherings have become an industry in themselves.

Among the international conclaves, those in the natural sciences, especially medicine, have produced noteworthy results. In these, the motivation of participants is strong. Senior scientists and junior researchers alike are eager to present papers outlining their laboratory work and offering new hypotheses on scientific developments. The conference becomes a device not only for publicizing current work but also for getting valuable critiques of that work and suggestions on how the scientific research might best be carried forward.

By contrast, conferences or conventions in international politics and the social sciences tend to be of less measurable value. There is a tendency in such meetings, particularly in the endless conferences discussing U.S.-Japan relations,

for the same people to go over the same ground. The papers presented are rarely illuminating. These conferences are reminiscent of university alumni get-togethers. The insiders have a good time. The public does not profit.

Of late, the fad in political and social science colloquia has been to claim that they are directed toward influencing government policy. The ostensible purpose (*tatemaie*) has shifted from providing a forum to exchange views on the chosen subject to influencing governmental policy.

In terms of this ostensible purpose, most conferences are charades. Our governments are not easily swayed by discussions at privately-sponsored conferences. In the case of the U.S. government, a well-reasoned, carefully edited article in the quarterly magazine *Foreign Affairs* will have more influence than 100 papers written for conferences. Indeed, I suspect the real purpose (*honne*) of these conferences is to promote international networking and to get papers published.

One exceptional conference

There are exceptions. The January 1969 Japan-U.S. Kyoto Conference directly influenced American foreign policy at a high level and set the stage for returning Okinawa to Japan.

The American delegates to this seminal conference were carefully chosen. The



The 1969 Japan-U.S. Kyoto Conference: one of the rare meaningful international conferences?

Photos: Asahi Shimbun

James Stewart, born in Kobe in 1912, spent a decade with the U.S. government in public relations before joining the Asia Foundation in 1951. He was the Foundation's first representative to Japan (1960-65) and has held his present position of Asia Foundation liaison representative in Japan since 1970.

usual inveterate conference-goers to meetings on U.S.-Japan relations such as Professors Edwin Reischauer and Robert Scalapino were there. But also at the table were Admiral Arleigh A. Burke, former chief of U.S. Naval Operations, and General Maxwell D. Taylor, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The distinguished Japanese delegates had prepared for the conference with great care; it was there that they broached the idea of "*hondo nami kakunuki*" revision—the return of Okinawa to Japan with American bases to be administered in the same way as bases in Japan and without nuclear weapons.

As this proposal was presented for discussion, the Japanese delegates particularly watched the reactions of Admiral Burke and General Taylor. When they saw that these influential representatives of the U.S. defense establishment did not pale, the mainstream Japanese governmental leadership, including Prime Minister Sato, quickly moved to embrace the politically popular formula, enabling it to prevail and ultimately strengthen the cause of U.S.-Japanese amity. But few such conferences take place.

Fewer conferences recommended

My personal view is that the tendency toward more and more international meetings should be reversed. No international convention in any category should be held annually. Every two years should be often enough. In fact, conferences presently held in alternate years might well find that every four years suffice.

In a way, this is similar to the situation in sports. Although the public has become jaded at the year-long repetitious Davis Cup competition, the quadrennial Olympics continue to arouse worldwide enthusiasm and to satisfy the desires of young athletes to have the opportunity at

least once in their lives to compete in the premier athletic event.

Problem of size

Public and private donors to international conferences might also question the size of the meeting projected by the conference sponsors. A large conference is not necessarily more useful than a smaller one. Except for scientific and professional meetings where new discoveries are the keynote, the record of the past decade will show that international meetings where the microphone did not have to be used produced the best and more long-lasting results.

The United Nations and its myriad of affiliated agencies have done us a disfavor in this regard. The UN conferences have set the stage for enormous conference rooms with opening sessions devoted to giving each delegate an opportunity to grasp the microphone and present the often-fossilized views of his government. The sessions become ritualized and the content of the discussion does not equal the splendor of the facilities and professional management of the conference. Kindergarten children playing in a sandbox may be achieving greater results in interpersonal communication.

Exchange of persons

The personal motivation and commitment of Japanese scholars and students in pursuing the foreign experience has declined from the early postwar years. It may be too easy now. Study abroad today is old hat, not revolutionary. Japanese young people, in particular, are less interested than before in going abroad except as tourists or honeymooners.

I recall vividly the experience of a Japanese assistant professor to whom my office gave a travel and study grant in the 1950s. The professor took off from Haneda in a Super-Constellation, a popular intercontinental plane of the time. A feature of the Super-Constellation was that when it reached a certain altitude the thrust of the propellers was changed, whereupon for some brief moments engine noise ceased completely. The professor and all passengers on his plane were convinced that the plane was going to crash and they were going to die.

The professor told me later that his own attitude in the moment of crisis was astonishing to him. He experienced not fear but outrage. He was in a fury to think that his life was going to end at the beginning of his trip. It was as though, he said, he would have been quite willing to die after his international experience.

This intense desire to get abroad, to come up against other civilizations, to learn new facts and gain new experiences

was the hallmark of Japanese intellectuals in the early postwar period. It was comparable to the animated early Meiji era.

Japanese youth indifferent to overseas experiences

Few Japanese studying abroad today or attending international gatherings possess the same sense of excitement in foreign encounters. Japanese graduate students going to the United States or Europe no longer find the challenge experienced by those just one generation older. The United States and Europe do not seem all that different from Japan.

I am sorry to say that the Japanese youth of today seem spoiled. The attitude of many toward foreign countries is either contemptuous or blase. It is customary to blame this sort of posture on the insular mentality of the Japanese people. But this island-country complex may not be the principal factor in shortcomings in international-mindedness on the part of Japanese students today. I think they are self-satisfied. They derive profound satisfaction in the continued economic growth of their country that has nurtured them in financial ease and provided them, without effort on their part, with all of the amenities of modern living that they accept in nonchalant fashion.

Japanese youth today have read that Japan is Number One. They have read about the English disease, and they are aware of the thesis of the decline and fall of American civilization. As to the developing world and its problems of poverty and hunger, they are largely unconcerned.

Many ambitious Japanese students prefer to stay home to climb onto the escalator toward governmental and business advancement as soon as possible. The serious graduate students who do go to the United States and Europe tend to pursue their field of specialization in single-track fashion, not expecting to gain new enlightenment from the American or even European culture that they think they know already.

Impact on foreign students in Japan

By contrast, it is the Americans, Europeans and Asians coming to Japan who are profoundly influenced by the Japanese encounter. I know from personal experience in talking to representative visitors from the United States, Australia and Southeast Asia that the encounter with Japan is truly mind-stretching.

On the part of thoughtful young American scholars, there is amazement tinged with utter disbelief that the Japa-



The Olympics continue to arouse world enthusiasm.

Photo: Asahi Shimbun

nese people could have made such progress without English. They have not known that for the past 100 years the intellectual output of Western civilization in science, philosophy and the humanities has been translated into the Japanese language and incorporated in the educational system.

For many Asian visitors, including students, modern Japan is almost overwhelming. As they think about the less fortunate circumstances prevailing in their own countries, these students can quickly develop an envy of Japan and a resentment toward Japanese successes in modernization. To be patient with these Asians residing in Japan, to be kind to them, to spend time with them and to explain gradually how the Japanese people have progressed is a challenge facing the Japanese people today.

Two-way exchange

Ministry of Education figures issued on May 1, 1982 showed that the number of foreign students from approximately 100 countries studying in Japan was 8,116. Of these, 664 were from the United States and 662 from mainland China. Many within the overall statistics may be children of Taiwanese and Korean families residing in Japan.

The Ministry pointed out that figures for Japanese students overseas cannot be accurate since many who say they are going abroad to study do not enroll in accredited institutions. Nevertheless, a rough figure may be 30,000, with a little less than half in the United States.

It is a truism to say that international exchange of persons must be a two-way street. In the case of Japan, a balance does not exist since there are almost four times as many Japanese ostensibly studying abroad as there are foreign students in Japan.

Specialists in cultural activities recognize that the number of foreign students coming to Japan will increase greatly while Japanese going abroad for study may not increase at all. The People's Republic of China has announced an intent to send 5,000 students of proven academic ability to Japan every year. Students from Southeast Asia may increase about 10% a year. Those from the Middle East and Africa will increase dramatically.

The need for personal attention

These observations bring me to my principal thesis as regards the conduct of personal exchanges, in particular the reception of visitors from the Third World. Whereas the Japanese government, businesses and foundations are increasing



Students from ASEAN nations receive diplomas from Yokohama National University.

their budgets in order to bring students, scholars and trainees to Japan, the need for personalized attention to these people is not being fulfilled.

The records of the Ministry of Education during the past 15 years show that monthly allowances to foreign students on government scholarships have increased regularly. Part of the necessity for this increase is the rising cost of living in Japan. Although among all the industrial nations in the past 20 years, Japan has done the best job in holding down inflation, costs have gone up. But part of the Ministry of Education largesse, I fear, is that giving foreign students in Japan more money is the easiest way to keep them quiet and not disturb the current Japanese educational structure.

This is not the proper approach to the handling of exchanges of persons. It is personal attention on the part of Japanese teachers, university faculty members, those responsible for training programs, and Japanese families that will make the Japanese experience truly significant for the foreigners in this country and will enable them to develop a life-long respect and affection for the Japanese people.

In this regard, I am impressed by the number of Japanese families accepting American high school as well as college students in their homes. The homestay resource was once the particular adornment of American society. Japanese families today are quietly and effectively redressing the balance.

Unfortunately, Japanese families are less inclined to bring Asian and African students into their homes. Through the years, Asian students in Japan have told me that they have experienced a certain coldness on the part of Japanese toward them. They resent what they see as undue Japanese favoritism toward Westerners.

As is the case in the United States, foreigners in Japan often have their best experience outside of the metropolitan centers. In small towns and more rural settings, the natural kindness of the Japanese people is more evident. A student accepted in a farming family in Iwate or

Shimane Prefecture can be assured of a warmth in human contact that is often lacking in Tokyo, Osaka or Nagoya.

Dispersal of students desirable

The Ministry of Education, other government ministries, and large enterprises are not prepared to enter into a calculated dispersal program for foreign students. Japan is undeniably centralized and an inordinate proportion of the academic institutions of excellence are located in Tokyo. Nevertheless, I would like to see the prefectural governments and universities outside the principal population centers become more actively involved in the reception, training and guidance of students, particularly those from the Third World. I think a case can be made that the best of Japanese society and finest examples of the Japanese genius for preserving tradition through change may be found in the somewhat rural setting.

To repeat my thesis, foreign students should be placed in every prefecture and ultimately in every institution of higher learning in Japan. Furthermore, all schools accepting students from abroad should have a foreign student adviser to help the visitor to cope with the complexities of the Japanese experience. This calculated dispersal program with individual care built into it is where funds are needed and must be allocated.

There is a larger meaning in getting the foreign visitor of every category to see the Japanese countryside and reside, when possible, away from the populated centers.

Intellectuals in the Third World levy a serious charge against their own societies by attacking the enormity of the gap in the standard of living and even lifestyles between the capital city and the countryside. The strong point of Japanese society and its continuing stability is in the fact that the gap between the urban centers and the countryside is very small and the distinctions between rich and poor are minimal when judged by international standards. In essential outline, as regards the necessities of life, Japan is an egalitarian society. This is something that foreigners can grasp and appreciate.

In all countries, it is both legitimate and desirable to build on strength. The strength and charm of Japan are not in the metropolitan areas alone. The introduction of the totality of Japan to impressionable students, trainees and young people from abroad is a challenge that the Japanese people can meet. The rewards, in the form of cadres of youth from many countries who have come to understand the best of Japan, will be significant in the decades to come.

Photo: Asahi Shimbun