

## 比文創立十周年記念文集

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# Japan and Young Japanese for Depressed Asian: My Views, Recent Initiatives, and Future Visions

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## RATIONALE AND SCOPES

Just prior to my departure for Thailand and Cambodia missions (9-23 November 2003), I received an e-mail request from one of my previous colleagues at the Graduate School of Social and Cultural Studies (*hereinafter* School) of Kyushu University, to write some memorial notes or any related essay because of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the School. I have been working with UN Centre for Regional Development (UNCRD) as a Researcher since April 1999, and my involvement with the School was under special agreement of UNCRD-Kyushu University. For a little more than two years until March 2003, as a Visiting Associate Professor, I had been involved with Graduate School of Social and Cultural Studies, where I enjoyed excellent time with my nice colleagues and students. On 1 December 2003, after my missions and then sick leave I just arrived in my UNCRD office for the first time, and one of our former doctoral-students reminded me — ‘toady is the last day for submission of the memorial draft’! Absolutely a mind-boggling situation as the event was totally out of my mind due to — busy mission’s schedules, conference presentation and voluntary activities in Cambodia as a founder Director of Japan-Cambodia Volunteer Association (JCVA), and sickness of my kids.

As I had only a few hours at my hands to send this article, I quickly decided to write something about young Japanese without enough

readymade materials on my desk. My intention was to write something very relevant in Japanese but the situation forced me to write different way even in English (for me both are foreign languages but any attempt in Japanese will take more energy and precious time). Hopefully, my views will coincide with the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the School in one way or the other. What I want to say here, I feel, is very simple but rudimentary, however it may not well organized and without even any English editing. Some meats of the article are based on my current activities and future visions under JCVA, a newborn organization having various socio-cultural programs for young Asians as well as development programs for the rural depressed.

I have been living in Japan since early-1992, and my personal interest has helped me to learn much about the socio-eco-cultural aspects of this country, and I am eager to learn more in coming days. My prime interest was to do research on socio-cultural aspects of the Japanese development experiences for my future comparative studies in other Asian developing countries, even if surrounding environments do not always allow me to do so. Recent days, I have been involving in some activities to touch my dream, having many zigzagging and difficult stages. Through this rough article, I hope to share some of my experiences and brief opinions on the socio-cultural aspects of Japan as well as my on going initiatives and future visions for young Asians including Japanese students.

During 2001, I was involved in rural Cambodia under the Human Security and Regional Development project of the UNCRD, but surprisingly the project was terminated (virtually stopped) without any valid explanations to any stakeholders! I was so shocked and decided to continue there by all possible means. I have close links with some well-intentioned Japanese who have been involved in various voluntary activities in several locations in Cambodia either individually or in small groups. We organized recently one umbrella organization, namely the JCVA. Student volunteers are the life-blood of the JCVA, and its top

managers believe in quite different development philosophy from other organizations in order to restore socio-cultural harmony among young people. The JCVA's objectives and visions are wide-ranged, so we will hopefully cover other Asian countries gradually in diversified-way. I have had such a dream in my heart for a long time.

## **MY EXPERIENCES, AND SOME OBSERVATIONS ON JAPAN AND JAPANESE**

Since my childhood, I have been eager to become a socio-economist. However it was difficult for me to realize my dream in my homeland because of many reasons. Prior to my arrival in Japan, I worked on temporary-basis for over four years on socioeconomic issues (project-based), after having received my Bachelor (Statistics with Economics and Mathematics) and Master (Statistics, 1987) degrees from Jahangirnagar National University.

**Why Am I in Japan?:** The reasons behind my selection of Japan for the higher study were many. For example, I had some reasonable grasps on Japan and Japanese education as five of my brothers took post graduate degrees from prestigious Japanese universities (including Kyoto, Kyushu, and Nagoya university); I was interested in tremendous economic growth of Japan and her Asian identity (I am an Asian in my heart-and-soul) since my young-age; there exists reasonably low level of discrimination in Japan (my brothers told me so); and above all I managed to win a Japanese governmental (*Monbushou*) scholarship. I spent my first two years in Japan to learn Japanese economy and socio-cultural aspects rather than to concentrate only on my research proposal on Agricultural/Rural Development in developing countries.

Many of my native friends have already moved (or some on the way to move) to USA, Canada, Australia or elsewhere for their better livelihoods (of their own thinking and understanding). I never tried to do so, even after many well-wishers' (relatives and friends) suggestions. So what's it like to live in Japan? The question is too general and

could be answered in so many different ways. Most people get confused and don't really know what to think of Japan after they describe their version of Japan. Some people might say the place is horrible, some people might adore it, some equate it with the higher income, some think more about the future of their kids' education, some look for the English environment or foreign passport and so on. I have always respected their views, even if I do not agree with them on all issues. I usually disagree when someone say, my kids must be educated only in the English environment (what about the culture?)! I want my kids to be educated, no matter whether it is in English, Japanese or in my native language. They may only need to learn English up to the level that enables them to have a simple communication with others (if necessary, they can improve it later by themselves).

I am proud of being an Asian, and I believe Japan is my second home. I like her better than any other developed countries, even if there are some problems, such as school bullying of my daughter. For me at this age, it is near impossible to get a research related job in a job-scarce and densely populated Bangladesh. Moreover, considering the nature of my field, my research interests, and related environments, Japan is a quite favorable place to continue my research (in my home country, my brothers and friends with the highest degrees and research capabilities are bound to engage only in a peculiar type of teaching without research facilities!). As all of my three daughters were born in Japan and we all became familiar with Japan and Japanese customs, we are better off in Japan, having close links with home and other Asian countries. I have no intention to change my own identity, nor my nationality. I am not eager to change my passport either; at best I want the status of permanent residence in Japan in order to continue my research and fulfill other dreams, such as cultural exchange programs for young Asians as well as programs for uplifting the rural depressed in Asia. I am not sure yet whether I am in the right track or not, but I am determined to realize my dreams by all possible means.

### **Asian Identity and the Role of Young Japanese—Some**

**Observations:** It is widely believed, especially among Japanese people themselves, that Japan is a “homogeneous” society. The government itself has repeatedly declared that there is no problem with minorities in this country. Admittedly Japan's minority population is relatively small, but that does not mean there is no problem. However, I feel better if at least officially all such discriminations were abolished (even if socially it is not easy to overcome fully) in Japan. In many Asian countries social and religious castes still strongly existed.

During my last 12 years in Japan, I have many interactions with a huge number of excellent Japanese people, to whom I am really indebted for their numerous supports. It is a very rare case to find a day without any Japanese in my home whether they are neighbors, volunteers or friends. It is surprising to me, as I have been observing many aged-women regularly visiting my daughters; conversely some neighbors sometimes also feel jealous! Sorry to say, in general Japan is still far from internationalized, and to many Japanese — foreigners are still strangers and not reliable, either. Some people even tried to calculate everything from economic viewpoint! I dare not to speak right things directly whenever necessary. I have some bitter experiences too as some peoples directly or indirectly sometimes try to remind (and discriminate) me that I am from a disaster-prone and economically poor country in the world (better be there?)! Many of my Japanese acquaintances, when visited many Asian grassroots, usually were surprised as most peoples over there are poor economically only but not in their heart in various ways (*e.g.*, hospitality). I think, for the developing countries in Asia, there are many things to learn from Japan. Conversely, Japan also has something to learn from other Asian countries.

Asia is the home of world-culture (just one example, all 6 great religions in the world originated from Asia), even if the continent until now is the most problematic one in various ways. Western countries

did not always stand on the side of Asian people and they captured the Asian resources by all possible means (From the colonial periods to the modern times, there are millions of immoral and predatory cases known to us). They learned much from Asian cultures, but many of them have superiority complex (even if, I have some good western friends and from them I may have something to learn). However, I hope, the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be for Asia, and no doubt Japan can play a central-role by unleashing the capacity of the young generations. I am still in the learning-process of Japan and other Asian experiences, culture and customs, and developmental behaviors.

Many people around me in Japan usually show very negative attitudes towards young Japanese. They say the young generations have been just enjoying and not serious about their studies and/or not unleash their energy to sustain the development of the country! I was also slightly influenced by such attitudes, especially during my postgraduate days! But I was always hopeful about the young generation in my heart; and when I started to deal with many youngmen in recent years, I gained confidence for success. Some responsibilities are also on all of us for the desired change; especially some additional socio-cultural props are essential to motivate the young generations.

I am really impressed about children's character-formation in Japan that usually starts from baby-care centers and kindergarten (*Hoikuen* and *Youchien*). However, some strong measures are necessary to overcome school bullying. My observations on young Japanese are: most of them are forgetting their Asian identity and family values as they have been running after western culture/s as well as money-oriented. Another tendency among some young Japanese is to study Asian socio-cultures in western universities! To learn deeply about local socio-economical and cultural aspects of a particular country, students had better stay in that country or region. There are also many good Asia universities, and it will be very realistic and also cost effective to study there.

**My Research and Teaching Experiences in Japan:** During 1994-1998, my research works were related to grassroots resources mobilization, rural poverty and micro-finance/credit in developing countries with special reference to Bangladesh. However, I had never been out of track to learn more on Japan and Japanese. Since the completion of my doctoral degree at Nagoya University in March 1999, I have been working as a researcher of UNCRD, which is located in Nagoya. My research activities with various projects of UNCRD are on Southeast Asian countries, and I had diversified and/or expanded my research fields quickly. I have been dealing with the Regional Development and Human Security situations in terms of poverty and rural finance, inequality and vulnerability, community participation and social environment, alternative livelihoods, integrated farming systems, etc. I have visited most of the South and Southeast Asian countries recent years; specifically I have been directly working in the depressed Northeast region of Thailand as well as selected provinces of war-affected Cambodia. Since 2001, I have been improving my understanding (doing research?) on Japanese regional development (specifically, that of Central Japan) and the local administrative system, participatory aspects (e.g. *Kuni-zukuri* and *Machi-zukuri* and so on) and peoples' behaviors in development. My other interests include the socio-economical as well as cultural and behavioral aspects of development in Asian countries. I am also interested in the comparative studies on Japan and other Asian countries, as I had mentioned before. I am happy that at least my activities and some UNCRD projects are partially coincided with my dreams. Moreover, I have been enjoying freedom in UNCRD; they allow me to teach temporally in various Japanese universities and organizations.

I have grown up in a teaching environment, as my late-father was a high school teacher for long after his retirement as a government official, and five out of my nine elder brothers have had research and teaching professions in various institutions/universities. I have always



had the desire to become a researcher-cum-teacher too, and I have been given opportunity since 1999, although I am not yet holding a permanent teaching position at any university. Besides giving special lecture series and courses in some universities and institutions, I am honored to have a chance to teach at the Graduate School of Social and Cultural Studies of Kyushu University until March 2003. It was sometimes a little cumbersome to communicate from Nagoya to Fukuoka but I had greatly enjoyed it with whole-hearted supports from my colleagues and students. Sometime they had supported me a lot to overcome Japanese writings and readings. I have gained many hand-in-experiences during my short involvement with Graduate School of Social and Cultural Studies by managing my own graduate seminars and also supervising some graduate theses both in Japanese and English languages. More importantly, as it is a graduate school I enjoyed my liberty to use both (and mixed up) Japanese and English languages for lectures/seminars.

Honestly speaking, some basic changes are needed in Japanese graduate schools and their programs, as it is essential for educational curriculums and research environments to improve. Apparently, there are not enough basic and quality research works in English, and there are also few spaces for foreigners in Japanese national universities. Even for basic researches on social and cultural issues in Japanese universities, scholarships for foreign students or post doctoral fellowships for the relevant subjects are limited. In my view, Graduate School of Social and Cultural Studies, Kyushu University also needs additional props in its educational courses and its research designs. During my involvement as a visiting associate professor, I was not even permitted to spend my allotted research funds outside Japan not for a single time, and virtually all amounts were remained unused. Sometimes, the rules and regulations were not very clear to me, either.

To attracting foreign talents, some policy changes are essential. University recruitment policies and promotion should be based on

experiences and research outputs rather than personal or private links (what about someone who have qualities but no one for pushing, especially for foreigners!). For Japanese students too, they do not tend to do research in other Asian countries. Some company affiliations in research process are essential. All in all, some more energy and resources should be spared for the comparative Asian socio-cultural research, students and teachers exchange programs, participatory research exercises, overseas field works, student voluntary community activities, and so on. I am not in a position to make these changes without holding any academic position, but certainly have been trying my best to do something for the young Japanese by other means possible to me and the JCVA is just one example.