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SPEECH BY MR LEE KHOO CHOY, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE (PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE) AT THE CALLIGRAPHIC EXHIBITION AT THE SINGAPORE CHINESE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY ON THURSDAY, 28 MAY 1981 AT 5.30 PM

As I have expected, the crowd that has turned up for this Calligraphic Exhibition has been rather discouraging, despite the fact that it contains a marvellous collection of the 78-year-old Master Calligrapher Mr Wang Sui Pick. Now that Chinese brushes are no more in use in our schools, for that matter, not even in the Chinese language stream, a day may yet come when the Chinese brushes will become an item of curiosity and antiquity to our younger generation. They may even become mere exhibits in our museum to remind future generations of the peculiar habits of their ancestors who once used brushes to lavish away precious hours. If that should happen, calligraphers would definitely be identified as rare birds and from a utilitarian point of view, a worthless lot. If they still have to depend on their calligraphic skill for two meals, they might have to confine their talents to writing things like '天官賜福' or '招財進寶', the stereotyped phrases which may still find a market among superstitious people longing for fortune. That would indeed be a sad day not only for calligraphers, but for the cultural development of the people generally.

A similar exhibition like this in Tokyo, with some publicity, would easily draw a good crowd. This room of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce would then be too small to accommodate the increasing number of Japanese enthusiasts who take calligraphy seriously despite the fact that they live in a society, technologically more advanced than Singapore. Since so much heat has been generated in Singapore about learning from the Japanese, I would like to take this opportunity to touch on the subject. Much emphases have been made on learning the Japanese methods and system of increasing industrial output and job management which involve attitude to work and

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loyalty to employment. These are the technological aspects aimed at boosting GNP. What I would like to talk about is the sociological and psychological aspects of the Japanese attitude towards leisure and their effort to improve the quality of life.

It was not a historical accident that the Japanese succeeded in overcoming the national crisis that befell the nation following the tragic defeat of the Second World War. It was not by luck alone that a defeated nation gradually grew into an economic giant overtaking most technologically more advanced western countries. One important factor that has contributed towards Japan's miraculous economic recovery was the inner strength, will and spiritual stamina of the Japanese people who have been inculcated with such human traits through their traditional culture. Without such typically Japanese characteristics, Japan would not have survived the last catastrophic defeat and humiliation.

You may ask what has the Japanese character got to do with calligraphy. What I am trying to point out is that calligraphy is only one of the many cultural items which the Japanese have used not merely as a hobby for self-expression but to instil mental discipline, cultivate inner moral strength and tranquillity of mind. Although the Japanese have taken over the modern aspects of western technology, they are by no means westernised, not to mention deculturalised. The process of modernisation has taken place on the basis of Japan's own traditional culture. Economic affluence brought about by modernisation has not swung the Japanese completely over to adopting a utilitarian and materialistic way of living.

It has been said that the Japanese have become an 'economic animal' as a result of Japan's economic expansion in the world market. That was the unfortunate image created by some unscrupulous Japanese businessmen. It is however justifiably true also to describe the Japanese as a 'cultural animal'. The Japanese have not lost their sense of balance or altered their sense of value in their lifestyle despite the fact that they have become better off economically. In Japan today, just as it was in the past, a person's success is not measured purely in terms of wealth and position. A person could earn equal or more respect from his countrymen if he or she has become an accomplished artist, singer, writer, musician or calligrapher and has good mental discipline and courage.

One important factor in the Japanese traditional culture is the strong desire of an individual for emotional self-expression despite the Japanese trait of subordinating individualism to the group. The search for self-expression has struck a deep chord in the Japanese soul. Not many people can become famous authors, calligraphers, musicians, painters or dancers but millions of Japanese find self-expression in writing either with pen or brush, play musical instruments, paint or dance. All the traditional arts of tea ceremony, flower arrangement, or sports like Judo, Karate, Chinese kung-fu and the other martial arts fit in as part of this tradition of the cultivation of individual skills, physical and mental discipline which are human qualities associated as status symbol for success. To the western oriented mind, such activities may lightly be dismissed as hobbies, but the Japanese value them as 'shumi' or 'taste' which help everyone of them establish his own identity and they become increasingly important to them as they grow old. The individual Japanese takes pleasure in displaying his particular skill, whether painting, calligraphy, singing or dancing at parties. The ardent pursuit of a hobby is almost necessary for self-respect in Japan. A millionaire Japanese would feel awkward if he has nothing else except money, for it would be a damaging admission of spiritual incompleteness. The big businessman feels that as a successful businessman, he must make a fetish of his interest in golf, or patronises art, music or anything that would give him some form of identity. The accumulation of wealth by itself does not provide the required spiritual identity.

Thus the art of calligraphy, for instance, becomes a simplest and easily accessible way of self-expression to seek identity. It may be of interest to know that scientific technological advancement in Japan has not done away with the brush in schools. All the students in primary schools and even some secondary schools take calligraphy seriously. It is not uncommon to find, for instance, a Japanese University graduate taking a Phd degree on Su-tong-Po calligraphy.

During the New Year festivities, thousands of Japanese of all ages demonstrate their skills in large size calligraphy at a national gathering in Tokyo. The winners sometimes received their prizes from the Minister of Education personally. Calligraphy as a hobby has become so widespread and popular that Calligraphy Clubs have mushroomed and proliferated into different schools. A normal school would have a membership of 50,000. People of all professions take up calligraphy not only as a hobby but a status symbol. A Sumo (Japan wrestler) would take pride in demonstrating his skill in calligraphy, to show that not only has he the muscles but artistic talent and refinement. The Japanese Prime Minister Mr Suzuki told me when he last visited Singapore that it was customary for him to write scrolls with his brush and present them to his constituents as they were in good demand. It is a common practice in Japan to present a friend or guest with one's own calligraphy as a token of friendship.

The Japanese are also fond of poetry reading, and there is also an annual national tanka (poetry reading) on a set theme, with the winning poems read in the presence of the Emperor who himself contributes a poem.

One other praiseworthy characteristic of the Japanese is the capacity to preserve and nurture ancient traditional culture. The Chinese often speak of the glory of their ancient Chinese civilization. What is left is but ruins, some of which are dug out as unearth relics. When a visitor goes to Siam, he can see remains of the bath tub in Hua Ching Tze '华清池' which Empress Yang Kwei Fei had used to take her bath. But Tang music is kept alive with ancient Tang musical instrument not in Siam, but in Japan. The graceful lady's costume of the Sung Dynasty can perhaps be found in one of the Chinese Museums. But in Japan, they are still worn as a traditional Japanese attire in the name of 'kimono'. The Shaolin School of Pugilistic Art is flourishing and expanding in Japan whereas in the country of origin, it has lost ground because many Shaolin kung-fu experts were persecuted during the cultural revolution. The name of Shaolin is not even in open circulation in China because of an attempt to do away with factionalism and the process of pugilistic unification.

The irony of it all is that whilst the technologically advanced Japanese are trying to perpetuate the values of traditional culture including those in mainland China, the industrially backward fanatics of the cultural revolution did whatever they could to uproot thoughts and things traditional with the misconception that these were the obstacles hindering modernisation.

It is not my intention to advocate mimicking everything that is Japanese in their human trait. There are things which we could learn just as we are learning the Japanese method of productivity. But it is necessary to have a clearer understanding of Japan's social infrastructure and the emphasis on social harmony in order to know how and why the Japanese have succeeded in modernisation and have been so productive and loyal to their employers. What I think we can learn is the Japanese experience and approach in modernising their society by absorbing western technology and yet maintaining the roots of their traditional culture so that their people are not completely westernised in their lifestyle.

If all those present today can make an effort to popularise calligraphy so that more people can feel proud that they have acquired one of the arts of self-expression, not so much for chauvinistic reasons, but as a form of individual identity and mental discipline, then we will have made a good start. This effort can be extended to other forms of art. If we could make our people feel that it is not enough just to be rich and powerful, and that they need something more in the identification of their cultural talents or artistic interest to earn self-respect, then we are on the way towards helping to build a more balance society - a society that is modernised and yet retaining its own cultural roots.

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