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KEYNOTE SPEECH BY BG (RES) GEORGE YONG-BOON YEO, MINISTER FOR INFORMATION AND THE ARTS AND SECOND MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS, AT THE WORLD CHINESE ENTREPRENEURS CONVENTION'S PLENARY SESSION ON CULTURAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES AT MANDARIN BALLROOM ON MONDAY, 12 AUGUST 1991 AT 9.10 AM

ASIAN CIVILIZATION IN THE PACIFIC CENTURY

In The Footsteps of Japan

In the 18th and 19th Centuries, the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain led to successive waves of industrialization on the European mainland and in North America. In the same way, the successful economic transformation of Japan is setting off successive waves of change in the Asia-Pacific region. In the wake of Japan are the NIEs, followed by the ASEAN countries (with the temporary exception of the Philippines) and, behind them, China, Indo-China, Burma (or Myanmar) and eventually North Korea as well (as part of a re-united Korea). These are historic changes on a continental scale. There is every possibility that East and Southeast Asia will lead the world economy in the next century. It is the turn of Asians to take their place on the world stage again.

Asian Settlement Of The Rim

The economic, social and political transformation of East and Southeast Asia is accompanied by the migration of Asians to North America and Australasia. This migration is a large, long-term phenomenon caused by high population densities in Asia and relative low population densities in the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

We are talking about a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon. We can trace it back to the decline of Qing China in the 19th Century when large numbers of Chinese migrated to Southeast Asia, North America and Australia in search of a more tolerable life. After the Second World War, the threat of Communism sent waves of migrants from China, Taiwan, Hongkong, Korea and Vietnam to the US and Canada. More recently, the uncertainty over the reversion of Hongkong back to the PRC in 1997 has prompted countries like Canada and Australia to encourage capital transfer and to actively source for human talent. The flow of peoples is now not only from East Asia but also from Southeast Asia and the Indian sub-continent.

As a result, what we are witnessing is a growing settlement of cities on the Pacific Rim by Asians. Let me cite some statistics to illustrate my point. Using the latest US census results, the Asian population in the San Francisco-Oakland metropolitan statistical area (MSA) has increased from 10 per cent in 1980 to 16 per cent in 1990, in the Los Angeles-Long Beach area from six per cent to 10 per cent and in the Seattle-Everett area from four per cent to seven per cent. If we zero in on Silicon Valley, we discover that the Asian population in San Jose has shot up from eight per cent in 1980 to 17 per cent in 1990. Of the 70,000 or so engineers in the Valley 10,000 to 15,000 are ethnically Chinese. About 5,500 engineers, managers and other professionals are from India.

If we look at British Columbia, the increase is equally dramatic. Ethnic Chinese are already 27 per cent of Vancouver City's population of 560,000 and 15 per cent of the 1.5 million population of Metropolitan Vancouver. Some demographers predict that the core city will reach 40 per cent ethnic Chinese before the turn of the Century which will make Vancouver the most Asian City in North America.

In Australia and New Zealand, the trends are not as startling but they point in the same direction. I do not have

the latest figures for Australian and New Zealand cities, but from 1981 to 1986, over a short five-year period, the Asian population in Perth increased from 3.4 per cent to 4.3 per cent, in Darwin from 4.9 per cent to 6.2 per cent, in Sydney from 2.8 per cent to 4.7 per cent, in Melbourne from 2.4 per cent to 3.9 per cent, in Auckland City from 2.3 per cent to 2.9 per cent and in Wellington City from 3.8 per cent to 4.7 per cent.

The migration of Asians to North America and Australasia is likely to continue well into the next century. The reason is simple. It will take that long for the Chinese and Indian heartlands to achieve the complete transformation of their societies. In the meantime, many of their more talented individuals will emigrate to secure better lives for themselves and their relatives. In short, the push factor will continue to operate. The pull factor will also continue to operate because the white peoples of the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand are in relative decline. They are hardly reproducing themselves. Asians are needed to top up the numbers and also to revitalize their economies. Here, we must expect public policy to change from time to time because large scale Asian immigration creates social problems in the host communities. Unlike European immigrants, Asian immigrants are less likely to melt fully into the pot. While the economic advantages are self-evident, there will inevitably be cultural clashes because these Asian migrants will not want to lose their Asian identity completely. To begin with, the skin colour cannot change. Depending on the political considerations of the day, immigration policies in North America and Australasia can be tighter or looser, but the general trend will remain one of continuing Asian immigration.

The benefits to states like California, British Columbia, Western Australia and New South Wales are obvious. This Asian settlement of the Pacific Rim is becoming an important part of the drama of the Pacific Century. At the individual level, many of us here today would have relatives in all four corners of the Pacific, often siblings or first cousins. Contact is easy

because of the advances in communications and transportation. You can be in Sydney today, Singapore tomorrow and Vancouver the day after. These family links weave a network of relationships which help bring Pacific communities closer together.

This pattern of Asian settlement in the Pacific is not unlike that of the Greek colonization of the shorelines and islands of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea more than 2,500 years ago. Then, because of overpopulation on the Greek mainland, Greeks migrated from their city-states to found sister colonies in North Africa, Asia Minor, Italy and elsewhere. Before Alexander the Great, there was no single power. The city-states were all part of a larger Hellenic civilization. They co-operated, competed and were in communication with one another, and met regularly for the Olympic games. In the same way, Asian communities all round the Pacific are in co-operation, competition and communication with one another, and we meet sometimes in conventions such as this.

In the 19th Century and the early part of the 20th Century, the European peoples spun the same kind of web across the Atlantic, connecting Europe to the Americas. The demographics were then quite different. At that time, the white peoples were growing in numbers and Europe exported people to populate entire continents. In 1900 about a third of the world's population lived in Europe. Today it is only about a tenth.

What happened across the Atlantic is now happening across the Pacific. We are part of this unfolding drama and we should try to be clear of our roles. While we ought to be proud of Asian achievements, we should, however, not overleap ourselves and become cultural chauvinists. I would like instead to argue that what is taking place is an interesting dialogue between Eastern and Western cultures which will lead to the general improvement of both.

Dialogue Of East And West

When the West was expanding, Western intellectuals selectively absorbed the best of Eastern science, art and ideas. Great men like Napoleon and Clausewitz, for example, found inspiration in Sun Zi's Art of War. The process was called 'Orientalism'. I use the term 'Orientalism' in a serious, non-pejorative sense and not in the way Edward Said described it. I am referring to the kind of 'Orientalism' that sought to absorb the best from the East. There is now a reverse process of 'Occidentalism' at work, of Asians selectively absorbing the best of Western science, art and ideas. 'Occidentalism' as the obverse of 'Orientalism' describes the process better than the word 'Westernization' because 'Westernization' suggests that we have lost our Asian character while 'Occidentalism' describes selective change within our Asian character without giving up the essence of that Asian character.

Japan was the first to Occidentalize. While China was sure it had nothing to learn from the West, which was what Qian Long told George III, Meiji Japan wasted no time in overhauling every aspect of Japanese society.

In the case of Taiwan, South Korea, Hongkong and Thailand, tens of thousands left to study and work in North America in the 50's and 60's. Many have since come back in return waves to help modernize their homelands, often using Western ideas and methods. Without their contribution, the NIEs would not have been able to make such rapid progress. Thailand and Malaysia are now benefiting from their returnees. Vietnam will one day also benefit from returning Occidentalized Vietnamese.

China too needs Occidentalized Chinese to help it modernize. The growth of the last 10 years would not have been possible without the role played by Hongkong and Taiwanese businessmen who are familiar with Western ideas and methods. One day, part of the PRC diaspora now in North America, Japan, Europe

and Australia will also go back to help transform Chinese society. Because of the immensity of China, this historic transformation will take many more decades. It has already taken China well over a century if we date the start of the process back to the humiliation of the Opium War, so we can afford to wait a few more decades.

We should draw a distinction between China as a political entity and Chinese civilization. For a large part of its history, China was divided. Even when the Empire was united, there was always a penumbra of countries which were wholly or partly under Chinese cultural influence but not owing political allegiance to the Emperor. In other words, Chinese Civilization has always been much larger than China itself and the interaction of the centre with the periphery is a fascinating theme in the history of Chinese civilization. It is the periphery which first absorbs outside influences and which then transmits these influences into the centre, and vice versa. Japan, Korea and Vietnam are examples of states at the periphery. The remarkable success of Chinese communities outside China means that these communities must also be considered part of the periphery.

At this stage in the history of Chinese or East Asian civilization, the Occidentalized periphery is more advanced than the centre. The centre, which is China, needs the periphery to help it achieve its great transformation. Even within China itself, it is the coastal regions which have made the most progress.

What all this means is that we have today many communities which are part of and contributing to a larger East Asian civilization. I use the term East Asian civilization rather than Chinese civilization to avoid any suggestion that the centre should be intrinsically more important than the periphery. Take the Chinese community in Singapore as an example. Chinese Singaporeans are not Chinese nationals and have no wish to be. We are Singaporean; we are Southeast Asian. But Chinese

Singaporeans are part of a larger East Asian civilization, not just in terms of our cultural inheritance from the past, but also in terms of our continuing contribution, however minor, to that civilization. In the same way, Chinese communities in Sydney, Vancouver and San Francisco are integral parts of that same larger civilization, drawing from and adding to it. It has become in effect a civilization with many poles and with much local variation.

The evolution of Confucianist thinking provides an interesting illustration of this multi-polarity. Confucianism as a broad stream no longer belongs exclusively to China. Indeed, up to the mid 70's, Communist China renounced and denounced the teachings of the ancient philosopher. Only recently is he being rehabilitated. Confucianism in Korea and Japan developed in different directions centuries ago giving rise to different patterns of social organization. Qing China, Yi Korea and Tokugawa Japan were all Confucianist states but different. Till today, the pattern of business organization reflects this divergence. While the Japanese established zaibutsus and the Koreans chaebols, Chinese businessmen have always found it difficult to break out of family control. It does not matter whether we are talking about Taiwan, Hongkong or Southeast Asia, this Chinese pattern is resistant to change, except possibly in Singapore, where state involvement has created a group of government, government-linked and privatized government companies which reject family relationship as a factor in human resource management. But, otherwise, succession is a recurrent problem among Chinese businessmen worldwide. This particular aspect of our Confucianist heritage is a weakness which has to be overcome. From opposite shores of the Pacific, we are all now taking a fresh look at Confucianism and its role in the modern world. China has no monopoly of wisdom here. This is a debate which encompasses all of East Asian civilization.

Thus when we meet to discuss Chinese entrepreneurship, the unifying idea is not political but civilizational.

Logically, we should also meet to discuss other subjects like the arts, letters, sociology or education.

Education is a big problem for Asians especially in North America and Australasia. Among Asian migrants, there is always a fear that the next generation will lose their Asianness. If they speak only English, half the battle is lost. Whether we are talking about Los Angeles, Singapore or Sydney, the apprehensions are the same. The determination to remain Asian is strong. As individuals, we can do little beyond what the family can provide. But if we are organized, much more can be done to promote the teaching of Asian languages in schools in California, British Columbia and Australia, not just Chinese but also Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Thai, Malay and Tagalog. In addition to education, we should also promote Asian culture. I refer to culture here in a broad sense and not just to calligraphy or music.

I recommend the formation of a Pacific Foundation to help promote Asian education and culture all round the Pacific Rim. Existing efforts are not enough. The Foundation should support the teaching of Asian languages and Asian subjects in schools and colleges. It should also promote the development of Asian culture by organizing seminars, sponsoring exhibitions, offering scholarships, honouring the successful and awarding prizes. It should not be difficult to raise the funds needed to launch such a Foundation. Asian businessmen are well-known for their philanthropy especially in the field of education and culture. What we need is a little organization and a lot of vision.

But will all this lead to conflict? Let me put it this way. White Americans, white Canadians and white Australians will of course prefer Asian migrants to be meek and to be as white in their values as possible. Then they can be absorbed like European migrants. But I doubt if this will happen. Yes, Asian migrants will want to blend in as much as they can, and they will indigenize, but they will not want to lose their Asian identity

completely. In fact, the more successful they are as a group, the prouder will they be of their Asianness. To put it in another way, if these Asian migrants were to become white in everything but skin colour, their dynamism will surely be affected.

In other words, the encounter of cultures should lead not to the complete absorption by one of the other, but to mutual accommodation and mutual learning. It is in the interest of Western societies to accommodate the cultural differences of Asian migrants and to learn from them. Western societies need a new Orientalism to reinvigorate themselves. The discovery of Japan from quality control circles to sumo wrestling is the start of this new Orientalism. It will widen to include Korea, Taiwan and Southeast Asia. Australian society is a case in point. At the top, there is considerable intellectual consensus that the future of Australia lies not in Europe but in Asia. But there is still no widespread emotional acceptance of what it means to be part of Asia in a cultural sense. Without a much greater Orientalization of Australian society, Australia will not be able to fully become a part of Asia. In that regard, British Columbia and California, with higher proportions of Asians, are much more Orientalized than Australia is.

Therefore, in answer to my earlier question on the possibility of conflict, there will be tension, and the tension is inevitable, but it can lead to good. Many years ago, Joseph Needham talked about the dialogue of East and West. It is a continuing dialogue and for the dialogue to be fruitful, the East should speak a little louder.

Conclusion

While we should not be immodest, we must have a sense of the historical current sweeping us and make our contribution to its flow. Japan was the first in Asia to succeed in transforming its feudal structures. Many others are now following and it is by no means clear who will lead two, three or four decades from

now. Great Britain led the Western pack for many years but America, Germany and France eventually overtook her. How long Japan will continue to lead the rest of Asia is, however, not the important question. What is important is the fact of the larger Asian transformation in the next century which will draw into its sphere of influence the western states of North America, the whole of Australasia and possibly parts of Latin America as well. We are talking about an Asian civilization which, while it may share many points in common with Western civilization, will remain different and distinct. That we should be inspired to come from across the four seas to attend this Convention is proof that we feel for this Asian civilization. I hope we will be able to build upon our sense of identity and help promote the development and the spread of our common heritage.

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