

6 NOV 1991

# PRESS RELEASE

91 - YYB - 24

Release No.: 22/OCT  
03-1/91/10/19

**SPEECH BY BG (RES) GEORGE YONG-BOON YEO,  
MINISTER FOR INFORMATION AND THE ARTS AND  
SECOND MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS, SINGAPORE,  
AT THE ASEAN-JAPAN CULTURAL SYMPOSIUM  
ON 19 OCTOBER 1991, TOKYO**

The cultural exchange between ASEAN and Japan is part of a larger pattern of cultural exchange in the world. We live in a world increasingly integrated by technology and the global economy. It is only natural that cultural exchange should follow economic exchange. Beyond a point, further economic exchange is not possible without cultural exchange.

Exchange means mutual learning. Learning means being humble enough to accept that someone else may have something positive to offer. To put it in another way, we must beware of cultural arrogance. Cultural exchange is at best superficial if there is cultural arrogance.

There are Chinese who insist that the major achievements of Japanese culture are in fact Chinese. They argue, for example, that sushi, sumo wrestling, zen, kanji, the kimono, the tatami mat and the tea ceremony all came from China. While this may be true, the underlying tone is an arrogant one which suggests that China has nothing to learn from Japan. Indeed, it was this attitude which held China back when it was confronted by the West in the nineteenth century. Through Lord Macartney, the Manchu Emperor Qian Long told Britain's King George III that China had everything and had nothing to learn from the West.

Japan in contrast, did everything it could to learn from the West during and after the Meiji Restoration. Unlike China, Japan was prepared to learn from others and was thus able to make rapid progress.

Part of the problem of the West today is Western cultural arrogance. With the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, there is a strong sense in the West that Western values should become universal values. Efforts by the West to learn from the East, like Japanese methods of management, are still superficial. The problem of the West's inability to compete economically lies not in the lack of knowledge about techniques but in the value systems. In fact, the logic is often turned upside down. Instead of analyzing that they have to adapt in order to compete more effectively, many Westerners argue that societies like Japan, South Korea and Taiwan have to change to conform to Western norms. In other words, be less effective so that I can better compete with you.

I am not suggesting for a single moment that the East is all good and the West all bad. Far from it. Under successive blows from the West from the last century right up to the US occupation of Japan, the peoples of the East have been conditioned to look to the West for knowledge. All the countries of East Asia have sent and continue to send tens and hundreds of thousands of students to North America and Europe for undergraduate and postgraduate education. This is such an ingrained instinct that in societies like South Korea, Taiwan and Hongkong, an education is often not considered complete without a period of study in the West. 'Liu xue' (留學) in Chinese or 'Ryugaku' in Japanese, meaning to leave home to study overseas, is generally considered a positive experience. In other words, learning from the West has become a cultural habit in the East. But the reverse does not yet hold true. Although attitudes in the West are changing, and American business schools are showing increasing interest in Asian methods of business organization and economic competition, there is still no widespread acceptance in the West that they should learn from the East.

This process of learning from the East is not going to be easy. Changing value systems is the most traumatic of human experiences. It will take decades for the West to come to terms with this historic challenge. But it must come. Without an

overhaul of their value systems, Western societies will slide further back in relative terms, just as Eastern societies could not have progressed without major changes in their value systems.

The political ramifications of this Western cultural readjustment will be far-reaching. Political tension between East and West will increase because of the mismatch in economic performance. Trade difficulties are only one aspect of this tension. Security considerations will be another as the American military presence in Asia become financially harder to maintain.

Japan's role in this unfolding historical drama is a very important one. Japan has no choice but to play a leading role. But it is not an easy role to play. It is a role fraught with difficulties.

To put limits on Japan's international role, American officials often tell Japanese officials that other Asians do not trust Japan because of the experiences of the Second World War. It is true that there is a certain distrust of Japan. But the problem is not one which cannot be solved. It is a problem which can and must be solved. It is in the interest of both Japan and other countries in Asia, and indeed in the long-term interest of the entire world, that this problem be solved.

Japan's Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu's expression of contrition in Singapore on 3 May '91 was an important step forward. It should not mark the end but the continuation of a process. Without what Singapore's Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew called a catharsis which involves not just political leaders but also common people, the distrust of Japan will not go away. A catharsis will enhance Japan's international standing, not diminish it.

I raise this subject because there can be no full cultural exchange between Japan and ASEAN without a common recognition of the problem of the Second World War. We can politely sidestep this awkwardness but it will not serve our mutual interest. Also, Japan's economic achievement is so far

ahead of the rest of Asia, there is an understandable temptation on the part of some Japanese to look down on other Asians. Like the cultural arrogance which led to the decline of Manchu China, such an attitude on the part of Japan will make it more difficult for Japan to play a leading role in Asia.

Many Japanese leaders are aware of this problem. A senior Japanese official I met recently told me that Japan can only play a leading role in Asia if other Asian countries invite Japan to do so. Japan cannot appoint itself because it must be sensitive to the feelings of others. Hence it is important for us to remove the distrust left over from the Second World War.

We need stronger Japanese leadership in Asia to help maintain the larger political balance in the Asia-Pacific and the world. In a sense, Asia has to help America achieve its transformation. The relative decline of America can be very destabilizing if Japan and other countries in Asia do not help America in its attempt to restructure.

Japan's leadership should be political, economic and cultural. It must of course not be in the military field. Because Japan's leadership must never be in the military field, the US-Japan Strategic Alliance remains critical even after the threat from the Soviet Union has receded. It will be necessary for Japan to underwrite a greater part of the cost of this alliance. Better this than for America to withdraw and Japan to re-arm which will cause instability throughout Asia.

Japan's cultural leadership will become more important. Japan's success is already an inspiration to other societies in Asia. However, compared to American culture, Japanese culture has not yet achieved the same degree of universal appeal. Much more effort is needed to promote understanding of Japanese culture and to widen its appeal.

I am not proposing that Japanese culture should dominate other societies. That will not be acceptable. I am suggesting a de-mystification of Japan which will promote cultural exchange

between Japan and other countries. That Japan should be so successful must mean that there are elements in Japanese culture which are worthy of study and emulation. The ASEAN countries, for example, will benefit by learning from Japan the way we have all benefited by learning from America. That other Asian countries are also making good progress must also suggest that there are elements in them also worthy of study and emulation. This of course is the basic purpose of cultural exchange.

What is in fact happening in the Pacific is the emergence of a dynamic East Asian civilization which will increasingly influence the West coast of North America and the whole of Australasia. It is a civilization which will transcend individual nation states. Just as Western civilization is larger than Germany, France or America, this new East Asian civilization will be larger than Japan, China or ASEAN. Confucianism and East Asian Mahayana Buddhism, for example, are not exclusively Chinese but are also the inheritance of others as well like Japan, Korea and Vietnam, in the same way that the ideas of Greece and Rome are the common inheritance of all those who are part of Western civilization. Indeed, as I have argued earlier, East Asian civilization has incorporated a great deal from Western civilization. I was told when I visited the Juilliard School in New York recently that 75 per cent of the students in the freshmen year are of ethnic Asian origin. The head told me quite frankly that it will increasingly be left to those of ethnic Asian origin to maintain and develop the Western tradition of music. Whether this will in fact happen we cannot say but what is interesting is the trend of development.

We have a responsibility to the civilization of which we are a part and to the future. Japan has a major role to play. ASEAN has a lesser role but not an unimportant one. ASEAN has much to learn from Japan and Japan can also learn something from ASEAN. On all sides, we should work towards reducing cultural arrogance and increasing cultural exchange.

oooooooooooooooooooo