Cultural Dialogue and Global Society in the 21st Century: An Asian Approach

Masayuki Yamauchi (The University of Tokyo)

Global society in the 21st century will be characterized by two apparently opposed trends – one towards diversification, and one towards uniformity. The major forces promoting these two trends are the technological advances in transportation, and communication as symbolized by the so-called IT revolution. The Internet enables almost instant worldwide transmission of such varied items as interesting ideas, funds for business management or investment, unique images, and the latest findings in scientific research, and with various goods and electronic money passing with increasing ease over borders, it is clear that a shared global standard is beginning to emerge among the peoples of the world. In other words, global society is through the traffic of goods and money moving increasingly in the direction of uniformity. However, the situation becomes more complicated when it is people rather than goods or money trying to cross national borders. In the 21st century too, the movement of people is almost sure to be a source of confrontation and dispute in many societies. In both America and the European Union, conservatism is on the rise, with growing opposition to immigration. Japan has not yet experienced a large scale inflow of immigrants, but recent statistics suggest that its population could drop to 100 million by 2050, and 65 million by 2100 without outside input. If Japan is to maintain its present high productivity and standard of living, it is going to have to accept many more immigrants from Asia. This would represent a move towards diversification for Japan. However, the Japanese tend to strongly equate Japanese culture with the nation of Japan itself, and such strong coupling of culture with the national framework is sure to make the road to a more diversified society a rocky one. At the same time, however, the move towards uniformity with other nations, driven by the markets and IT, will become ever more prevalent.

This situation is however not unique to Japan. The countries of Asia all take pride in their respective cultures, and one could equally ask of China, Korea, and the Islamic nations, whether they possess the ability to show understanding for the tenets and values of each others’ cultures. Is a dialogue leading to real mutual understanding in fact even possible? Could one say, for example, that the ability to translate the English word “flower” into its Japanese equivalent “hana”, or into the Arabic, “zahra”, constitutes a genuinely meaningful dialogue with people possessing totally different cultures? Though this is not the right place to debate philosophical exactitudes, I think that any reasonable person holds the cultural and social mores of the community in which he or she grew up in, and the world view shaped by those mores, to be the most natural and universal. When such a reasonable person comes in contact with another culture, however, that person’s beliefs invariably begin to waver under the influence of the differences he or she discovers. Even in a naïve way, such wavering is of vital importance, since the reasonable person, internalizing the opposing trends of both diversity and uniformity, would surely be inclined to discard his or her view of the world as an absolute in the interest of minimizing the risk of confrontation and dispute.
Such an approach can enable us to go beyond a “clash of cultures” to achieve a “cultural dialogue”. It is Iran’s President Hatami, representing the Asian view, who has proposed such a cultural dialogue as an alternative to the “clash of cultures” view of history which tends to have been emphasized in the West. I should point out that Mohamed Hatami has a very high opinion of “Western civilization” for its worldwide influence over economics, politics and society. What’s more, he is surprisingly objective in his views about Islam. In September 1998, he even went so far as to say that while Islam had once comprised a civilization which had contributed significantly to the history of human progress, it had “lost both its position and role in the present world”. By “the present world”, he of course means Western civilization, and he goes on to state quite baldly that if the products of Western civilization were to disappear, life would be impossible also for non-Westerners. What really surprised me was Hatami’s declaration that “the golden age of Islam peaked several hundred years ago”, after which he goes on to argue in favor of learning about Western values and acknowledging the achievements of Western civilization as a means of establishing a dialogue (from Mohamed Hatami “No religion can boast absolute truth”).

This is an astonishingly forthright statement for the leader of present-day Iran to make, but in order to bring about a dialogue with the West, such boldness is probably necessary. Hatami’s words remind me of the following words written by the Japanese philosopher Toshihiko Izutsu: “The most outstanding feature of the prevailing cultural universals (concepts or ideas regarding culture and everyday life held almost universally by mankind at the level of global society) pervading the world is that they are all of Western origin. Moreover most people are completely unaware of this fact, which goes to show the depth of penetration of Western ideas into individual cultures of the non-Western world. At the same time, this fact demonstrates the overwhelming power of Western culture, as a cultural paradigm for all humanity, to model global society” (from Imi no Fukami: Toyo Tetsugaku no Sui-I (Depth of Meaning – the Level of Eastern Philosophy) pub. Iwanami Shoten, 1985)

Hatami’s words provoked a warm response from former German President Roman Herzog, who declared in April 1999 that Hatami represented “the true voice of Islam, presenting his own culture in detail, showing understanding towards other cultures, and appraising each according to exacting judgments”. Herzog reflects on the way in which most Westerners tend towards an ethnocentric view of their own behavior as reasonable and rational, and that of others belonging to other cultures as irrational, and goes on to suggest that the task facing both Western and Islamic societies is the reconciliation of reason with emotion, mind with heart, and that such reconciliation would constitute a resource for creating a future fit for humankind. His attitude in a paper titled “The West must first doubt its presumptions”, can be extraordinary humble one.

Westerners should in other words develop a healthy skepticism with regard to the presumptions of their culture as the starting point on the road to overcoming East-West confrontation and establishing a genuine cultural dialogue. Moreover if the world view arrived at as a result of such an exercise is not reflected in political and economic policy, then ultimately no dialogue between
cultures will be possible. Particularly where the youth of America are concerned, there is a need to expose them to the ideas of such thinkers as [Claude] Levi-Strauss or [Jacques] Derrida regarding ways of viewing the world, or at the very least provide them with the kind of framework for interpreting history that the world history course taught at Japanese high schools presents. This is no doubt an impossibly fanciful expectation for the present time, but if a cultural dialogue is to be achieved, we can only hope for the appearance of an increasing number of people in Western society who, in place of the subjective transcendentalism which has its origins in Cartesian philosophy, realize the importance of taking a cross-cultural intellectual stance and constantly reverting from subjective to objective view, comparing the two on the same plane. In this respect, I feel that much can be learned from Asian thought as it developed in China and Korea and then Islamic society, taking as it does the exploration of “self” as its philosophical departure point.

Residing as they do in the depths of human consciousness, such elements of the human psyche as impulses, emotions, aesthetic sensibilities and such like cannot be explained solely in terms of intellect, but I feel that one could arrive at their understanding through a synthesis of the ideas behind Islam, Hinduism and Japanese Buddhism on the one hand, with Western philosophy on the other. Such an attempt would not possible within the bounds of Cartesian transcendentalism, since Descartes’ mind/body dualism rests on the existential presumption that the physical and spiritual worlds are ultimately irreducible in terms of each other. In that respect, attempts at melding of Asian or Japanese intellectual traditions with Western principles, and achieving a fusion of Eastern and Western thought might create a suitable substrate for the development of a cultural dialogue.

However, the aim in conducting a dialogue between cultures is not to create a world of uniform thought and culture, but ideally the exact opposite. Cultural dialogue should be nothing less than a mechanism for enriching the individuality and world view of people, whether they are from America or an Islamic community. Any culture tends to possess a framework which determines the basic form of the behavior, thoughts, and emotions of the people belonging to that culture. The people belonging to a certain culture base their ideas, feelings and behavior on the framework of that culture. Of course there are those who are very aware of this point, and others who barely recognize the fact. What is important to note however is that such a framework is a very closed entity with a very inflexible internal structure. When two or more cultures have come in contact in the course of history, whatever the circumstances, clashes and confrontations have occurred again and again. Ever since the conflict between the Achaemenid Empire of Persia and the city states of Ancient Greece, clashes between civilizations has been a major and very familiar theme of world history. If, however, the energy released when two cultures clash could be channeled in the right direction, contact between two different cultures could provide a golden opportunity for the birth of constructive self-reflection. People would be able examine their own cultural framework in the light of a different one, and if such an experiment succeeds, not only will conflict be avoided, but an opportunity will be created to broaden a culture’s intellectual horizons. It is in fact not that hard to find examples in history of the way in which a clash of civilizations has led to dialogue on a higher level. This is what happened
when the Mongols unified Eurasia and in effect wrote the history of the world for a period, and in the European Renaissance when the legacy of Islam was integrated with humanistic values.

Toshihiko Izutsu uses the expression “fusion of horizons” to describe the way in which contact between two opposed cultural frameworks can result in both attaining a new perspective on the world above and beyond their existing world views. If one is talking here in terms of principles and spirit, this comment would apply not only at the level of culture but also civilization, and surely what is called for today is such a fusion of horizons – the key to changing a clash of civilizations into a dialogue between them. If efforts were made throughout the world, between all cultures, to attain a “fusion of horizons”, then we would at last be achieving globalization in the true sense of the word.

I would now like to look at three specific problems which global society needs to solve in the 21st century – the problems of poverty, overpopulation and environmental degradation in Asia - from the perspective of cultural dialogue. Professor Anthony Giddens, British Premier Tony Blair’s ideological guru, has said that an out-and-out meritocracy results in grave structural inequality which can threaten the very foundations of society. In present-day Japanese and Western societies, markets appear to function according to a “winner takes all” system, whereby leading sports personalities or musicians and such like who are blessed with just a little more talent than others are able to reap incredible rewards as a result. The same could be said for the IT revolution, a slight edge in ability resulting in astonishing gaps in earnings, producing ridiculously rich “unknown celebrities” almost overnight in such fields as the information industry and e-commerce. Former President Herzog has also made the point that dangerous fissures and appalling disparities are emerging within both Western and Islamic cultures, giving rise to ideologies popularly referred to as fundamentalism, and religious radical and extremist movements which betray their own cultures and project a negative image. Japan, China and Korea are no exceptions.

Another problem is that the poor are getting poorer, and the well-off are becoming even better off as a result of unevenness in the tempo of population increase and economic growth. A certain degree of inequality could be regarded as an inevitable response in particular societies, since population increase invariably results in a decrease in equality and a bias in the distribution of wealth. However, in the year 2000, the world’s population will probably reach 7 billion, over four times the 1900 level of 1.5 billion, and most experts agree that the population will have topped 8.5 billion by 2025, a truly frightening prospect. Moreover 6.5 billion of those people will be living in poor countries. The population of Bangla Desh is predicted to grow from the present 115 million to 235 million, while India will leap from 855 million to 1.44 billion. Even Egypt’s population will jump from the present 50 million to 125 million, and Kenya from 24 million to over 80 million, an almost fourfold increase. And two-thirds of the world’s population will be crammed into urban slums of less-developed regions. It is hardly surprising that such low-income areas tend to become spawning grounds for Islamic fundamentalist armed factions and other extremist movements, and not only in the Islamic societies of the Middle East. By about 2030, the birth rate in the so-called Third World will
begin to drop and the world’s population is predicted to stabilize at about 10 billion, five times the 1950 level. One of the major discussion points in any cultural dialogue regarding the future of global society is likely to be whether to maintain the world population at a certain stable level, or maintain a steady fluctuation at a certain level.

However the richer countries of the Western world are surrounded by poor countries with younger generations seeking a better life and well-paid jobs. Despite being an island nation, Japan too faces similar circumstances. It has been reported that by 1994 in China, over 100 million peasants had left the countryside for the cities, and have been followed every year since by about 13 million. The flow of Chinese workers to Japan is for the time being very limited, but the movement of people in the Far East has become a lot easier in recent times as a result of advances in communication and transportation, and it is impossible to predict how long this situation can hold. Moreover, if Japan, despite the thorny domestic political issues involved, decides to allow a large number of foreign workers in to the country to maintain the workforce, what are the likely consequences? The Japanese populace might approve the entry of foreign workers out of necessity, but just as many Germans did with respect to the Turkish immigrant worker population, erect high barriers to prevent their full-blown assimilation. Or immigrant workers might be forced to forego the civil rights enjoyed by Japanese citizens, and accept very stringent conditions in return for right of entry.

Like the Huguenots who escaped religious persecution to settle in Holland and England, most immigrants in history have not only been very eager to succeed, but often possess special skills, and are also frequently ready to work harder than the average citizen of country in which they have settled. Immigrants want to prosper, and when invariably they do prosper, they boost the economy through consumption, and so in effect add jobs to the labor market rather than take them. In other words, even if cultural differences are often the cause of prejudice and hostility, they can also be a source of newfound vitality for the whole society. Despite this, there is a danger that society will come up with various ingenious excuses for establishing policies and laws which justify unequal treatment of, and discrimination against immigrants. Authorities might contrive ways to ensure that immigrants can find work in only limited, and usually poorly paid occupations. However when foreign minorities which are first scattered like so many tiny isolated islands throughout society begin to attain a certain level of cultural stability and population, they can present a threat to the integrity of a nation state. For example, due in large part to the teachings of Islam, the Pakistani minority in England, and the Turkish minority in Germany both have very high birth rates. Unwilling or not allowed to assimilate into society at large, these little islands of immigrants will as a result of population growth no doubt come to constitute an almost insoluble problem for the majority population. A nation might be well advised to promote cultural dialogue at the internal domestic level in order to avoid disputes and misunderstandings.

Often identifiable through their physical features, and also frequently projecting a strong ethnic identity and sensibilities, immigrants and those viewed as immigrants often find themselves
singled out as the target of enmity from people calling for ethnic purity and exclusion of immigrants. In many cases, the people can be invariably right-wing racialists. One might think that immigrants and right wing racialists would be isolated from each other geographically, but on the contrary they frequently reside in neighboring communities. Promotion of cultural dialogue on a global scale, difficult though it is, could also be of help in relaxing tensions at such neighborhood community levels of society.

Racial and ethnic discrimination is linked also to poverty, and it is for that reason that frictions occurring between the working class population of a country and its immigrant population is an eternal theme of society. The likelihood that solutions to such friction, through either diplomatic or internal political initiatives, will be found by about 2025 is very slim indeed, but the fostering of a dialogue between ethnic entities might go a long way to keeping such frictions to the minimum. If like the first generation, second and later generations of the immigrant population remain in the minority, the chances are that political unrest and a destabilization of the social order will not occur. However as the ratio of immigrants vis-à-vis the majority ethnic group increases, even the possibility of civil war cannot be ruled out as a worst case scenario.

The disparities in wealth between nations is another major cause of discontent among the impoverished peoples of poor nations, and can easily develop into a clash of civilizations. According to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Human Development Report 1992, the richest country of the world's population in 1960 had incomes 30 times greater than the poorest, but by 1990, this income disparity between the richest and poorest had leaped to 150 times. This trend is likely to continue at least for the foreseeable future in the 21st century. We will no doubt see sharp schisms appearing between Western civilization with its many rich countries (including Japan) and civilizations composed of poor countries. Particularly in regions where different cultures share borders, fault lines will appear, though maybe not in the sense of the word as used by [Harvard political scientist] Samuel Huntington. Disparities within the societies of poor countries will also increase, as will disparities between developing countries in the same regions, with only about half of those countries benefiting from development in terms of individual incomes. Moreover the Internet has enabled the younger generation of poor countries, unlike their elders, to learn about the good life in the world’s richer regions, and keeping the political impulses of this generation in check will not be an easy task. Lacking a safety valve for the release of their pent-up frustrations, the young people of poor countries are likely to turn to extremist solutions. [Former American National Security Advisor Zbigniew] Brezhinski stated that redressing the extreme inequalities existing in global society will be the most urgent task of the 21st century, and this is likely to be the main theme of any dialogue between cultures and civilizations.

Environmental problems, the source of increasing concern since around the 1970s, pose a threat to world stability every bit as serious as overpopulation, and constitute another main theme for cultural dialogue. In the ranks of environmental activists there are many who claim that the end of the
world as we know it is just around the corner, but unless countries such as Holland and Bangla Desh really do sink beneath the waves by around 2025, it is hard to take the Nostradamus-flavored predictions and arguments of such people seriously. However, it is equally clear that unbridled industrialism and economic growth that pay no regard to environmental concerns are no longer permissible. A decisive feature of environmental problems is the way they affect the whole world. Developed countries such as America, Japan and the members of the EU have in the past recklessly exploited the natural environment, leading to the extinction of species, and destruction of large swathes of forest. In the Cold War era, the Soviet Union and other former communist countries also ran roughshod over the environment and the health of their peoples in their pursuit of progress and industrialization, resulting among other disasters in the shrinking of the Aral Sea and drying up of the Amu Darya (Oxus River). It has now come to light that as a result of the industrialization policies of the developed nations, carbon dioxide and other “greenhouse” gases released into the atmosphere are preventing the dissipation of heat from the earth’s surface, resulting in a warming of the planet which threatens to inflict tragedy on a global scale. Here too, the nations of the world need to search their souls and seek solutions in the context of a cultural dialogue.

In addition to the atmospheric pollution caused by developed nations, another major concern as we enter the 21st century is the fact that developing nations are industrializing without establishing sufficient environmental assessment procedures or other restrictions, posing yet another threat to the environment. In their quest for prosperity, the Asian countries will follow the example of the developed nations. Moves by Western governments and NGOs to place restrictions on the industrialization of Asian countries on the grounds of environmental protection, symbolized recently by the breakdown of talks at the WTO Seattle Conference, have the same hypocritical air about them as the strident calls of Western nations for nature conservation after they tired of harvesting whales for their oil and otherwise depleting the Earth’s natural resources. From the point of view of Asia’s newly industrializing countries, the dire environmental problems of the present day are a legacy of the colonial policies of the Western nations, and it is those nations who need to search their souls, take responsibility, and bear the brunt of the costs of environmental degradation. Environmental concerns are in this way intimately linked to problems of equality, and here too, any discussions regarding environmental problems conducted between NGOs of developed countries and their Asian counterparts or government bodies need to be conducted in the broader context of a cultural dialogue.

The zero growth arguments propounded by some of the more hard-line environmental conservationists tend to be totally unrealistic in their calls for a return to a pristine state of apparent harmony between man and nature. Even if one cannot fault the ideal behind such proposals, there is little point in putting forward fantastical plans which are impossible to implement, and any dialogue between cultures needs to be realistic. Moreover, implementing a zero growth policy under the present circumstances would in effect uphold existing inequalities between nations and cultures. This is also a problem of North-South disparities, and those clamoring for absolute environmental preservation tend, like hard-line nature conservationists, to belong to the comfortable middle classes of rich Northern hemisphere countries such as America, Japan and the EU nations. Concern for the environment is
commendable as long as restraint is exercised to prevent its development into the kind of irrational “ecologism” seen in such movements as the call for a total whaling ban. Contradictions can even emerge among the rich nations. For example former French actress Bridget Bardot’s virulent opposition to the harvest of seal cubs in Canada has led to an increase in the number of adult seals and concomitant depletion of fish stocks, posing a serious threat to the livelihoods of Canadian fishermen.

Poor countries burdened with massive underemployment quite naturally hope for rapid and large scale development in order to catch up with developed countries. Zero growth would probably be much more easily endured by a middle class resident of Japan than by the average Bangla Deshi national, but can we realistically expect mankind to choose between such extreme alternatives as returning to the subsistence lifestyle of Stone Age ancestors or unconditional extinction of ourselves for the sake of environmental conservation? It would appear that some kind of compromise is inevitable. The only certainty is that if we fail to find the right balance between people and resources and the influence of human activity within the very near future, the future of global capitalism with its imperatives of pursuit of profit and accumulation of capital will rest on increasingly shaky ground. If the well-heeled sectors of the global population don’t rethink their lifestyles, and decide what is really necessary for mankind in the 21st century, any call for environmental protection is paradoxically likely to aggravate the existing gaps and friction between the poor and better off peoples of the world. Dialogue between cultures, while starting as a philosophical proposition, needs to be worked on and organized so that it can also serve as a key to the formulation of realistic solutions to the problems facing global society in the 21st century.