

Problems of Thai Japanese Cultural Exchange

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A Thai scholar who is an expert on Japan once pointed out that there has not been a two-way cultural interchange between Japan and Thailand. With regard to the performing arts and exhibitions, the Japan Foundation sends several groups of artists to Thailand every year. Thai enterprises have started to invite Japanese musicians and some Japanese groups visit this country at their own expenses.

It is to be noted, however, that in bringing

Japanese culture to Thailand, we have to consider Thai requests on the matter and it should never be one way or pushing. It is a problem, however, that the Thai are lacking in their knowledge of the variety of Japanese culture. The Japanese side should try to give information and knowledge on theatrical arts music, fine arts and so on to the Thai side. And at the same time it is desirable that the Thai in response should try to study Japanese culture and select what is to be intro-

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duced to Thailand.

Generally speaking, in Thailand there is a lack of information and knowledge about Japanese culture. The Thai tend to focus on a few aspects of Japanese culture or society and praise or criticize them. English language materials about Japan, mostly in book form, are available here; Thai materials are scarce, however. For the promulgation of Thai materials, both the Japanese, including the Japan Foundation, and the Thai should cooperate but they need an adequate budget and foresight.

I would like to refer to a Japanese private foundation which has been successfully carrying out and promoting translation of literary works of the Southeast Asian nations into Japanese. In one project, the selection of Thai literary works to be translated is made by the Thai. It would be preferable, then, that the selection of the Japanese literature to be translated into Thai be made by the Japanese. This kind of plan has not materialized, however, I am afraid it might cause the Thai to react unfavorably, attacking it as "one - way pushing," and going-so far as to label it a form of cultural aggression.

In Thailand, the central offices in charge of domestic promulgation and the maintenance of Thai culture are the National Culture Commission and the Fine Arts Department. It is apparently true that neither office has a budget for introducing Thai culture abroad. It is true that cultural interchange between Thailand and Japan is only one way or imbalanced at this time. The Thai people and the Thai government should seriously consider the situation. If they intend to introduce their culture abroad, they must be prepared for the expenses and can not depend on financial sources from abroad.

Both Japan and Thailand are Western oriented. The Japanese do not know about Thai culture and are not interested in it. The one - sidedness in the cultural exchange between the two countries may be related to this fact. It should

be added that this same one - sidedness or imbalance is also remarkable in the exchange between Thailand and Western countries.

The study of a foreign language is an important factor in mutual understanding. The number of Japanese studying Thai is increasing, that of Thai studying Japanese is far more. Some 30,000 Thai are estimated to be studying Japanese. The motive is said to be closely related to the economic activity by the Japanese, that is, the increasing number of Japanese enterprises coming to Thailand. The Japanese language is offered as a major at four national universities and one private university. It is taught as a minor and an elective at several other universities, teachers' colleges and high schools. There are also two big language schools where the students number more than 3,000 each. The major motivations for Thai students at the universities is that knowledge of Japanese will enable them to work in Japanese enterprises. This trend has been remarkable for several years, but the rapid increase of Japanese enterprises in the last two years has accelerated the trend. The demand for Thai who understand Japanese has been expanding, and the recruitment of such staff is reportedly getting serious among Japanese enterprises. The demand by Japanese teaching institutions for Thai teachers of Japanese has also been strong. However, no Thai are willing to work as teachers because of the low salary, which is said to be half as much as what their friends earn at other enterprises. It is widely known that those Thai who study in Japan for master's degree, or who attend the Japanese language training course sponsored by the Japan Foundation, change their original aim to teach Japanese in schools and get jobs at Japanese enterprises instead after returning to Thailand.

The Japan Foundation has been offering other programs for Japanese language teachers in Thailand, such as salary assistance, donation

of teaching materials and dispatch of native Japanese experts. At this moment, however, the demand is too great to be met fully. The Japan Foundation has a policy that the Japanese language teaching in Thailand should be taken care of by native Thai teachers. Unless such a situation does not change, I am afraid that our policy will not materialize in the near future. The Thai government is also trying to give more positions of Japanese teachers at universities but it's extremely difficult for the universities to hire Thai teachers of Japanese.

It is good to see more Thai speaking Japanese. As Japanese, we wish that more Thai would read Japanese texts on literature, sociology, economics, and other topics. Further, we would like them to translate such works into Thai and become Japanologists. Is such a wish a one - sided, excessive expectation? Based on our experience, we have the impression that the Thai are individualistic and materialistic.

The Thai government has policy in effect to encourage foreign investment in order to serve the promotion of her economic and social development. Many foreign enterprise, including Japanese, are thus coming into Thailand. I wonder, however, if it is possible for Japanese enterprises to come into this country without limit. Research by Thai scholars has disclosed that the Thai wonder why Japan assists Thailand by offering economic and technological development aid. Some Thai conclude that Japanese aim to reap the fruit of this aid for their own profit. The Thai ignore the benefits they are enjoying from Japanese aid and narrowly define the objective of incoming enterprises only as the sole pursuit of economic profit. As the Thai feel that the excessive Japanese presence will lead to over - dependence, the Japanese should take into account the excessive presence of Japanese enterprises in Thailand in spite of its encouragement by the Thai government

A Thai scholar specializing in Japan once made a historical analysis of Thai interest in Japan, dividing it to three stages, as follows : (1) Thai royalty and bureaucrats were interested in Japan from the 1880's through the 1920's, when Japan was assiduously absorbing Western civilization. (2) From the 1930's through 1940's the Thai military and politicians got interested in Japan when she was developing her activities in Indochina. (3) From the 1950's to the present, leaders and scholars of ASEAN nations have been interested in Japan's playing a major role in the region. In this last stage, Thai scholars started studying Japan through works by Western scholars, almost three or four generations behind the West.

The first generation of Thai scholars who specialized in Japan are now professors at universities. The second generation consists of those who were their disciples, who studied mostly in Japan, and who can understand Japanese texts. From the bilateral point of view, we find that Japanese studies of Thailand are superior to Thai studies of Japan both qualitatively and quantitatively.

In the fields of humanities, social sciences and arts, the Japan Foundation has been promoting Japanese studies abroad by offering such programs as the fellowship program, research grants, visiting professorship conference support and library support. The themes in these programs are overwhelmingly economic, probably because the Thai interest in Japan is economic and because the Thai thinks the study of Japan's economic recovery after World War II will contribute to economic and social development in Thailand. Some Thai scholars have expressed the importance of their studies on religion, history, society and literature because they think the study of these subjects would reveal Japanese mentality more clearly.

A Japanese scholar pointed out that the interest of Asian students in Japan is focussed

on science and technology. It is Westerners who try to study history, religion, philosophy and literature. Are the people in developing countries in Southeast Asia fascinated only by science, technology and economics. It is probably because they are very practical and they have no academic curiosity. It may be because the history of their Japanese studies is still short.

Regarding "study" or "research" in Thailand, it can be said that the duty of university professors is to "educate" students and that study and research are regarded somewhat differently from education and therefore additional fee is paid for study and/or research. We understand that there are some difficulties for professors who are underpaid and have no time for study and research. The universities have no budget for them and they have to look for funds from outsiders. The joint studies and research projects undertaken by major universities here with some Japanese counterparts apparently depends on funding by Japanese side.

It seems that the main interest of the Thai government and universities is in science, technology and medical science. The government allocates budgets for studies in these fields. In contrast, the budget for Japanese studies is scarce and scholars specializing in Japanese studies do not even request the government for funds. This results in the dependence upon funds from Japan. I understand that Japan - Thailand relations have been very close and that Japanese studies are necessary today.

The poor infrastructure in Japanese studies is caused by the fact that the scholars in Japanese studies are in an unfavorable situation in Thailand. When the Japanese government donated the building of the Japanese Studies Center to Thammasat University four years ago, a number of books on Japan were also donated to its library. The number of the books is not yet sufficient, I think, and major universities should hold sufficient amount of materials

for their Japanese studies. The Japan Foundation Bangkok Office has been trying to publish a union catalogue to list all books on Japan and teaching materials written in Japanese, English and Thai, available at major university libraries in the Bangkok area. After its publication, it will be donated to institutions concerned so that they can determine what books are available at what institutions. The Bangkok Office is also planning to publish Thai translations of Materials on Japan.

Most of the Thai I have had the chance to meet and talk with are those who are involved in universities and who studied in the U.S., England or Japan. They speak English and/or Japanese so fluently that there is no difficulty in communication. The intellectuals, mostly including university teachers, carefully observe the current situation in this country and make enthusiastic efforts to orient Thailand toward a better society even in terms of the moral and social justice. They are persons to be revered, I believe. They acknowledge themselves to be spokesmen for the farmers who occupy the 80 percent of the Thai population. It is they who sometimes raise criticism against Japan, and it is necessary for the Japanese to listen to them seriously.

At the same time, I can point out that there are many lone wolves among the intellectuals who are not good at activities based on teamwork although this is not a characteristic of intellectuals but of the Thai in general. It also seems true that the intellectuals are restrained from making certain demands of the government and refrain from criticizing government policies probably because of the old social hierarchy which still remains in existence today. Certain criticism against Japan can probably be recognized as resulting from their frustrated sense of justice. Is it wrong to think that the Thai have some feeling of dependence upon developed countries, like Western countries and Japan, as it clearly exists in the minds of the Chinese.

The exchange of culture must have started spontaneously. It was in European countries

where modernization and industrialization were in their courses that cultural exchange was first implemented consciously and politically. We have to face the fact that Thailand is a developing nation, in which the major interest of the government is in the social and economic development, necessarily placing cultural concerns far behind social and economic matters. It is understandable that the developing countries are worried about the negative effects of industrialization on their traditional cultures. Some developing nations regard Japan as a model of a country where the traditional culture has been kept in spite of industrialization. Japan may contribute to the developing countries in her "cultural cooperation," rather than "technology transfer."

The motive for Japan's official comment of cultural exchange was both economic and political, as it was for the European countries. We hope that cultural exchange based on the principle of cultural relativism will contribute to promoting mutual understanding and friendship among nations. We have to remember that the stress on cultural relativism may tend to cause nationalism and eventually produce unfavorable situations in the world if there is a lack of mutual tolerance.

Although this essay has been short and unsatisfactory, I have pointed out the importance of mutual respect and the efforts for self - help in the cultural exchange between Japan and Thailand. I have to stress that remarks and comments. I have made above are purely personal.

The following books, articles and reports were useful in writing this essay.

- (1) *Report on Cultural Affairs Abroad* (by Japan Foundation Oversea Friends) No. 1, 1987
- (2) *Research Report on Danish, German and Japanese Assistance to Agricultural Development in Thailand : A Comparative Study*, 1984, Institute of Asian Studies and Volkswagen Foundation, Chulalongkorn University
- (3) *New Directions for Japanese Studies in Thailand*, 1987, Thammasat University
- (4) " *Ajiya eno Gensoo wo Haisu* " (Wipe out excessive expectation of Asian national :), Kanji Nishio, " *Seiron* " (Sound Argumant) Magazine, Jan., 1989
- (5) " *Chugokujin no Amae no Kozo* " (Structure of Dependence in Chinese Mantality), Reiko Yamaguchi, " *Shokun* " (My Friends!) Magazine, Jan., 1989
- (6) *Culture and Industrialization : An Asian Dilemma*, R.E. Vents, P.S.J. Chan (eds) 1980, McGraw - Mill International Book Co.
- (7) " *Shin Tai Jijo* " (Recent Thai Affairs), Tadaharu Tanaka, 1981, Nitchu Shuppan Co.

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