

Reconnecting the Region Through Cultural Exchange

A panel discussion, "Reconnecting the region through cultural exchange" (Special Sponsor: The Japan Foundation), took place at the 26th International Conference on the Future of Asia, which was held for two days on May 20-21. Now, as we face the risk of division created by the COVID-19 pandemic, how do we continue international exchanges that transcend borders, cultures, and creed? One expert and two figures in culture and the arts came together to examine the current state of affairs as they discussed the importance of cultural exchanges and how to overcome divisions in the pandemic.



Masayuki Yamauchi
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Historian specializing in Middle Eastern and Islamic area studies and the history of international relations. Appointed a graduate school professor at the University of Tokyo in 1993 and became a professor emeritus of the University of Tokyo in 2012. A specially appointed professor at the Musashino Institute for Global Affairs and a special visiting professor at Mohammed V University in Morocco.

The 13th-century Iranian poet Saadi said, "Until the day comes when one encounters hardship, one does not understand the value of a joyous day." It is an aphorism that truly resonates with the people of Europe, North America, Asia, and Japan as we remember those we have lost in the COVID-19 pandemic. In one of his poems, Saadi wrote, "Think of a person with a fever who drifts between sleep and wakefulness. The sick know the length of the night." This poem contains the words to

Digital technology as the premise

steel the heart and overcome a pandemic. In the 14th century, about 100 years after he wrote this, the bubonic plague spread across Europe. "The Decameron" by Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio was inspired by the Black Death. Even after countless pandemics, we carry those experiences with us and put them on display in new ways as we continue to produce culture and engage in exchanges uninterrupted.

Those of us living in Asia in the present are in a digitalized era. It is a time of a pandemic caused by the coronavirus, and it is a time when cultural exchanges have become digital. For a while, the screen will be the mainstream as the medium for cultural exchange. The pandemic has accelerated digitalization and has also facilitated digitalized cultural exchanges.

I would like to touch on New Zealand. Zara Stanhope of the Brewster Art Gallery, who was unable to join us today, is from there. In February of last year, I visited the site

of the shooting incident at a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand, which had happened about one year prior. I was impressed with the work of New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern. She applied the lessons learned from the experience of and reaction to the mosque shooting to the coronavirus crisis. With quick decision-making, she announced a state of emergency. While implementing a lockdown and other strict measures, she maintained a strong connection with citizens to elicit their empathy. Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen is another leader who has implemented an effective response to the coronavirus crisis.

What we should learn from adamant politicians like Prime Minister Ardern and President Tsai is methods of overcoming the coronavirus crisis with soft power. It is time for us to reconsider how Japan should engage in exchanges with the new culture being created in Asian countries, Australia, and New Zealand.



Learning together through exposure to other cultures

Yamauchi: Mr. Mendoza, I'd like to hear what it's like to film in Japan, which you've done several times.

Mendoza: Five years ago, I shot a short film entitled "SHINIUMA *Dead Horse*" in Hokkaido. Unlike Japanese people, Filipinos are not so punctual, and we tell jokes while working. The Japanese crew didn't seem to appreciate the Filipino crew's laidback attitude, so I told the Filipinos, "We have to be sensitive to the way Japanese people work and their culture." This was a lesson for them about cultural differences. They started to take their work more seriously, and over time, even the Japanese crew started to share jokes with them. They were able to learn by adapting to each other's culture. This is the power of art. The important thing is for us to be connected as fellow human beings, not simply as artists.

Yamauchi: That's exactly right. When the mosque shooting in New Zealand happened, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern quickly went to the scene and

gave a speech where she said, "They are us." We are all together. Although the prime minister is a Christian, she stood in the shoes of Muslims and made it very clear that her most fundamental position is that humans are humans. It is also a fundamental and important idea in the arts and in culture. Where did you shoot in Hokkaido?

Mendoza: In Obihiro, which is famous for *banei kyoso* horse racing. Even though we filmed in February, there wasn't much snow, but only on the day of our departure, there was such heavy snowfall that our flight got cancelled. I was glad of the snow, and we decided to do our last shooting there. It was a beautiful experience I'll never forget.

Yoshimoto: That's a very interesting story, Mr. Mendoza. I'm involved in an international network called the World Cities Culture Forum (WCCF). We had planned to meet in Milan in October 2020, but it was canceled because of the pandemic. Deputy Mayor of London Justine Simons, our

current chair, suggested that since international exchanges have come to a halt, we should hold online meetings. We started holding biweekly meetings to share what is happening in each city.

Those conversations led to a shared understanding of two things. The first one is that resuming cultural and artistic activities, which have been hurt by the novel coronavirus, is an issue of utmost importance for municipal policy. The other is that culture and the arts have great power to revive a stagnant society. It is at this time in particular, when we are used to doing things online, that we must inquire again into the significance and role of international cultural exchanges conducted in the real world. The digital world and the real world complementing each other will allow international exchange to enter a new stage.

Yamauchi: I really like what Mr. Mendoza said about Filipinos believing that something good will happen in the end.

"SHINIUMA Dead Horse"

Part of "Asian Three-Fold Mirror 2016: Reflections," an omnibus film by the Japan Foundation Asia Center and the Tokyo International Film Festival. Set against the backdrop of *banei kyoso* horse racing in Obihiro, it portrays the circumstances of a deportation of a Filipino laborer who resides in Japan illegally.



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Times of adversity require new steps

Mendoza: Filipinos are very outgoing people. Even when something bad happens, we're always positive. In fact, we can be too optimistic sometimes. That may be a difference with Japanese people. Both Japan and the Philippines have lots of beautiful nature. Many tourists have traveled between our countries and interacted. We've learned about each other by exposing ourselves to a different culture. It's very important to interact with people from other countries.

Yamauchi: There have also been Japanese-Filipino exchanges in the world of sumo. Sumo, our national sport, symbolizes Japan's traditional culture, but it is becoming more multinational, and there are many active sumo wrestlers with roots in other countries. In the May sumo tournament, there were two wrestlers in the top ranks who have Filipino mothers. I believe that sports exchanges are also, in a larger sense, cultural exchanges. I think they symbolize a new form of culture that

is created through the meeting of different cultures.

Yoshimoto: In a newspaper opinion piece entitled "The Path the Soul Travels," the novelist Haruki Murakami wrote, "Cultural exchanges are a path where the soul crosses borders, so to speak." He added, "We must not obstruct them." With time, a given pair of countries may come into disagreement over a political stance or economic dispute. Cultural exchanges, however, have the power to create distance from political confrontations and economic disputes, encourage mutual understanding, and repair division. Right now, the division along borders is due to COVID-19, not political confrontation or economic disputes, but "the path the soul travels" is obstructed. Culture has played a major role in reconstruction following the Great East Japan Earthquake. We cannot speak of the pandemic as being comparable to the earthquake, but the power of culture is particularly needed when society is uncertain.

Encouraging further cultural exchanges will be essential to the future of Asia.

Yamauchi: We especially need to give greater consideration to the nature of international exchanges in this time of the COVID-19 pandemic. In-person exchanges are difficult, but there are many people in the world who want to engage in exchanges. The French scientist Louis Pasteur once said that in scholarship, there are no borders, but scholars do have homelands. Those who take up cultural exchanges cannot speak abstractly about exchanges while ignoring the love they have for their own countries. When forging these bonds, I hope that we can make some contribution from an Asian perspective.