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FORUM ON
ASEAN-JAPAN CULTURAL RELATIONS

Introduction

1. On 24 July 2009, the ASEAN Studies Centre at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) organised, with support from the Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund, a Forum on ASEAN-Japan Cultural Relations. The Forum aimed to take stock of the cultural dimension of ASEAN-Japan relations and provide recommendations for decision-makers in ASEAN and Japan on the cultural connections to be promoted in support of the strategic objectives of ASEAN-Japan relations. As such, the Forum brought together high-level officials and individuals involved in promoting ASEAN-Japan relations, and academics to share their views, perspectives and recommendations.

2. Kazuo Ogura, President of the Japan Foundation, provided the Forum’s Keynote Speech, which was delivered on his behalf by Professor Tommy Koh, Ambassador-at-large. The speech outlined five key points – which can also be seen as challenges – in entrenching culture (or cultural relations) as a foundation for partnerships and mutually beneficial actions:
   a. First, the impact of globalisation on the cultures of ASEAN countries and Japan, acting as a stimulus to greater understanding and appreciation of cultures but at the same time leading the respective countries towards preservation and maintenance of their own cultural values and identities;
   b. Second, moving from mere cultural exchanges to more meaningful collaboration and cooperation;
   c. Third, promoting the role that culture can play in conflict-prevention and peace-building;
   d. Fourth, preserving or consolidating each country’s unique culture and identity amidst the waves of globalisation that wash across all societies; and
   e. Fifth, the “fusing” of cultural activities with socio-economic development priorities.
3. Forum sessions explored different aspects of the five key points highlighted in the Keynote Speech, in assessing ASEAN-Japan cultural relations from viewpoints of both ASEAN and Japan. Session I gave an overview of ASEAN-Japan cultural relations. Session II addressed Japan’s “soft power” role in Southeast Asia, first discussing its strategic aspects and ASEAN perceptions, then looking at the culture of industrial relations from viewpoints of Japanese managers and the ASEAN workers. Session III looked into the linkages between culture and industry, especially the impact of Japanese popular culture in Southeast Asia and the response of the industries.

**Session I**  
**ASEAN-Japan Cultural Relations: An Overview**

4. Makoto Yamanaka, Ambassador of Japan to Singapore, and Rodolfo Severino, Head of the ASEAN Studies Centre at ISEAS, presented their respective perspectives of ASEAN-Japan cultural relations.

5. Providing the Japanese perspective, Makoto Yamanaka noted that in the past three decades of ASEAN-Japan cooperation, focus had been on economic development and regional peace and security. As such, culture had not been a priority and tools for cultural exchange were limited. However, the 1977 Fukuda Doctrine – which has remained the basis of Japan’s foreign policy for Southeast Asia – provided the space for a heart-to-heart relationship between ASEAN and Japan to develop. Even so, ASEAN-Japan cultural relations were generally a “one-way traffic” with the culture and tourist flows more from Japan towards ASEAN. In present times, ASEAN-Japan cultural relations have now entered a new phase, bringing about greater interest in cultural interchange and new business initiatives that ultimately support regional community-building in the East Asian region. For example, with the advent of globalisation, the IT revolution, and the rise of the middle class, Japanese popular culture had become a worldwide phenomenon, particularly in Southeast Asia. Japanese anime, costume play (or cosplay), manga, fashion, design and food enjoy an unprecedented popularity as they are now readily accessible and affordable to many who are fascinated by them. This has led to an increase of interest in Japanese language. In the ASEAN region alone, the number of people studying Japanese language had increased almost eightfold (from 55,000 in 1988 to 440,000 in 2006), making it the fastest increase in the world. Worldwide three million people study Japanese (as of 2006), which is four times as many as the 730,000 in 1988.
6. However, in the 1980s the interest was on using Japanese language ability for job opportunities while at present the interest is more on being able to enjoy Japanese anime and manga in their original language. This highlights the cultural attraction. Thus, in the new phase of ASEAN-Japan cultural relations, culture claims merit in its own right. ASEAN-Japan cultural relations in the 21st century would be governed by three distinctive features.

   a. A “two-way relationship”, signalling a clear departure from the one-way cultural relationship in the 1970s and 80s, and balancing cultural relations. This is becoming more evident in the tourism sector and in the spread of “food culture”. Tourist traffic from ASEAN countries to Japan is increasing significantly. Japanese restaurants in Southeast Asia now offer a wide range of high-end gourmet dishes to everyday staples. In Japan, Southeast Asian gastronomy and artworks are “trendy” and are gaining increasing popularity.

   b. Private sector’s leading role in promoting the popularity of culture. Though motivated by profit, private sector initiatives are innovative. The private sector also works with local partners in sales, marketing, research and development, providing business opportunities for local entrepreneurs in ASEAN countries. The private sector is now an important part of the Japanese brand and soft power. This is different from the government-led cultural exchanges of the past.

   c. Community-building, which provides opportunities for joint efforts in East Asia to tackle new challenges, including the global economic crisis, terrorism, pandemics, the environment, and piracy. ASEAN integration and community-building efforts are seen as such effective venues for a regional architecture in East Asia and beyond. Community-building contributes to the creation of a sense of regional solidarity and identity in East Asia.

7. A new ASEAN-Japan cultural relationship is thus necessary, as culture is now a key element in public diplomacy and in building a regional identity and community. In this new phase of cultural relations, the people are in the driving seat and the private sector is taking the lead in responding to their needs. The government should act as facilitator for individual or business initiatives to promote cultural exchanges, while continuing existing efforts for cultural exchanges among and for the youth. Governments should also focus on intellectual property concerns with the spread of digital media. In
this connection, the Japan Creative Centre would be inaugurated in November 2009 in Singapore, as
a test case for collaboration between government and the private sector in promoting Japanese
culture and encouraging business development.

8. Rodolfo Severino provided the ASEAN perspective, highlighting the value of exchanging and
sharing cultures in both the sense of high art (including music, dance, theatre, painting, sculpture)
and the broader sense of spiritual, religious and interpersonal relationships. ASEAN countries
viewed mutual cultural understanding as critical for the fulfilment of its main objectives for regional
peace and stability, economic development and cooperation on common transnational threats.
Mutual understanding was especially important in view of the historical antagonisms, mutual
suspicions and clashes of national interests that ASEAN members had experienced in the past.
Mutual understanding made possible peaceful dispute resolution, shared stands on security issues,
and overcoming the roadblocks for regional integration. Even at present, the pace of working and
cooperating for common regional good in ASEAN was still uneven.

9. Japan had consistently supported ASEAN efforts at cultural exchange and people-to-people contacts.
The Ship for Southeast Asian Youth programme was established in 1974 and continues to bring
together young people from each ASEAN country and Japan each year. The ASEAN Centre was
established in 1981, to promote ASEAN exports to Japan and Japanese investments and tourism in
ASEAN. 1984 saw the establishment of the ASEAN Cultural Fund and the Friendship Programme,
with Japan’s support. The initial activities of the ASEAN Foundation, established in 1997, were
sustained by Japanese support under the ASEAN-Japan Solidarity Fund. Programmes and activities
carried out under these initiatives had the dual role of promoting mutual understanding and
friendships among ASEAN youth and other people in ASEAN, and between them and the Japanese
people. This was an illustration of the “heart-to-heart” partnership highlighted by the 1977 Fukuda
Doctrine.

10. Both ASEAN and Japan need to expend greater effort to cultivate mutual understanding, mutual
appreciation and mutual confidence in reducing the inevitable frictions arising from greater inter-
personal contacts from economic, trade and tourism links. This is particularly relevant in managing
harmonious labour relations, either between the Southeast Asian workers in Japan with their employers or between Japanese managers and workers in the Japan-invested factories and offices in ASEAN countries.

Session II
The Role of Japan’s Soft Power in Southeast Asia

11. This session sought first to clarify the concept of Japanese soft power, its role in relations between ASEAN countries and Japan, and perceptions of this soft power by ASEAN citizens. Hank Lim and Lam Peng Er contributed their perspectives to the topics. The session then looked in detail at the interplay of culture and traditional stereotypes in the context of managing sound labour relations. Yoshiaki Takahashi discussed ASEAN’s cultural impact on the transferability of Japanese management, while Thawatchai Pholcharoen shared the perspective of ASEAN workers in Japanese industries operating in the region.

12. Joseph Nye’s definition of soft power was quoted by the speakers in their perspectives on the role of Japan’s soft power diplomacy in Southeast Asia. Lam Peng Er posited his view that while there is no doubt of the widespread influence of Japanese popular culture in Southeast Asia, this does not necessarily translate into diplomatic support for Japan’s expanding steps in international relations. The efficacy of Japanese soft power is thus still dependent on the consent of Southeast Asian countries, based on self-interest and geo-strategic considerations rather than the appeal of popular culture per se. Hank Lim’s observations focused on Japan’s contributions in the ASEAN region and the role of economic cooperation in Japanese soft power projection in ASEAN countries. Positive perceptions tend to be higher in ASEAN countries with higher economic growth while in countries such as Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam (CLMV) the “moulding” process of perception is still developing.

13. In attempting to understand the dynamics of industrial relations between Japanese managers and their Southeast Asian employees, Yoshiaki Takahashi used the lens of the three determinants of managing a country – cultural structure, economic process and internal and external organisations –
to assess the transferability of management policy from one country context to another. Enterprises are usually influenced by the cultural structure and economic process. Work or organisational cultures also tended to differ among the various ASEAN countries. Power distance (the extent to which the less powerful member of institutions and organisation within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally) was strong in countries such as Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia, but to a lesser extent in Singapore and Thailand. On the other hand, countries such as Japan placed higher emphasis on collectivism, i.e. individuals integrating into a cohesive group where loyalty is exchanged for life-long protection. Japan was also found to be more of a “masculine” society (assertive, focused on material success) than the Southeast Asian societies, some of which (e.g. Thailand and Vietnam) tended to be more “feminine” (modest, focused of quality of life). ASEAN countries varied largely on “uncertainty avoidance”, the extent to which ambiguous or uncertain situations can cause stress; Thais generally displaying strong uncertainty avoidance. In terms of long-term orientation, which is seen as more of a Confucian dynamic, Thailand, Vietnam and Singapore are similar to China, Japan and Korea. While Japanese subsidiaries have modified their management styles to adapt to different cultural and work environments abroad, they should take the above factors taken into consideration, as well as how management and labour view the firm’s objective, policy of stock ownership structure, wage system and promotion policy, and the different perspectives on team work.

14. Thawatchai Pholcharoen echoed the importance of team spirit in his emphasis on the importance of finding a common ground for “peace in the workplace”. It is important to consider both “in-country as well as home-country company management culture” when negotiating issues with management. Based on the experience with Japanese companies in Thailand, the industrial relations culture should be based on maintaining social harmony in dealing with one another in the context of diversity. Citing a real life example of experience with Japanese companies in the time of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis, a plea was made for win-win cooperation among parties with differing views and priorities, be it in managing industrial relations or in other areas of cooperation.
15. The Workshop’s final session dealt with implications of the spread of Japanese popular culture on not only societies but also businesses that were to some extent responsible for the spread, adaptation and fusion of cultures across societies in East and Southeast Asia. Hiroshi Aoyagi and Benjamin Wai-Ming Ng provided examples of Japanese popular culture’s impact on youth in Southeast Asia (and Hong Kong) and industries, while Tetsuhiko Yasuda shared lessons from Sony Computer Entertainment’s experience.

16. A study carried out in Hong Kong in May 2008 assessed the changing attitudes and consumption mode of Japanese Animation-Comic-Game (ACG). The study findings highlight some pertinent points for ASEAN countries to note. Sale and circulation of Japanese ACG are dropping in Hong Kong, but the response of the consumers indicate the continued dominance of Japanese anime over the globally popular animated films and television animated series from the United States. Japanese online games, however, have a relatively weak competitive edge compared to the arcade, hand-held, console and computer games. The drop in sale and circulation is attributed to the change in consumption mode, with the explosion of the internet replacing the more traditional sources of consumption. Fan-subbing (amateur subtitling by fans) and internet sharing, often by unauthorised sources, is also on the rise. Japanese manga are also downloaded and read over the Internet. While young people feel that Japanese ACG can provide a good reference for Hong Kong and China to develop their ACG industry, the mass media, government, religious groups and the older generation in general are biased against ACG as a form of entertainment or means of communication. This conceptual gap seems at odds with the official policies to promote creative industry and creativity in education. This could adversely impact cross-generational communication, creative industry and cultural policy in Hong Kong.

17. Assessing the impact of “J-Wave” or the flow of Japanese pop culture into other Asian countries, Hiroshi Aoyagi reflected on some instances of popular cultural exchange alongside ethnographic interviews with university students in several ASEAN countries and Japan, to identify the directions
for ASEAN-Japan “co-engineering of soft powers”. Suggestions from past experience of Japan’s soft-power diplomacy calls to mind the dispute over licensing rights of the Ultraman series outside Japan arising from a soured joint venture between Japanese and Thai production companies and affecting retailers from other countries. In contrast, Japan’s overseas distribution of the hugely popular serialised biographic drama Oshin (in the 1980s) evoked remarkable audience reactions across Southeast Asian countries, whose people identified with the values of perseverance, hard work, and the willpower and drive for self-actualisation. However, Oshin’s appeal seems to have waned in the present day “mood of our era” where “cool style” is predominant. It is interesting that perceptions of “Cool Japan” differ between Southeast Asian and Japanese recipients: the former are sensitive about any political implications the Cool Japan may connote while the latter see its instrumentality in encouraging regional co-existence, cooperation and communication between different nationalities. Aoyagi admits that the cultural effect and influence of J-wave in Southeast Asia needs to be investigated further. It is also likely that J-wave and Cool Japan may inspire non-Japanese Asians to surpass Japan by mastering its skills of soft-power engineering. ASEAN-Japan cultural cooperation could explore the potential of the intellectual trajectory of “smart power” beyond the intoxication with Japanese style pop-idols and idol groups.

18. Finally, an interesting industry perspective was shared by Tetsuhiko Yasuda, President of Sony Computer Entertainment Asia. Initially, when exploring the potentiality of game business in Asia, the issue of intellectual property breach was a serious concern for Sony Corp. The complex issues arising from establishing and enforcing intellectual property rights for the gaming industry proved a challenge in the initial years, but with the commitment and cooperation from relevant authorities, law firms and research labs in Singapore, Sony Computer Entertainment Asia has seen significant progress and improvement. Its aim is to achieve mutual growth together with local software industries in the region, rather than stifle local growth with “unthoughtful expansion of distribution channels”. As such, Sony Computer Entertainment Asia has instituted a programme that aims to cultivate the software industries in Asian countries, starting with Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan. This will help develop local strengths and talent, creating a positive spiral for healthy software business. The rich cultural and historical backgrounds of ASEAN countries would provide the inspiration for unique and creative digital contents to be produced in future.
Conclusions and Policy Suggestions

19. Forum discussions highlighted several lessons learnt and challenges ahead in entrenching cultural relations as a foundation for partnerships and mutually beneficial relations. Further policy studies should focus on exploring the 5 key points highlighted in the Keynote Speech, as well as on the following:

a. Japan’s role in and contribution to ASEAN development, particularly in the context of the Cultural Fund, and people-to-people exchanges facilitated at various levels;

b. The role and effectiveness of the Japan Creative Centre in disseminating information on Japan’s culture and technology; and

c. The role of the private sector in underpinning and strengthening cultural relations between countries.

20. It is hoped that follow-up activities and policy studies on the topics listed above would assist policymakers and the interested public to critically assess the multi-faceted role of cultural relations in elevating the existing partnerships between ASEAN and Japan.

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FORUM ON ASEAN-JAPAN CULTURAL RELATIONS

Friday, 24 July 2009
Orchard Hotel
Singapore

PROGRAMME

Friday, 24 July 2009

8.30 am – 9.00 am  Registration

9.00 am – 9.30 am  Opening Remarks

Ambassador K KESAVAPANY
Director, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore

Keynote Address

Keynote speaker:  Mr Kazuo OGOURA
President, Japan Foundation

SESSION I  ASEAN-JAPAN CULTURAL RELATIONS: A REVIEW

Chairperson:  Dr CHIN Kin Wah
Deputy Director, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore

9.30 am – 9.50 am  Paper 1:  A Japanese Perspective

Paper Presenter:  HE Makoto YAMANAKA
Ambassador, Embassy of Japan, Singapore

9.50 am – 10.10 am  Paper 2:  An ASEAN Perspective

Paper Presenter:  Mr Rodolfo SEVERINO
Head, ASEAN Studies Centre, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore

10.10 am – 10.30 am  Discussion
10.30 am – 11.00 am   Coffee

SESSION II (Part One) The Role of Japan’s ‘Soft Power’ in Southeast Asia

Chairperson:   Dr Nissim OTMAZGIN
Lecturer, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel

11.00 am – 11.20 am   Paper 3:   Defining Japanese ‘Soft Power’ and its Role in Diplomacy

Paper Presenter:   Dr LAM Peng Er
Senior Research Fellow, East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore

11.20 am – 11.40 am   Paper 4:   ASEAN Perceptions of Japanese Soft Power

Paper Presenter:   Dr Hank LIM
Director for Research, Singapore Institute of International Affairs

11.40 am – 12.00 noon   Discussion

12.00 noon – 1.30 pm   Lunch

SESSION II (Part Two) The Role of Japan’s ‘Soft Power’ in Southeast Asia

Chairperson:   Mr Rodolfo SEVERINO
Head, ASEAN Studies Centre, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore

1.30 pm – 2.10 pm   Paper 5   The Culture of Industrial Relations: Promoting Greater Awareness of Japan in Asean and of ASEAN in Japan “ASEAN’s Cultural Impact on the Transferability of Japanese Management”

Paper Presenters:   Professor Yoshiaki TAKAHASHI
Professor, Faculty of Commerce and Graduate School, Chuo University

Mr Thawatchai PHOLCHAROEN
Secretary General, National Congress Private Industrial of Employees (NCPE)

2.10 pm – 2.30 pm   Discussion
2.30 pm – 2.45 pm  Tea

SESSION III  Culture and Industry

Chairperson:  Dr Saya SHIRAISHI
Professor, Graduate School of Education
University of Tokyo

2.45 pm – 3.05 pm  Paper 6:  The Impact of Japanese Popular Cultural in Southeast Asia

Paper Presenter:  Dr Hiroshi Aoyagi
Professor, Kokushikan University

3.05 pm – 3.25 pm  Paper 7:  Japanese Cultural Values and Southeast Asian Industries

Paper Presenter:  Dr Benjamin NG Wai Ming
Professor, Dept of Japanese Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong

3.25 pm – 4.00 pm  Paper 8:  The Creative Economy: The Cultural Sector’s Impact on Business Development

Paper Presenter:  Mr Tetsuhiko Yasuda
President, Sony Computer Entertainment Asia, Singapore

4.00 pm – 4.30 pm  Discussion

4.30 pm – 5.00 pm  Closing Remarks

Ambassador K Kesavapany
Director, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore
The Institute of Southeast Asian Studies was established as an autonomous organization in 1968. It is a regional research centre for scholars and other specialists concerned with modern Southeast Asia, particularly the many-faceted problems of stability and security, economic development, and political and social change.

The Institute’s research programmes are the Regional Economic Studies, Regional Strategic and Political Studies (RSPS) and Regional Social and Cultural Studies (RSCS).

The ASEAN Studies Centre of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore is devoted to working on issues that pertain to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations as an institution and a process, as distinct from the broader concerns of the Institute with respect to Southeast Asia.