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Cross-Cultural Experiences

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The Great East Japan Earthquake which occurred in 2011 was an unprecedented disaster in recent years. In the aftermath of the disaster, Japan was able to demonstrate its strong national character through its persevering never give-up attitude. At the same time, Japan was able to reconfirm trust from the international community. Japan received an abundance of support such as relief supplies not only from adjacent countries but also from South East Asia, America and even far off Europe. This speaks to the excellent relations between Japan and the international community. But there is more to it than just that. Japan is widely perceived around the world as a peace-loving country. This is because Japan is the only country in the world to have suffered from atomic bombing. There is a slogan calling for abolition of nuclear-weapons. "No more Hiroshimas" is famous. The first World Conference against Atomic & Hydrogen Bombs was held in Japan, and Japan is widely recognized as a Pacifist nation throughout the world.

On the other hand, it is not the case that Japan has no problems when it comes to building relations with the international community. In this paper, I would like to discuss one of the underlying problems, "Discord among Japan, China and Korea". This is how I have labeled it through pinpointing one fundamental cause from a summarization of several problems which are superficially different. They are the comfort women's issue, the issue regarding ownership of Senkaku Islands, Prime Minister Abe's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine and criticism regarding it, as well as other matters. You may feel that I am too impudent as I may not be old enough to discuss them, but I humbly would like you to read through my discussion.

These problems have all arisen from mutual misunderstanding caused by all due to discrepancy in recognition of history. In 1910, the Empire of Japan annexed Korea and colonized it. In 1937, Sino-Japanese War broke out and developed into a catastrophic attrition warfare which caused tremendous human damage, particularly to civilians.

Japan, China and Korea share this history. That's why they are likely to be hostile each other. It's not the case that all Chinese people hold a grudge toward Japanese people. Yet, governments are likely to use this war as a propaganda tool.

Let's take textbooks as an example. It is a matter of course that a nation more or less justifies or glorifies its own history. However, I feel that East Asian countries go a little too far in that respect while they do not explicitly state that the other country is evil. They do implicitly condemn misconducts by other countries. In spite of that, they tend to keep themselves away from mentioning their own misconducts.

Recently, I learned about the Pacific War in history class. In that class, there was a detailed explanation on Japanese people's sufferings during the war. I have no intention to deny such fact. Even so, I found few descriptions in the textbook concerning neither what kind of violence Japanese military conducted when they occupied Nanking nor how the people in the occupied regions suffered.

I do not think this is fair. I insist that history classes, as one of the educational purposes, must teach students an attitude to squarely accept the misconduct in the past as well as to perceive things from the viewpoints of others. After all, what is required in the international community is sincerity.

Of course, I do not want to blame only Japan. Perhaps, textbooks published in Japan are some of the most highly ranked in the world. However, from the point of view of concealing inconvenient things, they are more or less the same. When we talk about our own history, we must always keep in mind how we are delivering the history if a listener is from ○○, or a national of ○○, and above all, if the listener is a global citizen.

As I mentioned above, it is also wrong that we unnecessarily bring back up such history. A case in point is the issue of Yasukuni Shrine. The Prime Minister officially stated that he visited in order to pray for the repose of war dead. However, a criticism arose in part of China. I cannot praise neither those who blame guilt every time nor those who imply them. We can see a contrasting case to this in Europe, where the people neither pay respect to the souls of high rank officials of Nazi nor blame them. They are not trapped in the past, but they are walking together hand in hand. I think we should follow them.

It is my ideal future where people of different nations forget the misconducts in the past and strive forward as company.

We cannot deny that one of the fundamental causes for such discord arises from ethnic homogeneity. Here, we need to take a look back at domestic problems.

Since ancient times, Japan has been perceived as an ethnically homogeneous nation. Entire national land consists of islands, and there was little interference from the outside (by neither immigration nor invasion). That's why such perception has become firmly rooted. Accordingly, such inclination has remained the same even into the modern times. As a result Japan took wrong measures such as oppression of minorities (Ainu, Uilta and Ryukyu) which were merged into Japan. Even after the cultural enlightenment, Japan continued to hold on a conservative spirit of a divine nation, Japan, which later ended in domination of the Korean people by imperialization policy. Has the spirit of "Japan Only" disappeared? No, I don't think so. There seems to be a little improvement, yet this spirit remains in the base of value judgment held by many Japanese people.

On this point, the United States of America greatly differs from Japan in this respect. Even in America, the people are embracing loyalty or a sense of public duty toward their nation, but their commitment is quite different from that of Japan. The reason is that the nation to them means national land or proof of independence rather than ethnic groups or tradition. You can see this in that people born in America are Americans.

Therefore, what we should learn from them is their American style patriotic spirit. Of course, you should abandon an idea like "I think this way, so he surely thinks the same way, too." You should not keep forming a group with people holding the same criterion of judgment. If you keep holding on to such a belief, you are likely to take an exclusive attitude in case you experience cross cultural exchange with other people.

In short, Japan has to change its perception that Japan is an ethnically homogeneous nation. There are countless countermeasures. First, more generously protect other ethnic cultures in Japan. Give lectures on Ryukyu culture at educational sites. More positively recruit overseas students, etc. Moreover, it must be a good policy to give voting right to foreign nationals residing in Japan. Nothing can be more unfair for foreign nationals living in Japan than levying tax without authorizing them to have a right to become representatives. At least, they must be authorized to have a right to vote for local representatives.

Whatever the case maybe, I cannot make any elaborate remarks as I am not a politician.

Yet, it is obvious that the government needs to change the idea of the ethnically homogeneous nation in some way. What is important is cross-cultural experience rather than cross cultural understanding. I don't think my proposals above will directly lead to resolutions of problems including a Senkaku Islands issue and reconciliation measures for disputes due to discrepancy in understanding of history. However, it is really important for Japan to correct a value judgment like "We are always right", which will become far more important. Japan will not truly belong to the international community until it is able to understand and acknowledge other cultures.