

01/02/1997

How to earn glorious place in the world

Motokatsu Watanabe

NO one can deny that in the past decade, relations between Japan and Malaysia have grown dramatically. The rapid expansion of trade and investments has benefited both countries.

For Malaysia, Japanese investments has brought about a continuous inflow of technology and know-how from Japan. In the area of human development, the numerous exchange programmes encouraging Malaysian students to visit Japan are bearing fruit.

However, if we reflect on the nature of our relationship in the past decade, we find an overwhelming concentration of our ties in the economic sphere.

I believe that relationships based solely upon economic merits can be fragile, as economic advantages change with time. Instead, those relationships founded on mutual respect and understanding, and rooted in the desire to know more of each other's cultures, will endure and stand the test of time.

Needless to say, economic and technological development are the cornerstones for the development of the national economy.

Culture and the arts do not bring about immediate economic gains but they are crucially important in developing the human values of individuals. Without the spiritual values of the individuals, the economic success of a nation merely makes that nation a "soulless powerhouse".

There should be an ideal balance in a nation for both cultural advancement and economic-scientific success. The pursuit of economic development alone may prove crippling in the long term, even degrading to human values and lowering overall quality of life.

A country's economic success should be measured by its cultural and artistic advancements. This is because culture is the key to true prosperity.

In Japan, we have been fortunate to have had concerted efforts in cultural circles throughout the period of reconstruction and development. Japan grew without forsaking its traditional values.

Japan's rise to an economic power did not drive Japan into a moral wasteland. On the contrary, Japan's example demonstrates that modernisation and economic development does not automatically lead to Westernisation, nor that a society's material quest for prosperity leads to social or psychological dislocations.

While much of Japan's success can be attributed to learning from the wisdom and wealth of Western civilisation, Japan's culture remains quintessentially Japanese. In essence, our character, our homes, and even our souls remain intrinsically Asian.

Take, for example, my son now studying in the US. He joined the family here in Kuala Lumpur during the recent holidays. I was glad to see that while he has learnt and benefited from his exposure to Western culture, he still upholds Asian values and Japanese identity with pride.

Although many young Japanese adopt Western ways and styles, their values, while evolving, still remain fundamentally Asian.

The bonds that hold Japanese society and families together have not been undermined by modernisation. Impressive economic success has not eroded cultural identity - this is a gratifying phenomenon.

This phenomenon cannot be attributed to the idiosyncratic Japanese psyche nor to the import of Western civilisation. Rather, it is the result

of a harmony of both. This is the important secret for true prosperity and cultural strength.

The true factor concerning Japanese spiritual identity lies in the fact that while it is infused with traditional Asian cultures, it is not an archaic museum piece - rather, it is dynamic and vibrant, synthesising positive elements of Western thinking and styles, so that it becomes uniquely contemporary and completely Japanese.

Asian countries in the throes of successful economic development should realise that advancement of culture and traditions needs to parallel economic development. We can see that at the core of every successful nation there exists a noble cultural heritage. To ignore the high value of culture is to sow the seeds of self-destruction of a people.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad once said: "A country without culture and heritage is like a person without a soul. Our country should not discard its culture and heritage in its pursuit of industrialisation and materialistic wealth, as progress without them would be meaningless."

Similarly, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim has also repeatedly asserted that traditions and cultural values must not be sidelined in the pursuit of industrial and technological advancement.

I sincerely hope that as Malaysia strives to achieve the status of a developed nation by 2020, it will also retain and advance its cultural identity and heritage.

The task ahead for Malaysians is most challenging. But if Malaysia, as a country unique in its multicultural ethnic diversity, can maintain this myriad-faceted heritage while securing material well-being, it will surely earn a glorious and unique place in the world community of the 21st Century.

Perhaps, Japan's path may offer a modest model towards this success. Better still, should not both our nations work together for the greater good of all?

Kuala Lumpur

(END)