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ON
UNDERSTANDING
ASIA

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SINCE WORLD WAR II, I have had a growing interest in Asia and Africa and the problem these continents present for American higher education. During the last eight years I have worked for varying periods in a number of the developing nations of Africa and Asia. This does not make me an expert on either continent or on any of the nations, but I think I am beginning to have some insights as to the difficulties involved in our understanding one another. Today I should like to confine my remarks to Asia.

For the past three years I have been associated with that American university probably most deeply immersed in Asian affairs—the University of Hawaii. This involvement is due partly to the University's geographical location, partly to the nature of Hawaii's citizenry, and partly to her history. For Hawaii, the Far East is really the Near East. So you can see that our interest in Asia is particularly great.

In Hawaii, and particularly at the University of Hawaii, the idea of a special relationship and a special role relating to Asia is a very old one, far pre-dating the interest now widespread on the mainland. Within the last fifteen to twenty years we have been able to do much about this through such instruments as the East-West Center and a variety of international conferences, but the idea goes back into the 19th Century. This in fact is two ideas—one of which I would call reasonable, if difficult and the other so venturesome that its realization lies,
I think, not decades but perhaps a century away. The modest goal is to make of Hawaii a bridge, if you will, across which those of the East and West can travel the route to mutual understanding. The adventuresome idea involves the hope that there will emerge in Hawaii not a compromise between East and West nor an eclecticism based upon both, but a true synthesis of the intellectual and cultural traditions of the East and West. This latter I have come to recognize as so inherently difficult that, while work on the matter should continue, nevertheless, I am pessimistic about much progress being made very rapidly. But the goal of understanding, difficult as this is to achieve, is one capable of attacking. I shall confine my remarks to that level.

Fortunately, the University of Hawaii is not alone in this interest, for throughout the colleges and universities of the United States there has been a growing realization since World War II that our exclusive reliance on the tradition of the West has left us with a partial and quite misleading concept of what the world is really like. Thus, there has been a marked increase in the number of courses as well as in research efforts relating to the East. In spite of the fact that some of these have been naive, the efforts on the whole have been healthy.

This explosion of interest puzzles many Asians. In Tokyo last September a Japanese academician tried to get me to admit that it was caused, first, by our need to defeat Red China ideologically and, second, by the growing recognition by our intellectuals of the bankruptcy of the Western intellectual and cultural tradition. In fact these points may be partially true. It is important that we understand Red China. And, outside of the natural sciences, many of the Western intellectual disciplines may be less vigorous than they were—although not to the degree depicted by the more dour critics.

But these are only parts of the answer. Many of us are convinced that the shape of the world in the 21st Century will be
determined largely in Asia, and understanding is essential to our participation in that determination. Even more important from the point of view of a university is the recognition that its claim to universality of knowledge is hollow if it concerns itself only with that tradition which is native to less than half the world's population.

Perhaps it would not be wrong to dwell for just a moment on the proposition that many of the major decisions of the 21st Century will be made in Asia, for there are still some folk in the United States so wedded to the Western tradition that they find it difficult, or at least uncomfortable, to admit the validity of the proposition. Much of the evidence for this proposition must be sought in the projections of demographers and economists as they have tried to forecast the development of the world's population and resources.

Since the end of the second World War, the developing nations of Asia have been engaged in an attempt to modernize. They realize that they must do so if they are to retain their national independence. As they begin to achieve this goal, and there is a likelihood that they could by the end of this century, the enormous population of these nations could be a factor which absolutely would have to be reckoned with in world power politics. There is, of course, a specific model for modernization available. Japan telescoped into 70 years the modernization process that took the West some 400; today she equals West Germany for third place in world industrial output.

Many of the developing nations and the rest of Asia are trying to accomplish the process at an even faster rate—in ten to twenty years. As a result of this rapid pace, there are many decisions which have been made that can be criticized. But it is futile to suggest a slower, sounder pace, for the very existence of most political regimes depends on their producing immediate results.
One can observe this revolution in rising expectations in all the developing nations. And while economic development is a part of all of the new nationalist movements, its motivation is no small measure political. Some economists believe that China and India and possibly Indonesia have started this “take-off” and that the other developing economies either are following or will follow suit.

Further, it is impossible to analyze the politics of world power without giving consideration to nuclear development. One Asian nation after another will be joining the nuclear club. While we may lament this, as a result, major political power will shift to them as a consequence. In fifteen years the developing nation of Communist China was able to produce a nuclear bomb. In another ten years it is estimated that she will have vehicles to deliver it. Thus inevitably she will have a greater role in the decision-making power of the world.

Even without this possibility, and with the optimistic hope that such nuclear power will be used for purposes of peace rather than war, power is going to flow to a greater degree to Asia simply because of the birth rates. At present Asia has a little over half of the world’s population. By the year 2,000 it is estimated that its share will rise to two-thirds. Projections for China indicate that it will have 1.6 billion people, and India will have one billion compared to the United States’ figure of 280 million, and Russia’s 370 million. China in 2,000 will have a population six times that of the United States and four times that of the USSR. It seems rather clear that when one projects the possibility of both modernization and population increase, Asia’s world power will likely come closer to the potential suggested by the population figures; and as has been observed, the weight of Asia in the arena of world power will increase more than simply its proportionate increase in economic status on the one hand and population on the other.
Rest assured that the Asian majority of the world will not stand still. Universal education which fifteen Asian nations have set as a target for themselves by 1980 under the Karachi Plan of UNESCO may be too ambitious, given the great masses to educate. But with international aid, it could be accomplished by the 21st Century.

The importance of this educational factor stems from the fact that many economists argue that probably the most important form of capital investment is human capital. Evidence abounds that educated human beings simply devise more productive economies. In this field of education, Japan again is our best model in Asia. Relatively low on natural resources, she has used primarily her human resources and a very early commitment to universal education to develop the manpower necessary to achieve today's stage of relatively high consumption. If China, India, and Indonesia had a more highly educated populace, they, too, would be able to modernize in a similar fashion. If ways to maintain the peace can be devised and the Karachi Plan is implemented, the productivity of these countries might well reach the point where more stable governments were possible. Again this would make for greater power at the world level.

Natural resources are another measure of potential world power, and Asian nations other than Japan are not wanting here. China and India have more than three million square miles of territory each. China's resources are not completely known, but few parts of China are very far from deposits of coal, and the Communists claim that they have found new and great sources of iron. Indonesia has oil and such huge supplies of natural gas that it wastes great quantities for lack of a local market. Therefore the obstacles to development in most Asian countries are not primarily physical, but social and institutional.

Modernization in Asia may be very much hastened by what has been spoken of as the cybernetics revolution. America and
possibly Japan, among other nations, are on the verge of a great technological revolution which offers the potential of solving the economic problems of the world more rapidly than we had dreamed possible. It seems clear now that if nuclear energy were harnessed to peaceful purposes and automation put into maximum use, the world food problem could be solved.

If by the help of international planning and assistance Asia becomes modernized, these nations will insist on making the decisions that govern their future and will no longer be satisfied with having their decisions made for them. Not only will they insist on determining their own future, but in the international conclaves they will want a proportionate voice. With the weight of the majority of the people of the world on their side, these nations will inevitably become a fulcrum of international, political, and economic power.

Thus it seems clear that understanding the East is an absolute must for those who make decisions in the West. Having granted this, one can not help but note that the problems are numerous. Let me suggest just a few.

The most obvious has to do with language. As one visits the universities and colleges of the United States, he finds among the faculty many who are competent in French, German, Spanish, Italian, Latin and Greek, and perhaps somewhat fewer competent in Russian, Dutch and Polish. But there are very few who are fluent in Japanese, Chinese, Indonesian, Thai, Hindi, Sanskrit or Pali. If one finds a master of Tagalog, one has to ask if he can handle the dialect of Mindanao as well as that of Northern Luzon.

Even when competence in communication is acquired, it is unfortunate that from our point of view many Asian languages are both uneconomical and imprecise. I hasten to point out that this is not necessarily true to an Asian, and in some situations imprecision is what is desired. One can not over-generalize. Our
scholars are becoming more aware, for example, that Chinese as a poetic medium is unsurpassed in its terseness, precision and evocative power.

A dramatic example of failure to comprehend language and cultural differences is, of course, what William J. Coughlin has called "The Great Mokusatsu Mistake."¹ You will recall that we learned after the war that before the dropping of the first atomic bomb, powerful elements in Japan were ready to end hostilities. Many members of the Japanese cabinet were favorably disposed toward the Potsdam ultimatum. Yet when Premier Suzuki spoke to the press, he said the cabinet’s attitude was one of "mokusatsu" apparently intending to mean that the cabinet was withholding comment. But the word was translated as "ignore." What followed we all know. It is ironic to speculate that possibly had Suzuki used the word mokushi the atomic military era might never have started and the history of Asia since World War II might have been quite different.

It is interesting to note further, however, that a distinguished scholar, Dr. John Young, who heads our department of Asian and Pacific languages, feels that both Coughlin and I have misinterpreted this incident. Given a knowledge of Japanese culture and the then existing military and political situation, Young says that Suzuki had no choice but to use the word mokusatsu. Thus, according to this interpretation, the United States simply did not have the right personnel in the right places to interpret a total situation of which language was only one of the elements.

While not quite of the same order of seriousness, our erroneous translation of the Japanese word "kami" into "God" gave us quite a false notion of the Emperor System. Thus the Japanese people were considerably surprised, according to Professor Suzuki of Waseda University, when at the conclusion of the war they were asked to renounce the divinity of the Emperor in which the Japanese did not believe in the first place.

¹Harper’s, March, 1953, pp. 31-40.
There is another problem. About which Asia are we talking? Asia is no more a single culture than is Africa or, for that matter, Europe. To treat it as such can only lead to error in policy making. Interestingly enough, communication between Asian cultures has been no better than between these nations and our own; indeed, it may not have been as good. We have on the campus of the University of Hawaii a large number of Asian students at the undergraduate, the graduate, and even the postdoctoral level. What they have told us again and again is that while they have a great deal to learn about the culture of the United States, as we certainly do of theirs, they are even more uninformed about the culture of the other nations of Asia. This, I think, is a facet of student interchange which has not been sufficiently explored.

There has recently appeared a revised English edition of Professor Hajime Nakamura’s excellent and significant book, *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples*. In this he examines a number of the frequent observations about the differences between the ways of thinking of East-Asian peoples and those of the West. He points out that at one time or another the peoples of the East have been said to be intuitive and accordingly not systematic or orderly in grasping things, whereas Westerners are said to be postulational or logical. It is often asserted that the ways of thinking of the Eastern peoples are synthetic and that of the Westerners analytic, or that Western civilization is materialistic, while the East-Asian civilization is spiritual or religious. Eastern thinking has been variously characterized as being subjective in contrast to the West’s objectivity, and being more concerned with ethics and less rationalistic than that of the West.

While a discussion of these dichotomies is probably useful, and there may even be in certain instances some truth in them, Professor Nakamura points out that much error can come about
by assuming that these apply to all cultures of East Asia and in equal measure. For example, it is possible to call the ways of thinking of the Chinese or the Japanese intuitive, but certainly this does not describe the thinking of Indians. The intricate arguments of the Abhidharma literature are logical and certainly can never be called intuitive. He goes on to point out that, while among the East-Asian peoples the Indians in particular are extremely religious, the spiritual disposition of the Japanese or the Chinese could never be termed religious.

So, in addition to the problem of language to which I alluded in the first instance, we come to a second problem. This has to do with the recognition that "the culture of Asia" is not a monolithic entity, but rather a composite of diverse and even contradictory parts. Thus the culture of China differs from that of Java or India as much as the culture of Egypt does from that of Greece or Rome, and all these oriental civilizations far pre-date the Christian era.

Another problem of great importance in understanding Asia relates to the rapid rate of change which this part of our world is experiencing. Westernization, at least in certain externals, has occurred at a very rapid rate, and not all of the aspects of Western culture adopted have been the most admirable. Thus we are confronted with still another dilemma — what happens to a Western idea when it is transplanted into an Asian culture? How adaptable a plant, for example, is Western democracy? In Indonesia the parliamentary system became "guided democracy," in Burma a military dictatorship, in Pakistan a new mechanism called "basic democracy."

Another case in point is Communist China. The proposals which now emanate from there are not all Eastern in origin, for Marx was surely in the main stream of Western thought. But it should be interesting to observe what happens to Marxism in the long run when it is set down in a society based
on an aged culture which may not be naturally receptive to such an idea.

Of all the forces for change that are at work in most of the nations of Asia, by all odds the most important is that of intense nationalism. Many of these nations have thrown off colonial rule only within the last twenty years. They want their place in the sun, and they are going to have it. They will not be satisfied with solutions which require historical perspective, for historical perspective fills no bellies. This nationalistic force could become an instrument assisting in developing the peaceful world. Used in another way it can result in domination of the area by the Communists. Which way it goes depends, I think, on both the Asian people's endeavor and the intelligence with which the Free World treats the area. The situation demands patience, forbearance and a genuine effort on our part to understand why the Asians act the way they do.

Thus far I have been speaking in fairly broad generalities with all the attendant dangers. But as I was preparing something to say today, it occurred to me that it might be of interest to you to know how Asian students from different cultures view themselves, the world, and particularly the United States. So I asked a member of our faculty who deals very closely with a group of these students if he would have a discussion with them and report their observations.

Interestingly enough, to a minor extent in conflict with the propositions of Nakamura set forth earlier, the Asians, with whom he talked in general, thought of themselves as religious and spiritual, and they thought of us and other Westerners as materialistic. This does not necessarily invalidate Nakamura's proposition. It is possible that Asians are no more capable of truly characterizing themselves than are we, and thus tend to live by the cliches which have been provided them.

These students pointed out that in India religion is a basic
motivation in all aspects of life — affecting decisions in politics, economics, law and education. And in the Asian cultures influenced by Confucianism, particularly those of China, Korea and Japan, traditional learning meant primarily ethical training through a study of the classics with emphasis on virtue rather than on their utility. Thus, even though some recognize as a false dichotomy the distinction between the spiritual East and the material West, we can say that, at least if this particular group is typical, this is still generally accepted by the young intellectuals of Asia.

A unifying theme for most of the Southeast Asians with whom this dialogue took place, including Malayans, Indonesians, Filipinos, Thais and Indians, was that a good person is mild, pleasant, passive and thoughtful of others' sensibilities. This concept of a good person becomes significant when the group was asked to characterize the American, and the word which occurred again and again was "over-aggressive." Since an over-aggressive person hardly can be mild, pleasant, passive and thoughtful of others' sensibilities, then it would follow that in general Americans are not considered good persons. Our posture suffers, too, from our sometimes overlooking the fact that our relationship must be based on the conviction that both the Asians and we are equal as human beings. American paternalism is most unpopular in Asia.

There are many implications of this difference, or alleged difference, between the two cultures. A Korean male, for example, criticized the American military in Korea for trusting the loud, assertive, extrovert types among the Koreans and placing them in positions of authority. Koreans looked on such people as being opportunistic at best, and dishonest, devious hypocrites at worst. It seems likely that in all of our programs for selecting Asian students to study in the United States, we are possibly selecting on the basis of our own self-image of
individualism, self-confidence, extroversion, and thus we may very well be choosing the very people who will be rejected by their fellows on their return.

Let us see now where I have taken our dilemma thus far. In the first place, I have said that the problem of developing a true synthetic philosophy, which would take into account both the Eastern and Western traditions, is so difficult that there is no chance of solving it in the foreseeable future. I have gone on to say that, while understanding may be possible, its attainment is impeded by such things as language, the multiplicity of cultures that are in Asia, and the rapid rate of change which the East is experiencing—particularly as far as the growth of nationalism is concerned. And I have then gone on to point out that probably, if my sample is typical, many young Asian intellectuals have a low regard for Western man, particularly the American, because of his aggressiveness. In short, it would seem that I have taken my thesis to the point where it is a real mess.

But I think the thing is not completely hopeless. And even if it were, understanding is so absolutely necessary that we would have to try to achieve it anyway. Let us then look at some of the things which might be done to improve the situation.

I spoke in the beginning of the widespread interest now developing in non-Western studies in our colleges and universities. This needs to be accentuated, expanded and given full financial support, and President Johnson’s international education program envisages precisely this sort of thing along with providing greater opportunity for exchange between cultures.

I know all of the difficulties here. Our curricula, particularly at the undergraduate level, already contain too much I think, and something will have to go. It will be enormously difficult for some years to find faculty trained to deal with such matters. Thus, it may be necessary to develop more imaginative uses of closed circuit television, films and other devices.
There must come also a vast expansion at the graduate level in the education of future faculty members who can demonstrate expertise in the many disciplines relevant to this problem.

The field of adult education cannot be ignored, for there may not be time enough left to achieve what we have in mind before those who are now in our colleges reach positions of leadership.

We must do a great deal more, too, in the teaching of Asian languages. It would be naive to believe that there will come a time when all Americans will be bilingual and one of these languages will be Asian. This cannot be achieved, except perhaps in Hawaii, nor would it necessarily be desirable. But we do need to produce enough individuals competent in the languages and areas of Asia to serve as resource persons not only for our educational system but for government, business, the professions and labor as well. Fortunately, with the revolution which is under way in the teaching of foreign languages, this is not quite the problem that it once was.

I think we have to place great reliance on a sharply stepped-up program of exchange persons, bringing Asians to the United States and sending our citizens to Asia. President Johnson assured us in his Smithsonian speech that this is forthcoming as a part of American policy. Only doing this with students and educators is not enough. Legislators, public administrators, businessmen, labor leaders and journalists from both the East and West should have a carefully planned experience in the other culture.

To make this effective, we must rid ourselves of a provincialism which, unfortunately, still marks too many Americans who visit Asia. This provincialism contends that the United States is superior in every respect to the culture of the nations of Asia. Without denying the accomplishments of the United States, we also must see with greater clarity than we have in
the past that we have as much to gain from Asia as we have to give. Our emphasis must always be on exchange and not on directing. The richness and variety of Asian cultures is an important asset to us.

Even in terms of certain of the accomplishments in which we take our greatest national pride, the Asian nations have equaled or surpassed us. For example, this year Japan is graduating 70 per cent of its youth from high school as compared with our 65 per cent. It has the highest literacy rate in the world, a literacy which consists of a knowledge not of 26 letters but of 1,500 characters. Any person who approaches Asia with any feelings of superiority will miss both the point and a golden opportunity to improve himself.

We must eliminate from programs of exchange what I have called the romantic fallacy on which they have in the past so frequently rested. This involves belief in the proposition that proximity produces affection. Anyone who has ever ridden the New York subway during the rush hour can readily reject this notion. Our aim in these programs must be understanding. It is not so necessary that we like each other, but it is essential in this world that we understand each other, and, in the case of rivals, anticipate accurately how the other will act in a crisis.

Albert Camus, writing shortly before his death and speaking on a somewhat different but related matter, had this to say, which should motivate us all to go on trying to participate in the solution of what sometimes seems an impossible problem:

"The fruits of the spirit are slower to ripen than intercontinental missiles. But, after all, since atomic war would divest any future of its meaning, it gives us complete freedom of action. We have nothing to lose except everything. So let’s go ahead. This is the wager of our generation."
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