

Preserving Asia's Traditional Cultures

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Today, at a time when most Japanese have little notion of the meaning of "intangible cultural heritage," few people can fathom the idea that Asia's intangible cultural heritage is facing extinction. The fact remains, however, that the striking economic development now under way in Asia has taken a heavy toll on Asian ethno-cultures, reducing them largely to the modern mono-culture typical of Western countries and Japan.

The growth of the Thai economy to a scale where the baht holds tremendous economic sway over the entire Indochinese Peninsula has brought sweeping social change, including the demise of techniques for making the elaborate earthenware pots and water pitchers whose production can be traced far back in the history of northern and northeastern Thailand. In China, there has been a precipitous drop in the quality of the chinaware for which *Chingtêchên* is famous, while in Vietnam, *towan cheau* and other performing art traditions are fast being supplanted by popular and rock music.

The countries of Asia are following in Japan's footsteps, pushing their linguistic and artistic heritage into the background as economic development forges ahead.

The history of Asia is anchored not so much in material cultural properties such as the Angkor Wat temple complex in Cambodia or the Borobudur Buddhist temple in Indonesia as in its intangible cultural heritage including the music preferred by the average person or techniques used to create articles for daily use. Asia, with its long history and diverse ethnic cultures, has created a myriad outstanding products of its intangible cultural heritage.

Intangible cultural heritage can be subdivided into two classifications: the performing arts, including oral traditions, ceremonies, music, dance, drama, performance, acrobatics, and festival and other annual events; and the forming technique,

comprising works made of earth, stone, trees, bamboo, grass, lacquer, paper, animal skins and plant fibers. In either case, these products are intimately linked with nature and the basic needs of daily life. They have often been born from deep religious beliefs and passed through a long process of refinement and development over time. The *Baron* (lion) dance of Bali and the *Ramakien* drama of Thailand, for example, provide in themselves a glimpse into the incredible variety of forms of Asian performing arts.

Over the past 30 years, I have had the good fortune to come into contact with various products of the intangible cultural heritage throughout Asia, especially such ethno-forms as chinaware, glassware, lacquerware, hand-woven carpets, ceremonial masks and sculptures. This exposure has revealed to me that the true value of these objects lies not in the objects themselves, but rather in a complex of factors ranging from the conception behind the creative process, the selection and use of materials and tools, the training of the artisans, and the production process itself to the uses and symbolic meanings of the finished products.

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objects have grown increasingly scarce. Some of the endangered ethno-cultures of Asia include the Korean *hoa gak*, stylized wooden box encased in paper-thin bull horn, Korean metallic work incorporating inlaid silver, the woven bamboo baskets of Myanmar, Vietnamese mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquerware, Nepalese ceremonial masks made of handmade paper, and the renowned *ikat* and *batik* of Indonesia. At this rate, it will only be a matter of time before many traditional handicrafts and performing arts are lost forever.

Many public opinion leaders throughout Asia have become alarmed at the situation and called for efforts to preserve and promote traditional culture.

Thus far, Japan has focused its assistance to Asia on hardware—the improvement of economic structures, technical transfers and the like. The scant attention given to cultural support has been concentrated on restoring examples of the material cultural heritage, such as Angkor Wat and other architectural relics with great historic significance.

The time has come for Japan to give more attention to “softer” assistance that will touch the hearts and souls of our Asian neighbors. In other words, more emphasis should be placed on preserving the intangible cultural heritage.

Fortunately, the government has shown a growing awareness of the critical nature of the situation. Earlier this year, the Foreign Ministry dispatched missions to

Southeast Asia to study the cultural heritage there and sent experts to an international conference on intangible cultural heritage, sponsored by UNESCO.

The International Conference on the Preservation and Promotion of Traditional Culture in East Asia, held in Tokyo this November with sponsorship by the government and participation by Korea, China, Mongolia and 10 Southeast Asian countries, was seen as a major step in encouraging and coordinating international efforts to protect Asia’s intangible cultural heritage.

Many challenges lie ahead. It will be necessary for experts and organizations to join hands with others and conduct surveys on the current status of intangible heritages, set up a reference data base, and pursue personnel exchanges among experts as well as personnel training and development programs.

The first and foremost way to proceed smoothly with these efforts is to respect the customs and practices, feelings, values and lifestyles of the local people and to avoid imposing our own values and ways of doing things on them. Of no less importance is the need to raise the Japanese people’s awareness of the importance of Asia’s cultural heritage.

The best way to gain the trust of our Asian neighbors is to demonstrate our desire to use culture as a viewfinder to see Asia as it stands today.

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