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## Forgotten Building Block of East Asian Community

By **MASAKI Hisane**

### What is East Asia?

What is East Asia? Who are East Asians? What do "East Asians" have in common? What common values, if any, do they share? These basic questions remain muted -- and therefore unanswered -- despite growing talk here and there of an "East Asian Community."

Countries in a region expected to make up, or at least form the core, of the proposed community are spreading a web of bilateral free-trade agreements, or FTAs. The aim is to eventually create a free-trade area as the first significant step toward formation of the community. Putting aside the clear definition of its geographical scope, East Asia is becoming increasingly integrated. The percentage of intra-regional trade of the region's economies' overall trade continues to rise sharply, to a little over 50 percent in terms of value. This figure is all but equivalent to the intra-regional trade ratio of the countries that make up the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA -- the United States, Canada and Mexico. What's more, it seems only a matter of time before the proportion of intra-regional trade in East Asia matches that in the 25-nation European Union, which is now around 60 percent.

Also, "functional cooperation" in various areas, primarily finance, is already under way and gaining momentum among prospective community members. Creating an East Asian Community will be a long and often arduous process. A step-by-step approach is inevitable. But one important building block for the proposed community seems to be forgotten: culture, in a broad sense. From the start, prospective members of the proposed community need to squarely face up to the question of how to foster an East Asian identity among the people in the envisaged community. Strengthened social, educational and cultural exchanges will be the key to laying a solid foundation for a harmonious, peaceful, stable and prosperous East Asian village. Any community built on a weak foundation would simply be a house of cards.

The grandiose idea of bringing together about two billion people, including 1.3 billion in mainland China, got a significant political boost and was thrust into the spotlight in Vientiane, Laos, in late November. It was then that the leaders from the ASEAN plus Three nations agreed to convene the first East Asia Summit, which will take place in December this year in Malaysia. The ASEAN plus Three groups the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations plus

Japan, China and South Korea. But the geographical scope of East Asia has yet to be clearly defined. There seems to be a general consensus among many people from the ASEAN plus Three nations that East Asia should be defined, at least for the moment, as a region stretching from Japan, China and South Korea in the north and the 10 ASEAN nations in the south. If that's the case, what about India? It's the world's most populous democracy, with about 1 billion people, and along with China is a fast-rising economic power. For political reasons, North Korea and Taiwan are off the map, although they would certainly have been charted otherwise. And how about Mongolia, Russia, Australia and New Zealand?

In addition to the unfinished map, there is also no clear definition of an East Asian. When it comes to regional communities, most people think of the EU. But it remains to be seen whether – and how fast – the proposed East Asian Community will be institutionalized and progress toward integrating itself as close and deep as the current EU. Unlike the 25-nation EU, what is now coming to be recognized as East Asia is known for its incredible diversity -- economically, politically and culturally.

East Asian nations are at various levels of development. The gap in wealth between rich and poor dwarfs the gap among the EU nations. Per-capita income of the poorest countries in East Asia, such as Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar, is much less than one-hundredth of that of Japan. By comparison, the gap between the richest and poorest EU nations is measured by a single digit. East Asia's wealth gap could create a two-tier East Asian Community, making it impossible to achieve the ultimate goal of a truly harmonized, peaceful and prosperous region. Political systems in East Asia also vary, from full-fledged democracies like Japan to communist-ruled countries like China, Vietnam and Laos to a military regime in Myanmar.

In the spring of last year the EU admitted 10 new members, including countries that were firmly in the Soviet orbit during the Cold War. Even after the expansion, the 25 members are all rooted in the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations and belong to the Christian world. In contrast, countries in what is widely regarded as East Asia are extremely diverse culturally. There is no single prevalent or dominant religion. In fact, the region is a show window of religious beliefs ranging from Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism to Confucianism, Taoism and Shintoism, among others. In addition, there are thousands of languages and dozens of national languages spoken in Asia.

### **An East Asian identity**

As the East Asian Community is budding, an international workshop was held in Seoul at the end of January to discuss how to build an East Asian identity. The workshop, hosted by South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade and organized by the Korean Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, was attended by scholars and researchers from the ASEAN plus Three countries, including the author of this article. A few participants, including Korean poet Ji Ha

Kim, who delivered a keynote speech, described the burgeoning East Asian Community as the advent of a "New Renaissance." Most participants agreed on the importance of educational and academic exchanges and the utilization of information technology and the Internet to promote an East Asian identity. But at the same time many participants emphasized the need to preserve the region's rich diversity. Even the feasibility of designating an official language for the proposed East Asian Community was discussed. Prof. Yoon Hwan Shin of South Korea's Sogang University advocated making Malay an official language of the proposed East Asian Community. The broad consensus among workshop participants was that the cultural facet of an East Asian Community should be discussed continuously and fully without being pushed to the back burner.

Various cultural exchanges have been conducted in East Asia but they have largely been bilateral. Exchanges that spread a regionwide net have been negligible, to say the least. But regionwide cultural interchanges will be essential if an East Asian identity is to be built. In a policy speech in Singapore in early 1997 during a tour of Southeast Asian nations, then Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto said Japan and ASEAN should open a new era in bilateral ties as equal partners. He stressed the importance of multilateral cultural cooperation with a view to inheriting indigenous tradition and culture. As a follow up, Japan formed a "multilateral cultural mission" later that year. The mission, comprising cultural experts from Japan and ASEAN, visited ASEAN nations for an exchange of views and in the spring of the following year compiled a report containing joint policy recommendations. The report called for four specific policy goals:

--promotion of cultural and intellectual dialogue to help foster a regional identity, deepen mutual understanding and further regional or history studies;

--inheriting cultural tradition;

--promoting understanding of culture and disseminating cultural knowledge;

--popularizing media and information.

These recommendations should be pursued to help build an East Asian identity and create a truly amicable and peaceful East Asian Community.

The proposed East Asian Community may not necessarily have to follow exactly the same path that the EU took right after World War II, when some heads of states first took up the idea of a common community. It may even be possible that the proposed East Asian Community will present an unprecedented model for regional integration based on respect for cultural diversity. Peaceful coexistence of people from various religions and cultural backgrounds should be pursued in the region. Even using the region's diversity as a base, it is still possible to discover

and foment common traits. At the end-of-January workshop in Seoul, Korean poet Ji Ha Kim called for a "fusion that does not lose and that preserves individual participants' identities of countries." Prof. Grace Nono Aves of the Philippines said, " identity is never internally homogeneous. The challenge, therefore, is how we can become one, while remaining diverse." Fostering uniformity as a region and maintaining diversity as individual countries or areas of countries should be pursued as goals.

## **Japan's to-do list**

As a full-fledged democracy and the world's second largest economy, Japan has a significant role to play in helping build the proposed East Asian Community. Here are at least three important things on Japan's to-do list in the area of culture.

### **1. Further assistance for the preservation of cultural assets**

Asia is a treasure house of valuable cultural and historic assets. Whatever shape the proposed East Asian Community may take eventually and despite the relentlessly rapid advance of globalization, these assets should be bequeathed from generation to generation. For developing countries, economic development comes first. It is quite natural. All people living on Earth have equal rights to be better off. But cultural assets should not be allowed to fall victim to economic development. Japan has taken the initiative in helping preserve cultural assets in Asia since then Prime Minister Noboru Takeshita made international cultural exchanges a pillar of his foreign policy in 1988, along with expansion and strengthening of official development assistance, or ODA, and stepping-up of efforts contributing to global peace. A trust fund was set up in 1989 within the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, or UNESCO, with Japanese financial contributions to help preserve tangible cultural heritage. Japan has chipped in about \$3 million annually. Most of the money has been spent on helping to preserve assets in various parts of Asia. Among these are relics in Dunhuang and Turfan, sites both situated on the old Silk Road, in China; the Sheyuan Palace in the ancient Chinese capital of Xian; the Angkor Wat temple in Cambodia; and relics in other places such as Myanmar's Pagan and Vietnam's Hue. In 1993, Japan made financial contributions in setting up another UNESCO fund to help preserve intangible cultural assets. With money from the new fund, various projects have been carried out, including the preservation of popular oral literature in China, drawing a map of the world's minority languages in danger of extinction and hosting an international conference on saving intangible traditional culture in the Asia-Pacific region. Japan should keep up the good job.

**2. Policy emphasis on aid targeting the poorest countries or parts of countries, not only for economic development but also for increased access to the Internet.**

Japan should focus more of its aid on narrowing the huge gap between rich and poor countries

in East Asia. Inequalities also appear to be expanding between urban and rural areas, not only economically but socially as well. Some experts say that youths residing in Asia's megalopolises -- from Tokyo, Beijing, Shanghai, Seoul, Hong Kong and Taipei to Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Manila and Jakarta -- have come to share common pop culture and an almost identical lifestyle. A two-tier East Asian Community -- not only economically but also socially -- must be prevented. Unless due efforts are made to that end, residents of poorer rural areas would feel left out of the proposed East Asian Community. Japan should ratchet up efforts to address the "digital divide" -- a widening economic gap between countries or individuals who have easy and affordable access to information technology and those who do not. In July 2000, then Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori announced at an annual summit of the Group of Eight (G-8) major countries that Japan, over five years, would extend \$15 billion in ODA to help bridge the digital divide. Ensuring access to the Internet for economic backwaters will also help people living there to share in the information spreading through the Web.

### 3. Make Japanese society more open and friendly to foreign students

Japan achieved a government goal, set in 1983, of accepting 100,000 foreign students in 2003. As of May 1, 2004, there were about 117,300 foreign students in Japan, more than 93 percent of them from the rest of Asia. By country or region, China topped the list, with about 77,700, followed by South Korea, with about 15,500, and Taiwan, with nearly 4,100. To be sure, this is a good trend. Japan should redouble its efforts to accept more foreign students, especially from Asian neighbors, to promote mutual understanding and friendship between Japanese and other Asian youths. But Japan must think not only about accepting more foreign students but also about enabling them to take home a favorable view of the country and its people when they return to their countries. More than half of Chinese students in Japan are said to return to their country with anti-Japanese feelings. In addition, many Japanese companies, especially large ones, remain reluctant to hire foreign nationals who have studied in Japan. As a result, many of those foreign students who wish to stay in the country after graduating from Japanese schools have to go back to their countries. Of the foreign students working in Japan after graduation, more than 60 percent are said to be employed by small- and medium-sized companies. Japan still has a lot of things to do, including shedding the notoriously closed nature of its society, in order to make itself a society more open, friendly, comfortable and attractive to foreign students.

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