

The Spiritual Linkage in Asia

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With the rise of Asian economy, the Asian value becomes a hot topic to explore and discuss. For a long time, Asia has been a term coined by the western discourse. And Asia is increasingly westernized today. For instance, people in Asia experience the shift from eating rice to eating bread. Economically speaking, many Asian countries have many things in common. They are strong in exporting manufactured products, have high saving rates, and claim a large amount of foreign reserve. But what about the cultural aspect? What does Asia have in common? What is Asia's Renaissance (renaissances)? How can people across Asia live together peacefully? After living in the West for many years, I am interested in tracing the spiritual nexus in Asia. The Asia Leadership Fellow Program (ALFP) in Japan offered me a great opportunity to pursue this goal.

Religion has at least three dimensions: theological, cultural, and social. It can be argued that the western civilization is essentially a Judeo-Christian civilization, in which church serves as an important institution and the Bible plays a great role in various aspects, such as literature, fine arts, morality, and law. Many top universities in the western world, such as Oxford University, Harvard University, and Princeton University, had religious background. The incoming American president puts a hand on the Bible during the inauguration.

In terms of integration and harmonization, Asia has thoroughly lagged behind the European Union. A common currency for Asia is still unthinkable. The postwar reconciliation between China and Japan has not reached the level of the French-German reconciliation. To have a bright future, Asia shall seek its common heritage and ground. Asia is very diverse. However, I firmly believe that spiritual ties closely bond Asia together. Three major groups of people actively engage in transnational activities: government officials, merchants, and religious personnel (including western missionaries). With their unique propensity for public interests, religious people have always played a great role in fostering the understanding and friendship across nations (ethnicities). Through its remarkable journey, Buddhism has connected Asia. Religious conflicts, which had greatly damaged Europe, have been relatively rare in Asia.

Japan has played a great role in shaping the Asia we have today. Paradoxically, for many Asians, Japan is a highly westernized country after taking the initiative to learn from the west. As a well-established developed country, Japan leads other Asian countries in many ways. Such a disparity often makes comparison between Japan and the rest of Asia very difficult. However, in terms of spirituality, I do observe many similarities between Japan and China at least. During my participation in the ALFP program in Japan, I visited Shinto shrines,

Buddhist temples, Protestant Church, Catholic Church, Mormon Church, and Jehovah's Witness. After its initial success, the Mormon Church is not developing well in Japan, although it is one of the fastest growing religions in the world. I realize that as in China, the traditional culture and lifestyle have been a major barrier for the spread of religions with western origins, such as Christianity.

While visiting the Shosanji Temple in Kamiyama during the field trip kindly organized by the ALFP Secretariat, I learned tremendously from the speech by the chief priest on pilgrimage. I agree with him totally that in the market economy we have gotten used to taking everything that we have received from others as granted and many people have forgotten the true meaning of pilgrimage. Through discussions with other fellows, I have realized that even education today has been highly commercialized.

In 1956, Bernard Berenson wrote, "Our present western world is harassed, hustled and driven. It excludes leisure, tranquility, permits no unexciting pursuits, no contemplation, no slow maturing of ideas, no perfecting of individual style."¹ Such pilgrimage forces people to reflect on such a reality. Berenson also wrote, "Nothing opens mind and heart like free discussion of gifted maturing individuals coming together with their own national traditions and differing attitudes and approach."² I believe that the ALFP program is a perfect example of such a great vision.

Moreover, I found that almost everything in the Shosanji Temple is familiar to me. The Shikoku Pilgrimage to 88 temples is closely associated with Kōbō Daishi, who studied in China. It is comparable to pilgrimage in China. I have increasingly realized that Buddhism is a powerful force that connects Asia. Buddhism is practiced by about 500 million people worldwide. The majority of the Buddhists live in Asia. In terms of the percentage of worldwide Buddhist population, China and Japan rank No.1 and No.2 respectively. The top ten countries with largest Buddhist majority, such as Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka, are all in Asia. In Southeast Asia, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar are all countries with a Theravāda Buddhist majority. When people think of Buddhism, they often think of Asia.

Can we image a Japan without Buddhism? The answer is definitely no. Originating in the Indian subcontinent, Buddhism came to China via Central Asia. In the sixth century, Buddhism was officially introduced into Japan from Korea. It has had great influence in Japan. During the early twentieth century, as China struggled for its survival, Buddhism in China had been in constant decline. Japanese Buddhist missionaries were active in China. Several Buddhist schools that have been extinct in China are active in Japan. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, and especially during the Cultural Revolution

¹ Bernard Berenson, "On the Future of I Tatti," Villa I Tatti, <http://itatti.harvard.edu/future-i-tatti> (accessed October 26, 2015).

² Ibid.

(1966–1976), a lot of Buddhist temples have been destroyed. However, even today, a lot of the popular tourist sites in China are Buddhist temples, a lot of which are designated as cultural heritage. And Buddhists from Japan and China engage in exchange frequently. China today observes the revival of religion and Buddhism is especially active, although Buddhism suffers from many problems, such as commercialization.

Japan and China are close neighbors in East Asia. The two countries, however, have had difficulties in advancing their friendship. For instance, during the ALFP program, Japan threatened to halt UNESCO funding over the organization's Nanjing massacre listing. China and Japan differ greatly in terms of political system and ideology. Nevertheless, these two countries are connected historically and culturally. They have common language in terms of cuisine and garden, two topics discussed during the ALFP program. The two countries have more similarities than differences. They both face similar challenges that go well beyond their borders, such as declining birth rates and environmental problems. Cooperation rather than confrontation is the right direction. In the age of globalization, travelling abroad has become fairly easy. More and more people from China visit Japan now and they bring back the Japanese people's good will to China. And many Japanese people enjoy visiting Buddhist temples in China. Moreover, the ALFP program has helped me to expand my horizon and learn from and think of other regions in Asia. For instance, the replacement of Buddhism by Islam in Central Asia and the spread of Islam to Southeast Asia are both landmark events in global history and worth our serious study. For example, very interesting new developments are taking place in many relatively small countries in Asia and they deserve our great attention.

It is said that every Chinese is a Buddhist. Many vocabularies in Chinese language have Buddhist origins. The Japanese are "born Shinto, marry Christian, die Buddhist." Both Japan and China have contributed to Buddhism's incredible journey across Asia. I believe that despite the political turbulence, religious exchange between China and Japan and even across Asia would play a great role in finding Asia's common heritage and fostering Asia's integration. Moreover, in the past decades, we have witnessed the decline of communities. Across the world, religious organizations have played a great role in serving the society. However, they often face barriers to carry out their activities. We shall strive to create a positive environment for faith-based organizations to function in our community.