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“Japan as a Guiding Light”

Japan as an Idea

The land of the rising sun elicits a sense of wonder in any who might imagine it. Japan has this same wonder leap into the hearts of those who hear her name even today. In fact, in Japanese, the nation of Japan is called Nihon (or Nippon), which means the origin of the sun and is traditionally translated as the Land of the Rising Sun in English. Over one and a half millennium old, this name serves as the perfect allegory in understanding Japan in her past, present, and future.

It has only been a few years since the 2011 Tohoku Earthquake and Japan is now preparing for the 2020 Olympics. To most outside of Japan, she is a land of mystery and full of excitement. Still considered the forefront of technological innovation by many, in both electronics and automobiles, Japan's stature as a giant in developing convenience for the average person is no overstatement. Many decades ago, products from Japan were disdained for their poor quality and now the “Made in Japan” sign is a seal of quality.

The true depth of this allegory can be seen in the history and future of Japan. First, as a modern nation, Japan needs to look to this past in order to move forward. A guiding light has always been present in Japan. As early as the Man'yōshū, the Japanese innovated a script for its burgeoning culture. This would lead to the creation of two native alphabets and the adoption and full integration of a foreign system of ideographs.

A millennium later, Japan would enter a period of peace, often called the Edo or Tokugawa Period, in which she would see further innovation in lifestyle, literature, technology, and overall culture. However, even at the end of this period, which saw a relentless struggle, Japan modernized in a speed unseen before and with no likeness thereof since. The post-war period of Japan shows a similar determination by the Japanese people, when a destitute and lost Japan would develop herself into an international economic superpower.

In a past more real to younger generations, the bursting of the Japanese economic bubble, the world economic crisis two decades later, and the Tohoku Earthquake tragedy have all shown the resilience of Japan, her people, and how progress is to be seen even in the face of struggle. All of these cases brought terrible sadness to many Japanese, but the focus on a

brighter future showed an important aspect of Japanese culture, well represented by the concept of *ganbaru*, or trying one's best. In the face of all these problems, the bright light that drove the Japanese to emerge from troubled times to find success never ceased.

Japan and her people have shown how a bright light can efface disaster and trouble through dedication, a focus on the future and people, and a desire to improve the world. Therefore, the Land of the Rising Sun is symbolic not just of Japan's location, but also her history and culture. In this same way, the problems Japan faces, her relationship with the world at large, and her place in the future can all be understood through Japan as the home of a guiding light for society, innovation, and culture.

In order to better understand how Japan can serve as a guiding light for others through its actions, the notion of Japan herself needs to be reconsidered. As a nation, she has an international presence which is different from Japan as a culture and the Japanese as a people. Therefore, Japan as a guiding light can be explained more clearly by demonstrating these different aspects of Japan as each functions as an important part of Japan's potential as a guiding light.

A Guiding Light as Reform

The brief examples I have described above were explained in the context of change, innovation, and progress. Even so, these same actions, if seen from a different perspective, are all reforms to the various sociocultural structures that Japan had in place at any given time. The reforms, as such, were not reforms at the core of Japanese society, but reforms made for progress and development to preserve the Japanese spirit.

Reform has at the heart of itself a need or desire to change. In other words, Japan needs to prioritize her future. This is not something new for her. The Nara reforms, the Tokugawa consolidation of power in Japan, the Meiji Restoration, and other large sociopolitical changes are just a few examples of change. While these changes appear to have been deep, others such as the shinkansen lines throughout Japan or the technology used to improve the lives of everyday Japanese are far more real for citizens of the contemporary world. In fact, upon further inspection, it becomes clear that even these train lines were built to improve the existing travel paths dating back to early modern Japan. Reform does not require sudden or even political change; it is a tool to improve and enhance the life of people.

Today, Japan is still a leader in Asia and in the world, but the last two decades have shown unparalleled changes both in Asia and the world at large. With the end of the Cold War, the rise of China and India as major international markets, the general economic landscape of

the world has begun to shift. Moreover, with the now ubiquitous presence of the cell phone and internet, the structure of social communication and spread of information have fundamentally changed. Japan has been at the forefront of most of this change, often called soft change.

Even so, Japan needs to continue to embrace this change. She has already taken advantage of wonderful new cultural phenomena such as cell phone stories and internet communities, which have built themselves in the space these earlier technologies created. However, the integration between the digital and real worlds is still far from complete. This is important because the rise of these international markets has shown a greater interconnectedness between nations than ever seen before. With the success of soft culture in her past, Japan has been able to spread the knowledge of her culture throughout the world. However, Japan needs to take these programs and make them interactive. Interconnectivity between cultures and societies means Japan herself needs to do this within her own society as well as with other societies.

Japan already has numerous social programs and activity communities. The government has also facilitated many such programs for a variety of causes. By coordinating and connecting these, access to them within Japan would increase and there would be greater social cohesion. Many of the smaller festivals (matsuri) represent this type of community gathering activities. Often, though, these events are organized by local groups alone. If more of these were organized, Japan would be able to connect her Japanese citizens to one another. In fact, many municipal centers have already made numerous such groups in order that non-Japanese residents have opportunities to interact with local Japanese and other non-Japanese residents.

This interconnectivity would help the larger Japanese population. For example, Japan has an aging population. With activities streamlined, many local residents would have the opportunity to participate in a wealth of activities. This is also the case for children as well as for men and women who work, are at home, or even in between jobs. Many people have social activity options, such as sports, interest groups, and hobbies through their schools, employers, or clubs. If these activities were expanded or at least some were coordinated and listed through municipal centers, it would allow the development of community identity and give many people an opportunity to connect with others. By instituting these reforms, Japan as a society can provide a guiding light for all its citizens and residents, local, immigrant, and foreign.

An International Guiding Light

The 2020 Olympics are a prime example of how Japan could also do this for the world at large. By hosting the games, Japan is providing a venue for the nations of the world to come together and compete in good sport. Putting the Olympics to the side, most people are unaware

of the level of international donation and aid that Japan provides for other nations. She also provides a great number of scholarships and related opportunities for study and work in Japan.

With the soft culture activities alluded to above, it is easy to see that Japan is no stranger to international activities. However, in all these activities, Japan needs to provide a strong message as a nation.

To most, the adept skill of Japanese manufacturers, the chivalrous Japanese business code, and the polite nature of the average Japanese are acknowledged as characteristics of larger Japanese culture. Japan has participated in international forums, collective games, and other global initiatives and collaborative projects too. With the 2020 Olympics, Japanese society will be given an opportunity to impart much about herself. At the same time, a leader in both Asia and world, Japan can do more than send a message about herself to others. Japan can serve as an example of international integration and a cooperative international community.

Throughout Japanese history, Japan as a nation has partaken in numerous sociocultural events whether they were internal strife such as the Warring States Period or the Meiji Revolution, or external interaction, such as the emissaries to the Sui and Tang (kenzuishi and kentōshi), Japan's rise to the international stage in the Meiji Period, or Japan's long twentieth century. In this way, Japan is also uniquely positioned to discuss issues of local and international cooperation.

Japan's past, as with any nation, is full of both the laudable and the questionable, often decided by the perspective of commentator. This is important to remember, since the past fifty years have shown enormous effort on Japan's part both in developing a local infrastructure and in international coordination. In the face of political and international critique, Japan has not relented in its efforts on these two fronts. Japan continues to rank in the top five countries providing international aid and development to other nations.

On a local level, Japan has inspired innovation throughout society. At the federal level, the government has instituted easy electronic filing methods. While new technology is often overwhelming, each year officials are present at each tax office to help those filing electronically for the first time and those who need more help. At the municipal level, offices are staffed with personnel who give their full attention when problems or concerns arise. At the level of education, Japan has numerous initiatives for students and academics to research or study abroad. At the same time, the opportunities for foreign nationals to study or research in Japan are boundless. At the societal level, there is constant cooperation from unofficial local festivals to official events, from aid work in the Tohoku region to local development activities. At the individual level, there are numerous occasions and programs that have been created to help the

average person participate and contribute to development, social projects, and even simple community building.

Internationally, Japan has also shown a commitment to cooperation and social development. One of the more salient examples is Japan's commitment to foster cooperation between Japan and other societies. The JET program, the U.S.-Japan Student Conference, the MEXT scholarships, and JASSO program are just a few initiatives for students. JSPS and other organizations provide scholars, researchers, and other professionals with funding and access to Japan to further their work. In fact, in the Japanese immigration system, it is possible for a foreign national to become a Japanese citizen after only a few years based on their contribution to Japanese society. At first glance, this might seem to be a bureaucratic ploy in international relations, but it shows the commitment Japanese society places on contributing to social cohesion and community development.

The message Japan has provided through her various activities and programs has had an important effect on its relationship with the world and how the world views Japan. As the world becomes more interconnected and networks within it inseparable, Japan needs to strengthen this message. Continuing what she has been doing, Japan must remain a pillar for the international community. As a guiding light for Asia and the world, Japan can help other nations likewise function as supports to help foster international cooperation and the building of a stronger international community.

A Guiding Light for the Future

During the postwar period, Japan's great success in forging international alliances and her improvement of domestic infrastructure is an important message for both developed and developing nations. A nation cannot focus on any one aspect for stability. In the wake of the 2011 Tohoku Earthquake, the strength of the Japanese community along with international help is what has allowed the region to begin coping with the grave tragedy that struck the area. At the same time, the 2020 Olympics give Japan an opportunity to envisage a vibrant future in the wake of this tragedy.

The Olympics are traditionally the venue for nations to compete peacefully for medals as athletes who have spent years working to improve their skills prepare to face one another in competition. While Japan continues to rebuild and reconstruct the Tohoku region after the 2011 tragedy, these games provide an opportunity for Japan to show how she is working not only to recover but to improve herself in the process. Hosting the games requires a great effort from the government, local contractors, and citizens of the nation.

In spite of the Tohoku Earthquake, Japan has brought herself to serve the greater good. Providing both for her citizens and those of the world. The Olympic Games is more than a simple competition between citizens of different countries vying for the highest accolades. The Olympics represent citizens of the world coming together to share in their attempts to reach heights and accomplishments that the world has never seen before. In this way, the 2020 Olympics are symbolic of Japan's past and present, and give a glimpse into a sustainable future for Japan.

In ancient Japan, the Taira and Minamoto were excluded from imperial succession, but formed complex and successful groups out of the imperial household. In doing so, both groups changed the face of Japan, paving the way for a new future. Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu are commonly seen as major figures who helped and eventually unified all of Japan. Even the greatest conflict at the end of the Edo Period was over how to proceed and develop as a nation. Japan's rise through the Meiji and Taishō Periods was also about finding an appropriate future for the nation within the larger international community. In the latter part of Shōwa Period, as Japan's economy began to recover, different people, but with the same mindset, worked hard to develop Japan into an economic superpower through her soft power. In all of these anecdotes, Japan has served as guiding light for both herself and the international community.

Yet Japan has faced many setbacks in the past few decades as hinted to earlier. These economic problems and natural disasters have often harmed the overall sociocultural mood of development and progress, but only momentarily. The true strength of being a guiding light is an unwavering spirit to carry on into the future. It is not economic miracles that define a nation, but the innovative mindset she has to propel herself onto to the world stage and into previously unexplored frontiers. This is where Japan has made the greatest contributions and continues to do so.

One glaring example is energy sources. Japan has advanced technology on multiple fronts. Most importantly, this can be seen in a streamlining of society, both commercial and government, to go green and be more environmentally sensitive. From ancient times, the environment has played an important role in thoughts of major Japanese thinkers.

Another example is the innovation of convenience. One aspect can be seen in the creation of konbini (convenience stores) that have fascinated many non-Japanese outside of the country but are an everyday reality to those live within Japan. Some of these stores were actually begun as subsidiaries by U.S. corporations but then took on a life of their own. In fact, seeing the difference between a convenience store in the U.S. and one in Japan is simple; they

are incomparable. The Japanese convenience store provides items for almost all needs, while her American counterpart is generally a store selling only food-related commodities.

The Japanese convenience store is a true example of the Japanization of a foreign idea. At the same time, examples abound of automated opening doors, heating systems, cell phones, computers, train technology, and other sometimes simple but very effective innovations. This is an important point, since many Japanese innovations are also complex and unexpected. This signifies that the guiding light for Japan in the Heisei Period of the twenty-first century is about progress and benefit to humanity. This can be alternatively seen as a technological revolution, as a guiding light working on enhancing society. Many non-Japanese technological advancements have built on early Japanese technology with the same guiding spirit that produced the original innovations.

On this note, Japanese companies have had corporate partnerships with numerous governments and commercial organizations where technology was shared and taught. As mentioned earlier, the Japanese government has also provided development aid in the form of money and personnel throughout the world. Japan consistently participates in international aid efforts when such situations present themselves. The constant support for others is an important aspect of understanding Japan as a nation and is well described in Japan as a guiding light for moving into the future.

The number of contributions Japan will make in the immediate future can be seen by reviewing her list of aid projects, research and development at universities and corporations, and international cooperative agreements at the government and institutional levels. However, as a guiding light, Japan's most important contribution will not be an object or an innovative idea. In the contemporary international climate, as nations work together to build peace and help the less fortunate find the means for better lives, Japan's presence is a guiding light for other nations.

Japan has no problems developing physically tangible goods that could change the way the world sees things. However, such a contribution is short-lived at best and might even be replaced by another Japanese good. In a world that is becoming more virtual by the day, Japan's continued commitment towards the betterment of her society, her people, and the larger world is the biggest contribution she can make to the world. Moreover, this can be translated into relations in East Asia, Greater Asia, and the world. Serving as a model which other nations can follow to improve the lives of their citizens, Japan is a natural guiding light for nations in Greater Asia, both nations still developing and the developed. The symbolic message

of Japan as a guiding light can change the way nations and international cooperation attempts to face the future.

A Message as Guiding Light

Names are often seen as artificial or ascribed characteristics. However, names can embody the heart of a person. In this same way, Japan's epithet of the Land of the Rising Sun is symbolic of the heart of Japan. As shown above, in its past, present, and future, Japan and her people have served as a guiding light for developing herself as a nation and community. As a guiding light, though, Japan also serves as an example for the world at large and as a theme for how Japan can face the future and contribute to the world.

Revisiting this name of Japan can help consolidate how important Japan is as a nation in East Asia and in the larger world. The technological revolution mentioned earlier identifies one aspect of how Japan has contributed to world culture and the improvement of the human condition. This contribution is worth considering from a different angle, that of unintended consequence. Japanese corporations and society have worked hard to improve the condition of Japanese society but did not plan for a larger revolution. Therefore, understanding how Japan could potentially engage the world and what Japan could do is not always a question of what Japan needs to do but sometimes what she needs to realize.

Japan's soft power, a word popularized over the past decade and increasingly important in a post-colonial but economically interlinked world, has allowed Japanese culture to pervade even the most distant and seemingly uninterested of cultures. Children in the United States, Canada, and other countries have grown up with Japanese culture. This is also true of children from the Middle East and other parts of the world as well. Over the past few decades, these children have now become leaders in public policy, business, education, and other similarly influential positions. These adults have therefore been exposed to aspects of Japanese culture that stress working hard and cooperation. In other words, Japan's message has not been unheard although it may have gone unnoticed as a Japanese message.

In this way, Japan needs to continue her commitment to what she has focused on in improving the life of her citizens and the infrastructure of her society while also working on the international stage to do the same for those less fortunate. As long as Japan continues on this path as a guiding light for both her people and the world at large, she will contribute to the betterment of Japanese society and to a deeper understanding between nations at the international level.