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East Meets West

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[I] Congratulations

(1) On behalf of Keio University, I would like to congratulate the University of Hong Kong on the 100th anniversary of its founding. I take this opportunity to express our sincerest respect for your glorious century-long history and to convey our deepest gratitude for the ties of friendship that bind us together, as seen in the programmes such as Three-Campus Comparative East Asian Studies Program between our two universities and Yonsei University in Korea.

(2) As you well know, the earthquake and tsunami that occurred in Japan on March 11 caused enormous damage. Our hearts are filled with renewed sorrow as we learn the truth of what happened. Immediately after the earthquake, we received many letters and e-mails of support from friends throughout the world including the University of Hong Kong. We were greatly encouraged by this show of genuine sympathy. I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude for the kindness and assistance of all our friends.

(3) Today’s topic for this Summit is the “East meets West”. What we saw immediately after the earthquake were the helping hands that rushed to the disaster zone from both East and West. There is no doubt that recovery from this terrible disaster would have been much more difficult without this assistance. The road to reconstruction will be a long one. But I am deeply moved to think that the process of reconstruction is also being supported by the ties of international friendship.

[II] National Isolation and the Meiji Restoration

(4) Japan is located on the easternmost edge of the Far East. It is an island nation located at the greatest distance from the West. And for a period of more than 200 years extending from the early 17th century to the middle of the 19th century, Japan chose to live in isolation. With the exception of some contact with the countries such as the Netherlands, Japan was completely cut off from the West.

(5) National isolation came to an end with the Meiji Restoration. The opening of Japan was initially forced upon it by the United States and other Western powers. But this was a choice that had to be made to preserve Japan’s independence.

[III] Yukichi Fukuzawa
Perhaps the person who was most keenly aware of this was Yukichi Fukuzawa, the Meiji-era thinker, educator, and founder of Keio University. During the first half of the 1860s, that is, immediately before the Meiji Restoration, Fukuzawa was sent on three missions to the United States and Europe. Fukuzawa published the information collected from these trips in his book, *Things Western*. Based on his experiences in the West, he later published such masterpieces as *An Encouragement of Learning* and *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization*.

In these books, Fukuzawa repeatedly emphasized the importance of Western science. An overwhelming gap existed at the time between the countries of the West and the countries of the East, including Japan. As witnessed by the Opium Wars, the East was being oppressed by the West. Fukuzawa argued that this was not caused by the moral and cultural inferiority of the East. Japan’s bushido was not inferior to Western chivalry, and the arts of Japan and China were not inferior to those of the West.

He found the cause of the overwhelming gap between East and West in science. In his books, Fukuzawa often wrote about Newtonian mechanics and other scientific theories. He believed that the Industrial Revolution was made possible by such scientific advances, and that this was the source of the West’s overwhelming economic and military might. Finally, he concluded that to preserve its independence, Japan needed to introduce Western science and technology, develop modern industries, and strengthen its military.

**[IV] Acceptance and Rejection**

Throughout its history, Japanese society has always been receptive to foreign cultures and technology. History shows that Japan adopted writing and Buddhism from China via the Korean Peninsula. At the beginning, there was some friction with supporters of Japan’s indigenous Shinto religion. But, Buddhism and Shintoism continued to exist side by side. Continental societies and countries, such as China, take great pride in the cultures of overwhelming grandeur that they have created. But as a society existing on the periphery of great nations, Japan was culturally flexible. While retaining the culture and traditions that suited its environment, Japan was prepared to accept anything that was useful.

During the Meiji era, there was some resistance to the introduction of Western technologies and Western military and government institutions. However, these were all adopted with relative ease, and a coexistence of Japanese culture and Western technologies was quickly realized. This gave birth to the term *wakon yosai*, which means “Japanese spirit, Western technology.”

With its victory in the Russo-Japanese War, Japan began to catch up with the Western powers. At this point, feelings of reaction and rejection of the West began to appear, and Japan reacted very strongly to the alarm and distrust of Western countries toward the emergence of Japan as a military power. Gradually, the forces of nationalism gained influence and overwhelmed those who believed
in the importance of cooperating with the West. The end result was the Pacific War, and you of course know the outcome of that.

(12) After the war, Japan entered a new phase of adopting Western technologies, systems, and culture. In this case, the West was mostly the United States. Therefore, after 1945, Japan learned much from American technology, systems, and culture.


(13) However, the process of Americanization did not proceed in a straight line. Instead, depending on the circumstances, the process went backward and forward. The employment system, which is my area of expertise, provides a classic example of this pattern. After the war, it was believed that Japan’s traditional employment system was backward and had to be replaced with the advanced American system. People were convinced that this was critically important for the modernization of Japanese companies. This feeling persisted through Japan’s economic takeoff and period of accelerated growth.

(14) After some years, though, Japan began to threaten the US economy in an age when Ezra Vogel’s book, Japan as Number One, became a best seller. Under these new circumstances, the Japanese started to think that the strength of the Japanese economy was rooted in its employment system. The systems of seniority pay and company unions were suddenly being praised. But these were the same systems that people had wanted to throw out until a few years before.

(15) After the collapse of the bubble economy, the Japanese economy went into a long decline. The pendulum was now swinging in the opposite direction and the Japanese employment system was again criticized for causing economic stagnation. This means the same system has gone through a roller-coaster ride of alternate praise and criticism. On the reverse side, Japan has gone back and forth between enthusiastically supporting the American employment system and scornfully rejecting it. This cyclical pattern is commonly seen in Japan’s acceptance and rejection of the West.

[VI] Convergence of East and West

(16) It is time for us to rise above this cycle of acceptance and rejection. For example, an employment system should not be deemed good or bad simply because it is an American system or a Japanese system. A good employment system is any system that allows a society to maximize the use of its human resources under the given circumstances. And it is important to realize that the East and the West now closely resemble each other, at least in the features of their economic and political environment.

(17) More importantly, the East and the West are now facing similar problems. I will give you another example from my area of expertise. Declining birth rates and the aging of society were initially problems of the West, in particular the
European countries. But today, Japan has the world’s oldest population. Korea, China, and of course Hong Kong are among the countries and regions of East Asia experiencing declining birth rates and the rapid aging of society. Other issues that similarly affect both the East and the West include the fiscal crisis and responding to natural disasters triggered by climate change.

(18) Of course there are vast cultural differences between the East and the West. But when we look at the problems they face, we see a far larger number of points in common. While respecting the differences that exist in our cultures and values, we must work together to solve the problems that are common to both the East and the West. The meeting of East and West must be taken as an opportunity to promote the welfare of all of mankind. I believe that this conference feting the centenary of the University of Hong Kong provides one such opportunity. In closing, I would like to once again congratulate the University of Hong Kong on the Centennial anniversary of its founding. Thank you.