

**Mr Shigekazu SATO**

**Consul-General and Ambassador of Japan in Hong Kong**

Minister of Culture of China Mr CAI Wu,  
Secretary for Home Affairs of Hong Kong Mr. TSANG Tak-sing,  
Ministers, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to represent the government of Japan at the Asia Cultural Co-operation Forum. First of all, I would like to express thanks to Hong Kong government for organising this forum. We highly appreciate such an initiative taken by the Hong Kong government.

Why do we think that culture and the arts are so important? Because they are indispensable for us as we seek a rich and fulfilling life. Because they are an all-important resource, the intellectual building blocks with which we create a sense of solidarity and lay the foundations of our society. In short, they give us our humanity. And in this Information Age, in this era of impassive globalisation in which we live, cultural exchange that crosses borders and regions has become more important than ever for promoting mutual understanding and friendship between the different nations and, just as crucially, the different nationalities of the world.

It is my firm view that conveying the attractions of a country's culture helps to build an attractive country. For Asian countries, endowed with long histories and a diverse range of rich cultures, one of the more pressing issues we face is how we can achieve new cultural breakthroughs that reflect present-day social situations, by promoting cultural exchanges between the countries in questions, while at the same time maintaining our cultural integrity. There is no doubt that in the long history of cultural development, Japan, once a secluded island in the Far East, has assimilated into its existing traditional culture a wide spectrum of influences from a variety of foreign cultures, via China and the Korean Peninsula as well as along the Silk Road, traversing Central Asia as the main thoroughfare for trade and commerce between East and West. In so doing, Japan has formed its own unique and differentiated culture.

Japan's new government stresses the importance of building an East Asian Community. I believe cultural exchange and cultural co-operation will serve as important cornerstones in the design and creation of this long-term framework.

Ministers, ladies and gentlemen,

What does the main theme of this forum, “Arts in Living, Living in Arts”, say to you? One possible interpretation is to see a situation in which “living” and “arts” are inseparably blended together. I then explain the underlying circumstances that gave rise to this situation as “culture”. To put it another way, when you encounter things in your daily life that you regard as beautiful, then in some sense you have already found “art”. On the other hand, the way that you appreciate that beauty, your aesthetic sense, and the pattern of your behaviour can be said to be culture.

Perhaps I can illustrate my point more poetically. Imagine that you are relaxing in a hot spring (onsen) in a Japanese-style inn (ryokan), looking up at the night sky and gazing at the beautiful full moon. As the ryokan, onsen and the moon merge into a single artistic framework, your enjoyment becomes what we may call “Arts in Living, Living in Arts”. Appreciating the dynamic but fragile beauty of leaves drifting along a promenade – the maple leaf is itself a work of nature’s art, admiring the delightful charm of ladies wearing a traditional Chinese dress, and even savouring delicious Japanese cuisine prepared by a master chef can all be regarded as “Arts in Living, Living in Arts”. In fact, Japanese cuisine often incorporates ingredients such as maple leaves and twigs that are inedible, but which form an essential part of the dish that is to be appreciated by the eye – though I do know of people who end up with an upset stomach after their mouth forgets what their eyes are looking at!

Here is another example. Just last week, Hong Kong celebrated the Mid-Autumn Festival. I live on Victoria Peak, and I saw a lot of people come up there to view the moon. We have a similar custom in Japan that is called “tsukimi”. Flowering Japanese pampas grass and special tsukimi dango or dumplings are displayed, and people also go out to enjoy the full moon. The combination of the autumn night sky with the full moon set off by the beauty of the pampas grass and the delightful dango forms a superb work of art that we also experience in cultural terms. In contrast, the full moon is regarded with suspicion in Europe and not as something to be appreciated. So there are differences between cultures.

Art thus forms an indispensable part of our daily lives. But it is our sensibility and capacity for discovering beauty that gives birth to what we call the arts. In that sense, no matter how magnificent a particular painting is, it immediately loses its meaning and its value as art when it is put up for auction and becomes a target for speculation.

As I hope you know, traditional Japanese arts such as “Ikebana” or flower arrangement and the tea ceremony have been absorbed into the daily lives of Japanese people since they were developed many centuries ago. Today, although not every Japanese citizen has the chance to learn these valuable traditional arts, we consider them to be “the heart and soul of the Japanese people”.

On the other hand, as I am sure you know, there is another strand of culture that represents modern-day Japan. Generally referring to animation, manga, TV dramas, fashion and music, Japanese pop culture is characterised by its high degree of penetration in many different countries and its widespread popularity primarily among young people. I just have to mention the names Doraemon, Ultraman and Hello Kitty, and you will know what I am talking about. Some of you may balk at calling animation and manga art, but it cannot be denied that manga in particular has exerted a significant influence on today’s modern arts. I would like to suggest that this kind of pop culture represent a form of “Arts in Living” that has taken root in young people’s lives.

Animation characters are very active even in the world of diplomacy. Doraemon has been appointed Ambassador of Cultural Exchange by the Japanese Government, while Hello Kitty is now Tourism Ambassador. I also carry the title of “ambassador”, but my popularity and power to promote Japanese culture can never match theirs! I do have the advantage of being able to speak, as they don’t speak when they appear on the stage but that also means they have the advantage of never making any slips of the tongue.

Hong Kong is also putting a lot of effort into cultivating its creative industry, while Korean TV dramas have scored a surprising success. In this dynamically progressing Asia, “living” and “art” are undergoing continuous change. Culture and the arts take a long time to develop. It is our challenge today to balance old traditions and new creations in our daily lives.

Finally, I sincerely hope that this conference will yield favourable outcomes that are conducive to achieving further cultural co-operation even in these times of economic difficulty, and thus to producing significant contributions to richer, more fulfilling lives, a more dignified and prosperous society, and a friendlier, more understanding world.

Thank you very much.