

A New Wind Blowing in East Asia

AKASHI Yasushi

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The Asia Future Conference was held over five days in January in Manila, and I participated in my role as conference chairperson. The conference brought with it a new, optimistic tide that could be felt across the countries of Southeast Asia, and Japan, China and South Korea in Northeast Asia.

Aiming for the exchange of ideas and opinions, the conference dealt with issues brought on by globalization not only from developmental or management perspectives, but from a multidimensional one through considering environmental, political, educational, artistic and cultural perspectives. The conference was organized by the Atsumi International Foundation which provides scholarships for overseas students getting their PhDs from Japanese universities, and spearheaded by Junko Imanishi, the managing director of the foundation.

Held on a biannual basis, there have been five symposiums to date with past conferences held in Thailand, Indonesia, Japan, and South Korea. The theme for this year's conference was "Sustainable Shared Growth: Our Common Home and Happiness," and was an effort to deal with growing inequality across the globe.

Many of the approximately 300 participants were former recipients of the Atsumi scholarship in their late 20s to 30s. Diversity was represented through participation from countries with Buddhist majorities such as Thailand and Myanmar, major Muslim countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia, and Christian majority countries like the Philippines. Unlike countries in the Middle East, the Muslims joining from Southeast Asia were overwhelmingly of moderate tendency. There were many Muslim women wearing hijabs, many of which were stylish and colorful.

Not unlike the previous four conferences, this conference too crossed over normal national and cultural borders, and led to many lively exchanges. In particular, opinions reflecting fields or specializations were liberated from their categorical boundaries.

A young Buddhist monk from Thailand remarked that "internal peace is the basis for external peace." A participant from Indonesia spoke passionately about the use of online technology in peace education. A PhD candidate from the University of Kitakyushu presented on how the culture and history of a country play a role in peace processes such as how the law is used in conflict resolution or community myths and traditions. Being privy to ideas and thoughts such as these, many participants

were left with a sense of hope for the future despite Asia growing ever more complex.

Other than the exchange of opinions, there was also a roundtable session for young historians from Japan, China and Korea. Simultaneous interpretation for all three languages was provided, and I felt that this discussion was not restricted by nation-state theory or geopolitics but was rather animated by democratic perspectives of history. Well-known scholars such as Professor Hiroshi Mitani from Tokyo University and Professor Liu Jie from Waseda University are at the core of forming a new historical perspective over this region. There was an animated discussion that looked at exchanges between Japan, China and Korea in the 19th century, and this provided heretofore unrecognized new perspectives on the relationships between these countries. Just as an understanding of a shared post-war history exists for countries such as Germany and France, the contents of this discussion made one feel that the birth of a shared East Asian historical perspective is also possible. Of course, problems pertaining to history are complex, and cannot be solved overnight.

This Asia Future Conference proclaims that we are in the process of a shared global era, but whether this will be one that crosses past ethnic nationalism or state-nationalism is yet to be seen. It is also uncertain whether the chaos and conflict that characterized the start of the 21st century will ever go away. However, amongst young scholars and individuals from various fields and sectors, one feels that there is less prejudice than the previous generations, and intellectual perspectives that cross-national boundaries are spreading. While it can be said that the exchanges that took place at this conference may be just an example of this, I also felt a strong sense of hope emanating from the people of Asia today.