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Examining Japan's Identity Now

By Ito Kenichi

Before we examine the question of Japan's identity, we need to ask ourselves what human identity is. We humans continually refer back to our view of ourselves. If we do not have a grasp of our own identity, we cannot justify our actions. If you are hiking in the mountains and fall down a steep slope, and black out, when you regain consciousness the first question you will probably ask yourself is, "Where am I now?" Your mind will go back to the place where you began hiking and the route you took. This will help you grasp your present location. Knowing our position in the world is the first step to justifying our actions. Knowing where you fell will tell you which direction to go to escape a predicament. One's axis of coordinates in the world – one's identity – offers a guide for action.

Another example: you cross paths with someone you have never met before while traveling. If there is no chance, you will go your separate ways without ever talking to him or her, but if there is an advantage in establishing some sort of relationship, you will do so, starting by introducing yourself. Names are an important foundation on which to build our identity. But only knowing the other person's name tells us nothing about their identity. Through our eyes we can identify their gender and get a general idea of their age and ethnic type. These things we intuit without being told. But any other information to know more about their identity must be obtained directly from them. In ancient Japan, it was common for two noble samurais fighting on the battlefield to formally announce their names, places of residence and positions in society to each other before fighting. This declaration was a statement of identity, pure and simple. By giving the enemy this information, the samurai was in effect pledging to fight honorably. This mutual pledge established and confirmed the relationship between the two fighters. Here, too, it is clear that personal identity – the foundation from which we view our axis of coordinates in the world and our relationship with others – is a guide for action.

States and ethnic groups have a sense of collective identity. But as Benedict Anderson, an authority on Southeast Asian studies, stated in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, a nation is simply an imagined political community. The identities of nations and ethnic groups consist of not only easily identifiable realities but figments of imagination and interpretation of multifaceted, pluralistic conditions, resulting in, an exaggerated and distorted view of a collectivity.

The identity of each individual is multifaceted as well. We are each a member of a nation and an ethnic group, but at a more basic level we also belong to a family, a community and a workplace. Some of us see ourselves beyond being members of the state of Japan and the ethnic group of Japanese as members of an Asian Community and/or as citizens of Planet Earth.

When Japan was shut off from the outside world in the Edo Period, we know that the Japanese had a strong sense of identification with their own feudal domain, such as Satsuma or Aizu. We also know that they had little sense of identification with Japan, a political and cultural entity covering the entire Japanese archipelago. However, a traditional sense of identification with a specific local domain was quickly converted into a strong sense of identification with the nation of Japan after the uninvited entry into the country of Commodore Perry's fleet at Uraga in 1853. A sense of national crisis emerging from the awareness that predatory Western powers were knocking at our door united all the Japanese on the archipelago.

In 1998, the Japan Forum on International Relations (of which I am the president) organized a series of workshops on *Japan's Identity: Neither the West Nor the East*. Observations expressed during the workshops were later published in a book of the same name. I recall Prof. Kitaoka Shinichi said in the book as follows:

"Not all nations feel a burning passion to define their national identities, and few are as obsessed with this issue as much as the Japanese. However, even the Japanese do not always search for an identity. There has been an ebb and flow."

There was no denying the reality of the threat posed by the Western imperialistic powers, in their advance into Asia in the latter part of the 19th century. The United States was exerting pressure on Japan from the east, Russia from the north, and Britain, France and other European powers from the south. The lesson of the Opium War could not be ignored, and most of the non-Western world had already been colonized by the West. Faced with this imminent threat from the outside, it was natural and wise for the Japanese to quickly develop a national identity, to see themselves as Japanese. The Emperor system that had continued since time immemorial was a gift from history to help Japanese formulate their national identity.

In the last days of World War II, many young Japanese commandos gave their lives for the country. This could be seen as a culmination of the Japanese search for national identity, but things are not quite that simple. It is true that, before dying, the young kamikaze pilot would give the battle cry, "Tenno Heika, banzai!" (Long live the Emperor!). But it is equally true that they felt they were dying to protect their hometowns and families, with a special thought for their mothers and younger sisters. This shows the multifaceted, pluralistic condition of human existence.

The question facing us now is this: what type of identity should be sought for the Japanese people? The answer must first take into account the "multifaceted, pluralistic human conditions" mentioned above. It must be pointed out that World War II delivered to the Japanese people not only material damage but a spiritual blow as well. Straight acceptance of decisions of the Tokyo War Crime Trials caused the Japanese to lose not only the identity they had embraced but their pride as well. This phenomenon parallels the post-war Japanese way of life entrusting its own security to a foreign power to concentrate on the pursuit of economic prosperity. An effort to balance and correct this most unfortunate situation must be admitted.

However, what must be pointed out simultaneously is the fact that a simple reversion to the pre-war identity will not resolve any of the challenges we face in Japan today. The international situation is not the same as in the late 19th century. The waves of globalism and regionalism are now lapping against Japan's shores. Since Sept.11, it has become obvious that the threat to security extends beyond national borders, and that Japan's security is inextricably bound to world peace. Today, the Japanese Self-Defense Forces have vessels in the Indian Ocean and troops in Iraq. This is also a time when the idea of establishing an East Asian community is one of the regular agenda items at the ASEAN+3 (Japan, China and South Korea) Summit meeting. The identity held by individuals living in Japan is now multifaceted, and there is nothing wrong with that. Today, we are faced with a growing need to ask questions about Japan's identity.

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