

## KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Yoneo Ishii

Director-General, Japan Center for Asian Historical Records

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen.

I wish to begin by congratulating the API Fellows gathered here tonight for the 8<sup>th</sup> API Workshop. I take it as a great honor to have the opportunity to give the keynote address to the distinguished participants of this meeting.

Let me start my talk by referring to the history of my academic involvement in Asia

and, in particular, in Southeast Asia. In those days I was studying Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit with the hope of becoming a linguist, specializing in Indo-European comparative linguistics. After two years, my interest centered on the comparison of Romance languages such as Italian, Spanish, and French, all of them derived from Latin. But when I was about to learn Portuguese which is another Romance language, my professor suggested that I choose some Asian language, which had been little studied in

Japan at that time. Following his advice, I decided to study Thai. It was in 1953 that my Thai studies, which continue up to the present, began.

However, at that time, there were but a few facilities from which to learn Thai in Tokyo, except from Japanese teachers who had been to Thailand. With the hope of going to Thailand for study, I successfully applied for a scholarship from the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was in April 1957 when I went to Bangkok where I studied at the Faculty of Letters of Chulalongkorn University. After staying in Chula for two years, I worked at the Japanese Embassy in Bangkok in the subsequent four years. Although my residence was in Bangkok, I was lucky enough to live with a Thai family, who kindly accepted me as a family member.

While in Bangkok, I tried to acclimatize myself to the cultural environment of Thailand, as much as possible. The best opportunity for the purpose was around the dinner table with the Thai family members. I learned a great deal from our conversations at dinner.

In Thailand, there was and still is a custom of temporary ordination as Buddhist monk. It is rite of passage. There is a Thai proverb that goes, “*boat rian mi ruan*” or “To be ordained as a Buddhist monk, to learn and then get married to have a family”. Following this well-established custom for any Thai man, I volunteered to be ordained. Knowing my decision, all of the family members congratulated me and helped me in every respect. I stayed in monkhood for 80 days, living at a *thammayut* temple known as Wat Bowonniwet. While in monkhood, I practiced mendicancy every morning. It was an ideal occasion for me to observe the daily life of ordinary people. This experience gave me more than what I might have gained from reading books. What I wish to stress here, ladies and gentlemen, is the importance of learning other cultures, as maintained and practiced by ordinary people.

In this connection, I wish to touch upon the role of language as the manifestation of cultural values. Language is more than just a means of communication. It influences our culture and even our thought processes. According to E. Sapir and B. Whorf, **language** plays an important role in shaping **our perception of reality**. When we perceive color with our eyes, for example, we are sensing that portion of electromagnetic radiation that is visible light. In fact, the spectrum of visible light is a continuum of light waves with frequencies that increase at a continuous rate, from one end to the other. In other words, there are no distinct colors like **red** and **green** in nature.

Our culture, through language, guides us in seeing the spectrum in terms of the arbitrarily established categories that we call colors. Different cultures may divide the spectrum in different ways. For example, in Japan we usually do not distinguish between **green** and **blue**. Traffic lights change from green to red. We call it a change from **ao** to **aka**. But for the blue sky, we use the term **aoi sora**. The reason we speak English here is merely for convenience’s sake. We should not forget, therefore, that by doing so, we are in the world of the English culture, where “green” should be distinguished from “blue”; these two colors are distinct in the English culture.

In the European Union where no common language policy exists, twenty-three different languages are accepted as official languages, of which Danish, Dutch, English, German and Swedish belong to the **Germanic** languages, while French, Italian, Portuguese, Romanian and Spanish are **Romance** languages. As for the **Slavic** languages, there are the Bulgarian, Czech, Polish, Slovak, and Slovene languages. The **Baltic** languages are Latvian and Lithuanian. In addition, there is **Irish**, which is one of the **Celtic** languages. There is **Greek** as well. All of them are **Indo-European** languages. There are also non-Indo-European languages such as Estonian, Finnish, and Hungarian which belong to **Finno-Ugric**; while Maltese is the only **Semitic** Language.

The cost of maintaining the institutions' policy of multilingualism (i.e., the cost of translation and interpretation) amounted to **1123 million euros** in 2005, which was 1 percent of the annual general budget of the European Union. This was also equivalent to **2.28 euros per person per year**. Why did the members of the EU admit to such a huge budget for the salaries of translators and interpreters? This was mainly because of their adamant belief in the importance of language as a carrier of their respective cultures and values.

Meanwhile, the API fellows are invited from the different countries of Asia where a multilingualistic situation prevails. We should not forget that our use of English is merely for convenience. In this connection I remember an instance which I experienced in Indonesia several years ago. That was during the Indonesia-Japan cultural forum held in Jakarta. When we started the forum, we agreed to use English as the medium of communication. Among the Indonesian participants, there was a well-known Indonesian actress who is a good speaker of English. She started her talk in beautiful English. But at one point, she suddenly stopped to speak and said, from now on, I wish to speak in Bahasa Indonesia since what I really want to say might only be expressed in Bahasa Indonesia. Fortunately, we had among the Japanese participants a good Bahasa speaker, who volunteered to be her interpreter. Then she continued her talk about Indonesian culture and values.

One of the most important tasks expected of public intellectuals, I believe, is to promote mutual understanding among people of different cultures and values. Insofar as we speak in English, we are forced to remain within the context of the English culture and

values. Therefore, it might not be an easy task to make people understand exactly what the speaker really wishes to say. We should not forget that in English, "green" should be distinguished from "blue".

One of the most important missions expected of public intellectuals, I believe, is to help promote mutual understanding among people of different languages and cultures. In the case of the European Union, respect for linguistic diversity is a fundamental value, in the same way that respect for the person, openness towards other cultures, and tolerance and acceptance of other people are. The European Union began the Lingua Program in 1990 and has invested more than 30 million euros a year, promoting language learning.

A similar situation prevails in Asia. So many languages are spoken and so many religions are subscribed to by the people. As is usually the case when people of different cultures and values meet, Asians tend to interpret their partner's thoughts and behavior in light of their own values. I wish to repeat, ladies and gentlemen, that communication using a common language such as English, is merely a convenience. But insofar as we speak English, much might remain untouched. Here is where public intellectuals are expected to play an important role. It is my sincere hope that public intellectuals are good enough to be interpreters of other cultural values so that the rest of the people shall have a real understanding of the culture and values of the other people whom they encounter.

To achieve real understanding among people of different cultures and languages, we are required to humbly study other cultures and other ways of thought namely, other values. It is rather too much to expect the achievement of such a task from ordinary people. Here again is where public intellectuals are expected to play an important role. I sincerely hope that the public intellectuals will play the important role of cultural interpreters so that real peace will prevail in Asia for many years to come.

Thank you.