

The Global Society:  
Acquiring Strength from Traditional Culture

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Eight years ago an American who was avidly studying Noh told me he thought that Japan's wealth of traditional culture – not just Noh – was enviable. At the time, I was serving as an instructor for the Noh Training Project in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania. There were about 25 students, who had come from Canada, the United Kingdom and Malaysia as well as the United States. Most could neither speak nor read Japanese, so the brush-written classical Japanese of the *utaibon*, the libretto of Noh, was transliterated into the Roman alphabet for them and they chanted “*Azuma asobi no*” in resonant voices. What most surprised me during my two weeks there – and what I still respect them for – was their serious approach to Noh and how diligently they practiced.

When I asked myself why they were so enthusiastic about studying Noh, which even Japanese tend to think of as old and difficult, I recalled that American's comment. He regarded Noh as something imbued with the wisdom of our ancestors that had been handed down in the form of traditional culture, which he felt was one of Japan's strengths. Born in New York, he had ambitions of becoming an actor and had appeared in various plays. He said he felt that the more he attempted to be more individualistic than others and to express himself in his own way, the more confusing things became. And he had the feeling that clashes between those around him who had a similar desire for self-expression were going to wear him down. He told me that when he first saw Noh, he found it intriguing that there was overall harmony despite the clashes between the energy of the performers.

*Utai* (Noh chant) is sung in a loud voice produced by breathing deeply from the abdomen. *Hayashikata* (Noh musicians) play drums and perform *kakegoe*, their unique vocalizations, equally loudly. This American said he found the real charm of Noh in the harmony that emerged from this clash of the performers' energy. He also said that as he studied Noh he sensed the strength of tradition across the generations, which offered him emotional support because America had no traditional culture. He also thought it was a shame that Japanese knew so little about Noh. Having been born into a family of Noh performers and been around Noh since I was a small child, I was shocked by what he said. It had never occurred to me that traditional culture such as Noh could offer emotional support. Perhaps people don't recognize the significance or value of things they take for granted.

Needless to say, Japan is a traditional culture “superpower.” The names of most of its forms of traditional culture such as *shodō* (calligraphy), *kadō* (flower arrangement), *sadō* (tea ceremony) and *budō* (martial arts) share the Chinese character *dō*, meaning “way” or “path.” In Japanese, when we want to master something we talk about following its path. Although we don't use *dō* when referring to Noh, I feel I am following its path. The path has hills, valleys and other challenges, but when I lose my way the wisdom of those who have gone before guides me. Just as I follow those who have gone before me, I am followed by those who are coming after me. I must follow the path myself, but it is not lonely because I am linked to many predecessors and kindred spirits.

When I'm overseas people often express surprise that the Japanese have no

religion. But, looking back over history, it seems to me that the “path” of studying traditional culture has provided emotional support to the Japanese. When teaching Noh overseas, I’m sometimes made aware of important things I’m not conscious of in Japan, which is a welcome experience. Trying to live in a global society without something “local” and unshakable inside is risky. While society may be globalized, individuals exist on the local level. If you have pride in and love for yourself, the people around you, and the community and country in which you grew up, you can respect others, enrich your understanding along with people from other countries and accept diverse values and cultures.

Fifteen years ago, Hiroko Yamamoto, then principal of Sankun Elementary School in Okayama, invited me to teach at the school, which continues to offer lessons in Noh. Ms. Yamamoto was eager to incorporate Noh into the school’s “integrated studies” program. She firmly believed that the 21<sup>st</sup> Century would be an era of globalization and wanted to nurture Japanese who had good insight into and understanding of their culture, who could convey their culture overseas with confidence and who could interact with people of other countries on an equal footing.

I had taught a few lessons at schools, but teaching 80 sixth graders all at once seemed like a daunting task. But with the kind support of Ms. Yamamoto and the school’s teachers, I did my best, finding my way as I went along. The 80 students, who were seeing and hearing the techniques of Noh for the first time, practiced *utai* and *mai* (dance) enthusiastically in the school gymnasium, starting in June. Six months later they gave their best efforts in a recital on the Noh stage in Korakuen in Okayama. Seeing their children looking dignified in kimono and *hakama*, the parents were impressed. Some were moved to tears. From this experience, I realized that practicing Noh could be useful in education, and it also encouraged me in my own endeavors.

When teaching Noh at schools, I focus on three points. The first is posture: sitting, standing, *kamae* (the basic posture maintained while performing Noh) and *suriashi* (the “sliding feet” walk). It’s important to give the students a feel for a stance in which the lower half of the body is stable. By adopting this stance and by being aware of the center line of the body, concentration is enhanced. The movements in Noh, known as *kata*, are the “receptacles” of Noh. If they are not sound, you can’t put anything in them. It is the same with people. By straightening people’s posture and making sound “receptacles” of their bodies, it becomes easier to put things in them.

The second point is breathing and vocalizing. You must breathe deeply from your abdomen and let out long breaths. It is better if you have an awareness of the *tanden* (Chinese: *dantian*), the energy center just below the navel, but that is difficult. So I usually describe it to the children as a spot behind their bellybuttons, which seems easier for them to understand. The Chinese character for breath is composed of the characters for “self” and “soul.” Your breath is your soul, your state of mind. By controlling your breathing, you can relax and achieve a sense of mental balance. For *utai* the voice is added to the long, deep breaths from the abdomen. By producing a loud voice from the abdomen rather than the falsetto often used in choral singing, you can generate vitality in a tranquil mental state.

The third point is moving actively, initiating movement. If not everyone devotes all of their energy to actively playing their parts, the performance cannot proceed. When you wait for someone else to take the lead, things come to a halt. You must

pull everyone along with you while maintaining a sense of the whole. If everyone does this, a wonderful, harmonized performance will result. I keep these three points in mind when teaching, and they are what I'd like the students to learn by practicing Noh.

I'm sure many teachers were at a loss after the government established a policy under which traditional Japanese instruments were to be taught in music classes. Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, music education had meant Western music. I myself have no recollection of learning any traditional music in school. I just thought that was the way it was. But as an adult, when I stopped to think about it I realized it was strange that it was taken for granted that the Japanese knew nothing about traditional Japanese music. The policy that has attempted to do something about this situation should be welcomed, but I can imagine how much confusion it caused for the schools.

For about six years I have been teaching one day of the license renewal courses for music teachers. Japan's traditional performing arts and music include Noh, *bunraku* (puppet theater), *kabuki*, *gagaku* (court music) and *koto* (13-stringed zither) music. Few countries can boast such diversity. Because I am a Noh performer, my one-day course focuses on Noh. When I first taught the class six years ago, I detected a lot of confusion and uncertainty on the part of the teachers from their reports. But over the years their reports have become more positive, and I can sense enthusiasm now. Seeking a practical skill they can make use of at school, the teachers come up with ways to convey the pleasure of Noh, even without musical instruments, such as by using *utai* and *kakegoe* or clapping to the rhythms of Noh music. I can sense the teachers' eagerness to learn, and that makes me feel good.

I've heard that in recent years the time devoted to music and art has been cut, but artistic activities must not be neglected. Not because we must train artists but because art and culture are essential to cultivate the minds and bodies of the young people who will be leaders in the global society of the future. I firmly believe that traditional arts have an important role to play in this regard.

*From the bulletin "School Education" (No. 1169) published by the School Education Workshop at the Elementary School attached to Hiroshima University, in January of 2015.*