

Diversities in Culture and the Red Cross Cultural Heritage Spirit

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Sixty years ago, Japan's reckless waging of war in Asia resulted in countless war victims in the region, including the Japanese themselves. In 1945, I was 15 years old, a third-year junior high school student. On August 6, 1945, I was exposed to radiation when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. A total of 201 people from my school (13 teachers and 188 students) were killed outright in the bombing.

I narrowly escaped death, but suffered from radiation sickness for many years afterwards. At one point, my blood cell count dropped sharply, endangering my life. To pray for the repose of the souls of the atomic bomb's many victims, I became an artist and have continued to draw pictures based on religious anecdotes and legends. Buddhism was brought to Japan in the 6th century by way of China and the Korean Peninsula. Relayed from country to country and ethnic group to ethnic group, it took about 1,000 years for this religion to finally reach Japan from its origin in India. Influenced by the cultures of Hellenism and Persia, Buddhist arts were born of the cultural exchange between the East and the West on the Eurasian Continent.

In the Shosoin Storehouse in Nara, cultural antiques from Persia, Central Asian countries, China and the Korean Peninsula have been preserved with great caution and care for well over one thousand years. The Japanese arts have developed their own particular characteristics through their absorption of aspects of these various cultures.

I myself have learnt a great deal about the histories and cultures of the lands along the Silk Road within the context of cultural exchange between the East and the West. In fact, I have journeyed along this path of cultural exchange on the Eurasian Continent around 190 times, visiting among others the Korean Peninsula, China, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka,

Myanmar, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Egypt, Kuwait, Bahrain, the Arabian Peninsula, Greece, Bulgaria, the Balkan Peninsula, Russia, Italy, France, Switzerland, Britain, Germany, Spain, the Netherlands, and Belgium.

Sadly, civil and religious wars have been erupting in Asia, the Middle East, Eastern Europe and other areas around the world. In these places, in addition to the natural collapse of cultural heritage, war ruins and destroys the lives of innocent citizens as well as their cultural heritage, the embodiment of their unique culture. Moreover, plundering of cultural heritage sites is not unusual; it is a crime of desperation born out of economic necessity and poverty. I was appointed a Goodwill Ambassador to UNESCO more than 10 years ago. I have been visiting such areas of conflict and providing suggestions and financial support in the name of UNESCO to countries that have asked me for assistance in the preservation of their own unique cultural heritages. I hope that people will realize the importance of their own histories through the cultural heritage created over generations by their ancestors, and that they will feel pride in preserving these as their own treasures.

To preserve a cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, is to save the lifestyles of the people of that region and to respect their humanity, thereby protecting the culture of humankind. Once a cultural heritage is destroyed, it is lost to the world forever. We must protect both the people and the heritage. There are many important cultural heritages, even in poor countries. It is my hope that such countries will also have the opportunity to inscribe their own cultural heritages into the World Heritage listings of UNESCO.

Japan has a pacifist constitution established as a result of lessons hard learnt on the destructiveness of waging war. No other country in the world has such a constitution. I am advocating that, in addition to humanitarian aid and economic reconstruction support, Japan include in its foreign policy the provision of assistance in promoting cultural reconstruction.

I hope culturally flexible and religiously generous Japan will advocate and move to ensure the promotion of peace with the international community through mutual respect for different cultures.

Finally, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to president Khatami for giving me this opportunity to share my experiences and

opinions. I pray that this gathering will promote peace in the world.