Learning from Each Other:
Japan, the United States, and the International Knowledge System

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The Japan-U.S. bilateral relationship is one of the most important in the world. Trade and security issues come to mind as central to this relationship, but education and culture are just as important, and are a necessary underpinning to commerce. Each country is very much on the mind of the other, not only in matters of trade policy but also in popular culture and imagination. Japan pays more attention to the United States than vice versa. For example, the number of books translated from English into Japanese (2,466, mostly from the United States) far outweighs translations from Japanese into English (32). Very few hooks from Japanese sources reach readers in the English-speaking world, while Japanese bookstores are well stocked with American books, many reaching the bestseller lists. A study done in the 1980s by the Research Institute of the Japan Press Society looked at what was reported about the United States in the Asahi Shimbun and about Japan in the New York Times. In a one-week period, 112 news items about the United States appeared in the Asahi Shimbun while only 24 stories about Japan were printed in the New York Times.

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Learning languages is another way of learning about another culture—and of communicating with it. Here, again, there are obvious inequalities, with many more Japanese learning English than there are Americans learning Japanese. The Japanese public school system requires students to study English in junior high and high school. While there has been much criticism of the quality of English-language instruction in Japan, most college graduates have a reasonable reading knowledge of English, partly because the entrance examination system has emphasized reading over speaking. The number of Americans who study Japanese, despite dramatic growth in the past half-dozen years, is tiny in comparison. Approximately 50,000 American postsecondary students were enrolled in Japanese-language courses in 1990, with a handful of additional students studying Japanese in high schools.

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There is also a lack of balance in people. Many more Japanese visit the United States than Americans visit Japan. Not only are there vastly more tourists from Japan going to the United States than there are Americans traveling in the other direction, but the numbers of students and researchers are dramatically unbalanced. In 1995, 1,782 American students are studying in Japanese universities, and only 442 of these are graduate students, while more than 43,000 Japanese students are at present studying in the United States, the majority at the graduate level. In fact, Japanese students now comprise the largest single group of foreign students in the United States. While Japanese numbers continue to increase, American enrollments in Japan are declining. Moreover, more researchers and experts from Japan go to the United States than American scholars and scientists go to Japan.
and universities, and the field has been growing in popularity. In contrast, there are few places in Japan to study the United States, and few experts in Japanese academe specializing in the United States; the field of American studies is underdeveloped in Japan.

What is to be done? There is an urgent need to correct dramatic imbalances in educational and cultural relations. It is clear that some inequalities will remain. Large numbers of Americans are simply not going to learn Japanese—it is a language that requires a great deal of time and energy to master, and its usefulness is limited to Japan—although there ought to be further growth in the numbers of Americans studying Japanese. With only minor improvements in language instruction in Japan, large numbers of Japanese can be sufficiently fluent in English to communicate with Americans and other English-speakers.

The main challenge is to recognize that there is a distinct knowledge deficit, and that education and culture are very much part of the pattern of international relations in the modern world.

Better policies and performance in education and cultural exchange and learning do not require treaties or diplomatic ann-twisting. Modest initiatives can go a long way. Here are some suggestions:

- Improve and expand already existing programs to bring Americans to Japan for study. This can be done by better publicity and coordination, and modest infusion of resources. At present, 90 percent of the foreign students in Japan are from Asia. More attention can be placed on attracting students from the United States.
- Stimulate the translation into English and publication of more Japanese books in the United States. This can be done through commercial publishers with subsidies for translation.
- Expand the study of the United States in Japan and provide resources for training experts on American culture, history, politics, and society.

The main challenge is to recognize that, while there might be a trade surplus in Japan's favor, there is a distinct knowledge deficit, and that education and culture are very much part of the pattern of international relations in the modern world.

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