

Researcher's Eyes

Reflections on the Cultural Significance of the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics

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Tokyo 2020 is just over a year away. Preparations for the Olympics are progressing steadily, as evidenced by over 24.25 million views of the ticket sales website and the announcement of the torch relay course.

On the other hand, some other preparations are not well known. The Olympic and Paralympic Games are not only sporting events but also cultural festivals. The cultural program of Tokyo 2020 began when Rio 2016 ended in September 2016.

One fundamental principle of the Olympic Charter states that “Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life...”. In fact, the cultural program has been implemented since Stockholm 1912, where Japan sent its first team of athletes over 100 years ago.

At that time, “artistic competitions” were held where participants competed for medals as in sporting events. Later this became an “artistic exhibition” and finally, the “culture Olympiad”, which lasts for four years. The cultural program of London 2012, with its unprecedented scale and content, set a new standard. Partly because the cultural program of Rio 2016 was underwhelming, Tokyo 2020 is attracting international attention.

The ultimate goal of the Olympics and Paralympics is peace. Overcoming the differences created by geographical borders and political affiliations, athletes meet once every four years to compete under common rules. The actions and dignity of the athletes as human beings and the ideal international community that we see, impress us.

However, in reality, winning medals is the primary focus. The media seems to inflame international competition rather than promote peace. Similarly, we also feel joy or sorrow when winning or losing medals. The number of medals won is also a reflection of the economic power of that country, and contrary to the Olympic principles, the Olympics and Paralympics are also a place to parade national strength and highlight economic disparity.

Because of this, the role of cultural programs held in parallel with the Games is very significant.

In fact, there were many cultural projects with the theme of peace during London 2012. They invited artists from all 204 countries and regions indiscriminately, just like the athletes. They did so to provide them with an opportunity to gain the world's attention at the Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Relevant organizations are also promoting cultural programs for Tokyo 2020. The cultural programs which the organizing committee has implemented or will implement number about 3,000. The number of certifications for the government-promoted cultural program, called "beyond 2020", exceeded 10,000 at the end of March. With the support of Tokyo metropolitan cultural facilities and the Arts Council Tokyo, the Tokyo Metropolis is promoting various projects which are collectively called "Tokyo Tokyo FESTIVAL".

Although there are some interesting ideas in each project, they, unfortunately, lack an overall sense of unity. The fact is that the Japanese government is more interested in the number of certifications. In addition, they generally tend to emphasize projecting Japanese culture, and only a limited few will promote international cultural exchange. The "Japan Cultural Expo", which was recently announced by the government, is an example of this emphasis.

When considering the inbound flow of tourists after 2020, it will certainly be wise to demonstrate the appeal of Japanese culture at the Olympics and Paralympics. However, and more importantly, we should use the unique integration of culture in the Japanese lifestyle to show the international community the role that culture can fill in our future societies.

The "World Cities Culture Summit" was held during London 2012 as part of the cultural program. At an international conference where the role of culture in future urban policy was discussed, overseas experts were surprised at some of the cultural data from Tokyo. In the Tokyo metropolitan area, the number of pianos owned by ordinary households (830,000), the number of citizens enjoying tea or flowers on a daily basis (460,000), the number of amateur dance schools (748), and, with newspaper circulation amounting to 5.4 million, the large number of citizens posting daily to the haiku corner of leading newspapers, and so on. The number of citizens who display their drawings, sculptures or calligraphies at local exhibitions is the highest in the world.

In other words, the evidence that citizens in Japan enjoy cultural activities daily and that culture is rooted in their lives was noteworthy from an international perspective. Therefore, shouldn't we show this to the world at Tokyo 2020?

Japan has entered a period with an elderly society that has never been experienced by any other country in the world. However, Western and Asian countries will eventually have similar aging societies. In such an environment, is there any other country where the elderly enjoy culture as much as in Japan today? The number of elderly people who are seriously learning music or acting, thereby finding new purpose in life, is increasing across the country. The same is true for sports. Most foreigners are surprised to see that many elderly people participate in the Imperial Palace Marathon or climb Mt. Fuji.

In other words, culture and sports support this country where the elderly population is energetic and live comfortably. This is the current state of Japan.

Thanks to Tokyo 1964 half a century ago, Japan made great strides in economic growth. Expecting the same thing from Tokyo 2020 should not be our focus. Rather than obsessing over economic value as we have in the past, we should work towards presenting the world with a model next-generation society - that of a mature developed country, in which we pursue culture and sports in tandem. Shouldn't we make that the vision that we present to the world in 2020?

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