Peter Salovey
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Thinking Across Cultures

President Tanaka, members of the faculty, students, family members, and friends: It is an honor to join you for today's ceremony, and I am especially thrilled now to be counted as an honorary graduate of Waseda University.

My university – Yale University – and Waseda University have a long-standing partnership including exchanges of students and scholars through our Fox International Fellowship, Summer Session, and Light Fellowship Programs. My friend and Yale colleague, Professor of Political Science, Frances Rosenbluth (who, unfortunately passed away in 2021) served as an external member of the Board of Trustees at Waseda University. And, in fact, there are over 1,000 publications just from the last decade jointly authored by Waseda and Yale scholars.

The relationship between Yale and Waseda was initiated more than 100 years ago by Dr. Kan-ichi Asakawa who graduated from Waseda and then earned a doctoral degree in history at Yale in 1902. He was Yale's first professor of Japanese history and was in charge of Yale's East Asian Library. Because Dr. Asakawa maintained contact with many prominent public figures in Japan and because he was so devoted to fostering mutual understanding between the United States and Japan, he helped build Yale's exceptional Japanese book and document collection in Yale's Sterling Memorial Library. In his honor, there is now an Asakawa Garden in Yale's Saybrook College and an Asakawa Senior Fellowship Program that allows Yale scholars to conduct research at Waseda. Dr. Asakawa is buried on our campus in the Grove Street Cemetery, and someday my wife and I will be his neighbors there – although hopefully not too soon.

This long history between Yale and Waseda should not be surprising given that the connections between Yale and Japan date back to the middle of the 19th century. When Commodore Matthew Perry arrived in Japan in 1853, a Yale graduate (and future faculty member) named George Jones served as his chaplain and interpreter, and another future Yale faculty member, Samuel Wells Williams, also was an interpreter. Professors Jones and Williams helped negotiate the Treaty of Kanagawa in 1854 between Japan and the United States.

Between 1870 and 1900, sixty students from Japan studied at Yale, and the first one was one of the fathers of physics in Japan, Kenjiro Yamakawa, who went on to serve as the President of the University of Tokyo, Kyoto University and Kyushu University.

In fact, Yale was the first university in North America to offer courses related to Japan. But why do I describe this shared history of ours?

I believe that the educational experience in the classroom, laboratory, and studio is enhanced by the presence of people who – no matter who you are – have had different life experiences than you, who do not share the same learning history and cultural experiences.

Now, it goes without saying that we all share a common humanity, we are all citizens of the earth, and there are many ways in which we are very much alike. But there are also ways in which our family backgrounds, upbringings, and schooling have taught us to notice different things, to reason differently, and to solve problems in different ways. Educational systems throughout the world may emphasize the learning of different ways of thinking.

Here's an example that I think you will find intriguing. Professor Richard Nisbett is a University of Michigan social psychologist – that's my field of study too -- who began his career on the Yale faculty. Through careful laboratory experimentation, he has demonstrated that individuals who grew up in the countries of East Asia actually learn ways of thinking with different emphases than individuals who grew up in the countries of North America.

So let me tell you about the kinds of psychology experiments that Professor Nisbett conducts. In one, he and Taka Masuda showed students who had lived in Japan and students who were raised in the United States various underwater scenes including fish swimming around in the foreground with rocks, plants, snails, bubbles, and the like in the background. The fish were the focal point of the scene. After studying these scenes for 20 seconds, the students were asked to report what they could remember.

All students reported seeing fish, but the students raised and educated here in Asia were 60% more likely also to mention the background elements like the plants, rocks, and bubbles. The students raised and educated in North America were more likely to mention the most compelling focal element: an especially large fish swimming in the water. Those from Asia were more likely to describe the context: This scene seemed, to them, like a pond.

Here's another experiment: Li-jun Ji, Zhiyong Zhang, and Professor Nisbett presented college students in East Asia and college students in North America with words to classify. These words were presented in groups of three, and the students had to decide which two words went together, and which one did not belong with the others. So, for example, a three-word set might include monkey, panda, and banana.

As it turned out, the students raised in North America were more likely to group words together by categories such as animals versus fruits, thus pairing monkey and panda but leaving aside banana. However, college students in Asia were more likely to group the

words by their relationship to each other, so monkey went with banana, and panda was left aside. If you were raised in North America, you were more likely to say something like, “monkeys and pandas are both animals,” and if you were raised in East Asia you were more likely to say, “monkeys love to eat bananas.” The difference seems to be rooted in the experiences North American students have learning to think about taxonomies as compared to the experiences East Asian students have learning to think about relationships.

Neither Professor Nisbett nor I intend to imply that all East Asians or all North Americans are alike. Of course there is considerable variability within each group of individuals. But family background, schooling, and experience help determine the wonderful differences among human beings, and social psychological research provides a fascinating window into one way that this is so.

So, what happens when we put North Americans and East Asians together in a classroom or in a workplace? You get much better solutions to problems because both styles of thinking are represented. And that is my point today: We are better together. The world is better off when Americans and Japanese people are sitting side-by-side, in the classroom or wherever you may end up, whether it is at Apple or Sony, Ford or Toyota. The world will be improved today and for future generations when we collaborate across cultures and thinking styles.

As you move on in your education and in life, I suggest that you seek out opportunities to work with others whose backgrounds are different from your own. Recognize that the solutions to problems will be better ones when you do that. And encourage our governments – both in the US and in Japan – to make it easy for this to happen. Whether we are working together, side-by-side, to solve global climate change or cure the next viral pandemic, the benefits to the world – to our common humanity – are immeasurable.

Once again, it is a great pleasure to be with you today. Thank you, President Tanaka for inviting me and for making me a part of the Waseda University community for the rest of my life.

And good luck to all of you as you further your education here at Waseda University.