

Speech by Yukiko Nakahari, Head of Cultural Affairs and PR at the Embassy of Japan in Finland, on the occasion of the international symposium, “Interaction, Influence and Entanglement: 100 years of Finnish–Japanese Relations and Beyond”

15 September 2016

Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honor to be here today, participating in the symposium “Interaction, Influence and Entanglement – 100 years of Finnish-Japanese Relations and Beyond”, which coincides with the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the Japanese studies programme at the University of Oulu. On behalf of the Embassy of Japan, I would like to express our heartfelt gratitude and congratulations to Oulu University, for its 20 years of marvelous contributions to the field of Japanese studies.

The underlying theme of our symposium is the upcoming centennial of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Japan and Finland. In May 1919, two years after Finland’s independence, Japan officially recognized the sovereign nation of Finland. Four months later, Professor Gustaf John Ramstedt became the first Finnish envoy to Japan.

Since then, much has changed in the world for the better and for the worse, but in terms of Finnish-Japanese relations, it seems as though things have only gotten from good to excellent. We have had very few setbacks in our political and economic relations, and there is a very strong attraction or affinity between our two cultures and societies that is rare to find between two countries geographically apart like ours.

And while I mention the geographical distance, people often joke that there is only one small country between Finland and Japan. In the current age, owing to ICT as well as increased ease of physical access through direct flights, this joke is becoming less of a jest and more of a simple observation or fact, as the geographical divide between our two countries gets smaller and smaller.

In thinking of the next 100 years of bilateral relations, we need not drastically change the hitherto efforts and policies of Japan and Finland. Rather, we should build on the wonderful existing relations, by taking away as much as possible the barriers for

further development. This is an area where the two Governments of Japan and Finland must play a large role. While bilateral relations cannot be pushed forward by Governments alone, but it is the Governments that must provide the basic framework in which all other interactions, be it business, cultural or grass-roots, can flourish. In this regard, it is important to note that in a joint statement, President Sauli Niinisto and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe underlined the importance of concluding negotiations on a social security agreement at the earliest possible time, as well as to accelerate the efforts to introduce a working holiday program. The joint statement was released on the occasion of the visit by President Niinisto to Japan in March this year.

In contemplating the next 100 years, it is also important to recognize all of the possible areas of cooperation between Japan and Finland. Japan and Finland face similar challenges and goals in our society, economy and politics, and we have much to offer to each other in terms of best practices, technological know-how, and human resources. In terms of foreign policy, we must be increasingly aware that in a highly interconnected international community, what may prima facie seem region-specific is indeed a global problem that concerns all countries and regions, and that disregard for the rule of law is not an option. There is much scope for Japan and Finland, as peace-loving nations, to cooperate in the international arena in this regard.

By continuing the efforts to strengthen bilateral relations at various levels, Government, business and grassroots, by the next centennial in 2119, we can hopefully achieve bilateral relations that are so strong and deep that we even forget that there is that one country in between us, and start to hallucinate that we can walk from Helsinki to Tokyo.

In closing, I would like to thank our co-organizers, Oulu University and Hokkaido University Helsinki Office. The Embassy of Japan is proud to have been able to participate in this project, and looks very much forward to future collaborations. I would also like to thank all of the participants, notably our two keynote speakers, Dr. Bart Gaens who is here with us today, and Dr. Riikka Lansisalmi who will be joining us tomorrow. I look forward to hearing the presentations and active discussions over the next two days.

Thank you all for your kind attention.

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