

SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA'S ESSAY SERIES
A RECORD OF MY LIFE
INTERPRETATION IS THE LIFELINE OF CULTURAL EXCHANGE
BY SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA

When I met Premier Zhou Enlai (1898–1976) of China (in 1974), outstanding interpretation was provided by Lin Liyun. Premier Zhou once gave the following advice to Ms. Lin on how to be a good interpreter: “You should broaden your knowledge and become well versed on a wide range of issues. Interpreting is not simply a matter of conveying words; you have to transmit the spirit behind the words. Toward that end, you need to have a good understanding of what the speaker is saying.” I agree entirely.

I myself have been able to build a global network of friendship and trust thanks to interpreters who have conveyed my spirit and thus opened the hearts of those with whom I have met. Interpretation is truly the lifeline of cultural exchange and the nucleus of human diplomacy.

My Meeting With Zhou Enlai

The car drove through the darkened streets of Beijing, its headlights illuminating the lowest strata of the night.

It was the evening of December 5, 1974, and I was scheduled to depart the following day, concluding my second visit to China. I was hosting a banquet at the International Club in Beijing to thank those who had offered their assistance and hospitality during the trip. As the party was wrapping up, I received word that Premier Zhou would meet with me.

That morning, I had been apprised of Premier Zhou's condition by Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping, who told me: “He has been in the hospital for seven or eight months. His condition was worse than we had thought. ... We are doing everything we can to keep him from being burdened by work.” His voice was solemn, communicating his deep concern.

Therefore, when the news arrived that I could meet with the premier, I initially tried to decline. But Premier Zhou clearly wished it, and I was urged to take my leave of the banquet immediately. We drove for about fifteen minutes until we arrived at a hospital in the central part of the city known as Zhongnanhai, or Sea Palace, where the meeting took place.

Winter in Beijing is cold. And that December day was particularly so. The hospital was quiet and in the short time we were waiting for the meeting to begin, my wife began to shiver from the cold. Seeing this, Ms. Lin casually took off her coat and draped it over my wife's shoulders. She has never forgotten Ms. Lin's warm consideration.

A Witness to the Making of History

Despite his frailty, Premier Zhou greeted us standing tall and resolute. He said: “This is your second visit to China, isn't it?” Each word shone with vigor, as if he were wringing out all of his remaining energy. I can still hear his unforgettable remark: “The last twenty-five years of the twentieth century will be an extremely significant period for the entire world.” Time has flown by and we have already reached the final year of that period.

Ms. Lin has bright, sparkling eyes and she exudes an elegant simplicity. Although she was raised in Kobe, Japan, Ms. Lin was inspired by reports of the birth of the People's Republic of China (in 1949) and returned to her homeland in 1952 to work for the construction of the new country.

For the benefit of later generations, she often speaks of my meeting with Premier Zhou,

saying: “Even though he was then hospitalized, the premier insisted on meeting with Mr. Ikeda because he recognized very well the latter’s contribution to opening a path of friendship between China and Japan. He entrusted Mr. Ikeda with the great mission of creating friendship between our countries.”

An interpreter is also a witness to the making of history. I am grateful for Ms. Lin’s profound understanding of my sentiments in wishing to build such a golden bridge of friendship.

Betting Everything on Youth

The year I met Premier Zhou, 1974, was a year that saw a dramatic increase in my travels around the world and my opportunities to speak with world leaders. In addition to visiting China for the first time (in May), I also made my first trip to the Soviet Union and traveled to North, Central and South America. A *Seikyo Shimbun* reporter who graphed the number of times I met with world figures each year was surprised by the marked change that took place from 1974.

Through these overseas trips, I gained a deep appreciation for the important role of interpreters. And as my young interpreters and I came to know and understand each other, I trained them in actual interpreting situations.

When the *Seikyo Shimbun* newspaper was started (in 1951), Josei Toda, the second Soka Gakkai president, remarked: “Being amateur is fine for now. Everyone has to start somewhere. But in ten years you will develop into professionals.”

Based on these words, in 1974 I determined to devote ten years to fostering capable interpreters by learning and struggling together with them. I wanted to raise interpreters who were still in the prime of youth. I bet everything on youth.

Raising Capable People

The corps of SGI official interpreters grew into a solid and capable force.¹ In March 1991, to express my appreciation for their daily efforts, I held a meeting with the SGI interpreters at which we were able to discuss a wide range of topics. This was the first meeting of its kind.

I believe in “on the job training” when it comes to raising capable people. It was essentially due to the personal coaching and the life-to-life encouragement and inspiration, that such an outstanding core of SGI interpreters was able to develop.

This year (2000) marks the fortieth anniversary of my first trip overseas (in October 1960). Since then, I have visited fifty-four countries, and traveled abroad on more than seventy occasions. During those trips, I received tremendous support from many interpreters. I have never forgotten those individuals whose noble efforts behind the scenes have transcended the barrier of language and enabled Buddhism to spread around the world.

A Great Interpreter of Chinese

I often tell young interpreters: “An interpreter must have a strong voice. When the voice is strong, the meaning can be conveyed. There is an outstanding Chinese interpreter whose cheerful voice reverberates throughout China’s Great Hall of the People without the aid of a microphone.”

The owner of this clear, resonant voice is Huang Shiming. Mr. Huang has been a dear friend of mine ever since my first visit to China. He has interpreted for me on numerous occasions during meetings with Chinese dignitaries, and we have also held personal dialogues here in Japan. He has served as vice president for both the Chinese People’s Association for

Friendship with Foreign Countries and the China-Japan Friendship Association.

Mr. Huang is an honest and virtuous man of exemplary character. I have known him since his side-parted hair was a deep black. I recall how he once cited such Chinese proverbs as “It is in times of difficulty that we know our true friends” and “Pure gold fears no fire” in expressing his profound spirit of friendship. He is a person whose every word reflects personal conviction.

Mr. Huang attended an entrance ceremony for the Soka Junior and Senior High Schools in Tokyo. In his address to the matriculating students, he said: “I hope all of you will strive to make the golden bridge [of China–Japan friendship] shine with increasing brilliance for generations to come.”

Because he himself had worked so hard to promote China–Japan friendship, his appeal resonated in the hearts of the youth present. Now, many graduates of the Soka Schools have gone on to make building friendship between the two countries their lifelong endeavor.

Youth Are the Axis of Change

When I was in China in 1992 I learned Mr. Huang was in the hospital. I immediately composed a poem and had it delivered to him:

*I pray,
I deeply pray
For the day
When I will again
See your great smile.*

Two years later, having won his battle with illness, Mr. Huang came to Japan together with his wife, his face alight with a brilliant smile.

In September 1998, Mr. Huang sent a kind message saying that my call for the normalization of diplomatic relations between China and Japan² thirty years earlier had been a significant impetus toward the development of bilateral friendship. Referring to my statement at that time, “The times are changing moment by moment. It is the prerogative of youth to take action, ever-focused on the future,” he voiced his expectations for youth, whom he called the “axis of change in history.”

Mr. Huang further stated: “Both officially and privately, I regard my association with the Soka Gakkai as a source of immense honor and pride.” In addition to being a person of keen insight, he is also a true friend who shines with a spirit of sincerity.

Five Guidelines for Interpreters

The SGI official interpreters are all hardworking, serious and highly capable individuals. One of them is Ryoko Yakura, who is my principal English interpreter. Ms. Yakura’s father was a second-generation Japanese-American, and her mother, a Japanese national, was an educator. She attended an international school in Kanagawa Prefecture from kindergarten through high school, and then went on to college — earning top marks all along the way. From the time she attended a summer training course as a member of the junior high school division, Ms. Yakura cherished the dream of becoming an SGI interpreter and she pursued her goal wholeheartedly.

Around the time the activities of the SGI official interpreters really began gaining momentum, I recall giving the following five guidelines for interpreters at a leaders meeting in

Los Angeles attended by representatives of many different countries: 1) develop broad learning and linguistic ability; 2) maintain pure faith; 3) cultivate the ability to capture people's hearts; 4) accurately convey the spirit of the speaker; and 5) develop physical stamina.

Moscow University Rector Anatoli A. Logunov, with whom I published a dialogue,³ highly praised the young woman who interpreted for us, who happens to be a graduate of Soka University. I'm sure it wasn't just her linguistic ability he was complimenting: an interpreter's character is also vital.

In a book of memoirs, former Moscow State University vice rector Vladimir I. Tropin writes: "I will never forget my discussion with President Ikeda during my first visit to Japan in 1976. He stressed the importance of life-to-life exchange, particularly among youth, and of acquiring proficiency in a foreign language toward that end. ... He also joked that now that Soka University has incorporated Russian language instruction into its curriculum, on his next visit to Russia he would bring a 'home grown' interpreter to save face."⁴

Many outstanding interpreters have been fostered through the active exchange program developed between Soka University and Moscow State University.

My Friendship With Dr. Strijak

Speaking of Russia and the Russian language, I am also greatly indebted to Associate Professor Leon A. Strijak of Moscow State University. When I arrived at Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport for my first visit to the Soviet Union, Moscow State University Rector Rem V. Khokhlov and other dignitaries were there to greet me, and Professor Strijak was on hand to interpret. To be honest, I was surprised to find someone able to speak such fluent Japanese in the Soviet Union.

Dr. Strijak interpreted between the rector and me as we drove into the city from the airport, led by a police escort. A different language is a different culture. I deeply appreciate the significant role played by the interpreter who conveys the initial exchange of words between me and my host when I travel overseas.

When we arrived at our lodgings, I praised Dr. Strijak's wonderful command of the Japanese language. My wife was equally impressed.

Professor Strijak also interpreted during my meetings with the late Soviet premier Aleksei N. Kosygin and the Nobel Prize-winning author Mikhail A. Sholokhov. He provides guidance and support to students of Japanese at Moscow State University, and frequently escorts groups of these students on trips to Japan.

He once shared with me what was going through his mind as he waited for my arrival at the airport that day in Moscow. "I was in fact extremely worried," he confided, "wondering if you would trust me as your interpreter and if I would be able to accurately relate your sentiments. But you were extremely kind, and you spoke in a way that was easy to understand. This gave me confidence."

We formed a bond of trust on that first meeting, and our friendship has continued to this day. I believe that it is just such bonds of the heart that have fostered enduring educational and cultural exchange with Russia.

Dialogue Is an Earnest Struggle

When I visited Central and South America in 1974, my original plans were changed and we wound up flying from Miami directly to Panama, where I was to meet with the country's paramount leader, General Omar Torrijos Herrera (1929–81), along with the president of the

republic, Demetrio Lakas, and the rector and heads of a Panamanian university.

Because of the sudden change in my itinerary, I found myself without a Spanish interpreter. One alternative suggestion was to have what I said rendered into English, and then have a member from the United States who was traveling with us translate it into Spanish. But this would take a lot of time, and would hardly amount to dialogue. And so it happened that the young Kimiro Yoshida, a member of the Soka Gakkai Headquarters staff who hadn't had much experience as an interpreter, was put up to the task at the last minute.

At the end of the first day of the visit, someone expressed concern over the fact that Mr. Yoshida had only been able to communicate about sixty percent of what I had said. But I reassured him, saying that for a first time, to communicate even that much was quite an accomplishment. I believe that the most important thing is to encourage young people and give them confidence. Mr. Yoshida went on to become fully active as an interpreter and has also raised many fine successors.

In a sense, dialogue is an earnest struggle between two people. It could even be described as sparring with words. It is through this process that both parties begin to open their hearts to one another.

When I encourage interpreters to speak in a loud voice, I am thinking in particular about Nichiren Daishonin's reference to the statement: "Voices do the Buddha's work" (WND, 188).

The Solid Force of SGI Official Interpreters

When I was young, I did not have the time to study foreign languages. I spent each day supporting President Toda through difficult times and exerting myself tirelessly to rebuild the Soka Gakkai, which is my greatest pride. Nonetheless, I deeply sensed the importance of language study. At a meeting of the Suiko-kai5 youth division group, I addressed a question to President Toda on this very topic.

With a bright smile, he replied: "Acquiring proficiency in foreign languages is a precondition for achieving worldwide kosen-rufu. No matter how many language experts we have, there will never be enough."

I am happy to report that due to the hard work of the SGI interpreters and their efforts to develop, they have become a solid force. I am infinitely grateful.

The Translation of the Lotus Sutra, Supreme Treasure of Humanity

Translation is different from interpretation in that it deals with the written word. Translation of the sutras contributed to the worldwide spread of Buddhism, which originated in India.

In March this year, amid the first signs of spring, the exhibition "The Lotus Sutra and Its World: Buddhist Manuscripts of the Great Silk Road"⁶ opened at the Austrian National Library in Vienna, Austria. It featured a collection of thirty Buddhist manuscripts and block prints (xylographs), including copies of the Lotus Sutra and other important texts from the collection of the St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

The Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni's ultimate teaching, is the supreme treasure of humanity. This is borne out by the great many languages into which the Lotus Sutra was translated in the course of its eastward transmission from India along the Silk Road. These languages include Chinese, Old Uyghur, Xixia (Tangut) and Tibetan. In this way, the Lotus Sutra served as a vehicle for cultural exchange in Central and East Asia.

Among the scriptures displayed at the exhibition was a Sanskrit copy of the Lotus Sutra known as the Petrovsky manuscript, which was obtained in the late 19th century by Nikolai F.

Petrovsky (1837–1908), the Russian consul general in Kashugal at the time.

We must never forget that it is because of the painstaking work of translation that such Buddhist concepts as the sanctity of life, the value of peace and the importance of the environment, and a sophisticated view of the universe have been conveyed as shared human values.

Kumarajiva — Great Translator of the Lotus Sutra

It was the translations of the famed scholar Kumarajiva (344–413) that communicated the essence of Buddhism to China with unmatched precision.

The location of his birthplace in a part of Central Asia between India and China must have contributed to Kumarajiva's sense of mission as a translator. From the time he reached the Chinese capital of Chang-an after having overcome various trials and hardships, Kumarajiva single-mindedly applied himself to the task of translating the Lotus Sutra. It had been his cherished dream for some forty years, ever since a copy of the text was entrusted to him by his teacher Shuryasoma.

When he was in his late fifties, with the help of many outstanding scholars — said to have numbered more than 3,000 — Kumarajiva at last undertook the work of producing a translation of the Lotus Sutra while lecturing on its profound principles. This was not simply a work of translation, but a great movement of Buddhist study.

The well-known writing “On Refuting the Five Priests”⁷ says: “Just as when the Buddhism of India spread eastward, the Sanskrit texts were translated and introduced in China and Japan, so when the time comes to widely declare the sacred teachings of this country, the Japanese texts are sure to be translated and spread in China and India” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1613).

Many of Nichiren Daishonin's major writings have now been translated into English, and efforts are currently being made to translate them into a number of other languages. It should be remembered that this has all been made possible through the broad-based desire of people around the world to study Buddhism.

The pioneers of this unprecedented movement are none other than our noble interpreters and translators all across the globe. Through the changing times and our expanding activities, it is the invaluable efforts of such language experts alone that spread outstanding thoughts and philosophies far and wide.

The dialogues I have held also must be challenging to render into other languages, for they cover such a wide range of topics. These have taken place with historians, educators, astronomers, politicians, economists, physicists, chemists, mathematicians, poets, authors, military leaders, religious figures, dancers, musicians, revolutionaries, painters, calligraphers, athletes, diplomats and physicians.

Creating a Foundation of Trust for the Future

It was during my discussions over the course of ten days with the British historian Arnold Toynbee (1889–1975) that I realized the importance of professional interpretation. Although that was more than twenty years ago, I feel as though it was just the other day that Dr. Toynbee and I were exchanging views on history and the problems facing humankind, and thoroughly exploring the challenges and counterchallenges of civilization.

In March of this year, our dialogue was translated and published in Czech, the twenty-fourth language in which it has appeared. Though different, both interpretation and translation play an indispensable role in promoting inter-civilizational dialogue.

Words reveal what is in the heart. Content is of course important, but it is ultimately the true intent, the spirit of the speaker, that the words convey. I imagine that the real thrill for

interpreters comes from bringing people together and opening the way for heart-to-heart communication, thereby creating a foundation of trust for the future.

The Entire World Is the Stage of Kosen-rufu

I love people. That is why I meet and talk with people from all walks of life. Dialogue transcends ethnic and ideological differences. I will continue to engage in dialogue as long as I live. We must never stop promoting dialogue across cultures.

Interpreting in any area is extremely difficult. I am eternally grateful for the interpreters who stand at my side, becoming my ears and mouth. The SGI's foreign language experts, who are advancing our Buddhist movement for culture, education and peace, are the Kumarajivas of the modern age. I would like to praise them from the bottom of my heart.

The SGI now spans the five continents, reaching all corners of the globe and transcending all linguistic barriers. Nichiren Daishonin says: "It is certain that kosen-rufu will eventually be achieved throughout the entire world" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 816). The entire world is the stage of kosen-rufu.

1. The system for qualifying SGI official interpreters was inaugurated on August 16, 1983, at the time of the Fourth SGI General Meeting in Sapporo, Japan, with the first nine interpreters receiving certificates. There are today more than 80 SGI official interpreters.
2. At a Soka Gakkai student division general meeting in September 1968, Mr. Ikeda called for the restoration of diplomatic ties between Japan and China, for China to be granted membership in the United Nations and for the promotion of Japan-China bilateral trade.
3. *Daisan no Niji no Hashi* (The Third Rainbow Bridge), currently published in Japanese, Russian and Chinese.
4. Translated from Japanese. Vladimir Ivanovich Tropin, *Deai no Nijunen — Sekaishimin Ikeda Daisaku to Roshia* (Twenty Years of Meetings — The World Citizen Daisaku Ikeda and Russia), trans. Ekuko Saito et al. (Tokyo: Ushio Shuppansha, 1995), pp. 151–52.
5. Suiko-kai: A young men's special training group, which studied directly under second Soka Gakkai president Josei Toda. They took their name from the Chinese novel *The Water Margin* (Jpn *Suiko-den*).
6. The exhibition opened in Tokyo in November 1998, the first time the collection had been shown outside of the country. In May 2000, after the Vienna showing, it was displayed at the Herzog August Library in Wolfenbüttel, Germany.
7. "On Refuting the Five Priests" (Jpn "*Gonin Shoha Sho*"): A thesis written in 1328 by Nichijun, a disciple of Nikko Shonin, pointing out the errors made by five of the Daishonin's six senior disciples.

FIVE GUIDELINES FOR INTERPRETERS

- 1) Develop broad learning and linguistic ability.**
- 2) Maintain pure faith.**
- 3) Cultivate the ability to capture people's hearts.**
- 4) Accurately convey the spirit of the speaker.**
- 5) Develop physical stamina.**