A VIEW FROM THE EAST

A reporter comes home with trepidation, hoping the Asian perception of an America in decline is exaggerated, and fearing it is not

BY TOM ASHBROOK

Overripe.

Five minutes off the plane from Asia and the word drifts through my head like a bad smell. America. Overripe.

The limo from the Honolulu airport is a lumbering, battered Buick that speaks of a pumped-up prime gone by. I've seen pristine '64 Chevys in Java still polished to a sheen and Toyota taxis of every year that sparkle. But this is something different waiting at the curb. The doors don't close properly. The seats are stained and torn. The suspension is drooping, cockeyed. The music is mushy. The paint is extravagantly scarred. The passengers are fat. American. Overripe. Welcome home.

Nearly a third of my life has been spent working and studying in Asia, almost 10 years traveling out of India, Hong Kong, most recently Japan. It used to be reassuring coming home to America. In my memory, home came with a cool blast of certainties and competence, an air of eternal affluence and standards to count on.

No more. At its crisp, industrialized forefront, Asia now puts America's slacker face to shame. Like everyone else, I hear the buzz of debate over whether our nation is in decline. I am no economist. But I am home again from Asia, and troubled by what I see.

"Sometimes it shuts, sometimes it don't," says the limo driver at the airport, repeatedly slamming a passenger's rattling door. "But don't worry, we'll get there."

I wonder.

Businessmen receive "samurai" training in Japan. Cultural emphasis on harmony and discipline has contributed greatly to Japan's economic success.

WHAT A COUNTRY, MY COUNTRY, SEEN WITH A WARY, ASIA-FRESH EYE. IT LOOKS FREE, BY ALL means — viscerally, unnervingly, exhilaratingly free. But to what end? It looks wealthy, by any measure, but drowsily, dangerously accustomed to its wealth and to its life on credit. It looks principled, in a noisy, faddish way, but afflicted with the crime, drugs, and alienation of moral decay.

For four years this time I had crisscrossed Asia out of Tokyo. It is a vast continent with great backwaters and problems of its own. But along the vigorous economic axis stretching from Japan to Singapore, it is hardheaded, dynamic, aggressive, and hungry. Most things work, and those that don't soon do. The region's cultures can seem, and often are, relative straitjackets demanding conformity and obedience. But a resident anywhere along Asia's industrialized spine soon develops a taste for precision, dependability, disciplined energy, and a certain high seriousness about the practical tasks, great and small, of life.

Ride the gleaming subway in Hong Kong. Feel the crisp concentration of a Singapore banker and his lowliest tellers, the fiery intensity of a Korean shipbuilding crew, the palpable dedication of a Yokohama schoolteacher. No one on cruise control. All alert, engaged, at grips with the importance of their roles and the gist of the national life they support. All infused with a powerful sense of forward motion, of purposefulness.

In just those terms, an American homecoming is a journey into shades of disarray. While veins of efficiency and competence feel ever-expanding in Asia, they appear to be contracting in the United States. Our cracked highways and rusting bridges seem physical reflections of falling standards of service, *Continued on page 70*

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organization, simple care in the performance of jobs — of lost resolve.

How to judge? Trade figures? Foreign debt? Dire but dry. Atmospherics? Scary for a recent returnee. My brother-in-law sleeps with a large pistol in his nightstand and an alarm system that can track a burglar room by room. The news on arrival in America has the US president turning to astrology, Los Angeles drivers taking potshots at one another on the freeway, American schoolchildren scoring at the bottom of the First World heap in key subjects, Drug lords reigning over urban fiefs. Alcoholics Anonymous and its ilk as a new religion. Wall Street sapping the economy it was intended to fuel. What is wrong with this picture?

True, the slippage is widely bemoaned. But to a returnee the more impressive point is the extent to which Americans have developed a tolerance for excess, ineptitude, and carelessness in the everyday business of life. To apply the sharper, more disciplined standards of contemporary Asia is to risk ostracism in the United States. Relax, man. Cool out. We don't want to hear about it.

If only it were a simple matter of lifestyle, the advice might have a certain charm. There is a beguiling aspect to a First World nation self-indulgently flirting with Third World standards, tempos, timetables — like seeing your father puttering around on vacation, or pampering yourself on a beach holiday.

But so much more is at stake here. In the realm of political ideals, of core values, America remains powerfully attractive to a returnee from Asia — that rare nation where individuals can assume individuality as a birthright, where diversity is, at least in principle, championed instead of smothered. Viewed against Asia's more restrictive norm, those American ideals have a sparkling, almost magical quality. But as the 1980s end, one fears that critical links between industry and affluence, discipline and maintenance of national ideals, are

slipping away.

Have we really reached a special plane of devotion to democracy, liberty, and civil rights? Or have we just been rich enough to pretend? We may soon have the chance to learn.

Notes as follows:

Honolulu, May 21, 1988: "Hello, Occident. Cracked highways, no service. Hotel is heavy on glitter and self-promotional hype, light on everything else. Construction quality shabby. Rusting metalwork. Cheap materials. Very big people stuffed into little Japanese cars. A joke? So many tawdry corners, even here in "island paradise." Rich next to poor. Slick by shabby. Twitchy bag ladies and a legless panhandler croaking "Aloha" on Waikiki. Lumpy, pale people on sidewalks, half-undressed, not self-conscious. All so casual. Korean cabdriver complains road repairs take 10 times longer than in Seoul. I bet. No overnight work. Air of indolence, low voltage. Is this just the islands? Or America, First World's Third World?"

Hopped up. Shambling. Borderline derelict. On the streets of America, jokes once made about service in Delhi and the dowdiness of Moscow come hauntingly back to roost. At the airport, lusty baggage handlers throw bags off the carrousel with un-Eastern flair, zinging them into grand and ragged rows. But half the bags aren't there. A truck has broken down. Wait an hour, please. A woman shrieks and swears. Others too. More are passive, like Third World villagers waiting for a bus that might come, or might not. Welcome home.

Am I too harsh? Have I unconsciously slipped on a straitjacket of Asian rigidity? Lost patience with the least disorder? Fallen for the comforts of conformity? Have I lost appreciation for the hurly-burly dynamism of America's diversity? Or is this, my country, getting to be a mess?

Fresh into an American hotel, my son turns on a *Ghostbusters* cartoon on Saturday morning television: "Hey, fella! This is America," comes the wisecracking voice of an animated hero of the '80s. "I've got the right to not work any time I want."

Six years old, with no memory of life outside Japan, my child has never heard such a notion before.

"What did he say, Daddy?"

"Something ridiculous," I growl, overreacting perhaps at the thought of my son's tender moral fiber already being toyed with while millions of Asian youngsters are studying away, night and day, being toughened for economic battle.

"What kind of show is this?" I yell to my wife. "The Japanese and Koreans are going to eat my kid's lunch!"

"They're already eating ours," she says. "Where are the suitcase keys? And did you get some money?"

I stop at the bank. An engraved plaque staring at me from the head teller's desk would confirm insanity in Japan:

"Pardon me," it reads, "but you seem to have mistaken me for someone who gives a damn."

Once that brassy crack would surely have been the hard shell of American humor that overlaid an indomitable spirit. Does it still?

A century ago, China's nadir was captured in the image of bony drug ad-

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Corporate executive compensation figures are published with Lee Iacocca, self-styled champion of American industrial renewal, taking home a packet worth $18 million. It is an unthinkable figure in Asia, and not because they don't have the money. They have mounds. But an $18 million pay packet simply sounds unethical in Asia. It reeks of disharmony, the great Asian taboo. All right, in capitalism, money motivates the man. But if $18 million is required to motivate, the magnitude of the compensation seems to squeeze out all room for a sense of national mission, of balance, of the good of the whole as the final guarantee of each individual's well-being.

Still, I am baffled by the low level of urgency in America's discussion of its global standing. Of course, there is a great deal said on the topic, there are hearings and warnings and media attention. But to anyone coming from a region of nations hyper-attuned to their mounting success, the United States seems strangely unattuned to its mounting troubles.

At what point will we be galvanized? Could it be that a critical mass of Americans just don't believe that life could ever be anything but generally prosperous? That we have forgotten what a rare, fine legacy history has left to us? Or that the habits of affluence are now so deeply ingrained, so tied up with our elemental national mythology, that our behavior will not change even in the face of the most pressing evidence that it should?

To a nation that carries a historical reputation for pragmatism, the notion of marching to decline in myth-bound disregard of a downward slide might seem ridiculous. But in Asia, the form is well known. The continent's two largest nations — China and India, both once great themselves — have spent centuries in deep troughs, gripping old cultural patterns, myths, and self-images that left them cripplingly out of sync with a changing world.

Could America do the same thing? At first blush, it seems unlikely. Historically, ignorance of changes over the horizon has been at least one major factor in nations' unresisting fall from relevance. In the global village today, who can remain igno-

used. Our techniques are everyone's. Our system and values and vanities stand at last, in their eyes, on the level playing field of a harder reality, the only reality that most of the world has ever known. It is a new game, and in the first round we have lost a bundle very quickly. We are deeply in debt and do not seem to understand, or want to admit, that the game has changed.

Will we reach for rejuvenation and draw new strengths from old? Our hidden asset, as Asia knows and we should know, too, is diversity's flexibility, our capacity to stretch and move and recombine. But the clock is ticking. And opportunities go by.

"You don't know what you have. They know what they don't have. And they want it," says a Chinese friend who recently emigrated from Hong Kong to Los Angeles. "Americans are too naive. You forget the world is a jungle. It's a race. If you slow down too much, you lose."

How quick the turnaround seems to have been. With every single year of the 1980s, Asian astonishment at the behavior of the United States has grown. For all its pyrotechnic quality, the debacle in Vietnam did not signal the big slip in Asian respect for America. Loss in misconceived war is something that happens. Japan survived it handsomely. So could we.

But loss of spunk, of moral fiber, of well-considered national resolve and high, hard-nosed seriousness — that is a first-rate affliction and one that many Asians associate directly with the Reagan years, the years of American dreaming.

Year by year, our trade deficit spiraled up in the 1980s. No region of the world profited more than Asia. In the early '80s, I remember hearing Asian businessmen and bureaucrats express their respect and then near-awe at our commitment to free trade despite the consequences. By the late '80s, awe has turned to incredulity and disdain. Were we so arrogant as to think we could turn any setback around, no matter how long we waited to begin? What, they would ask, is the United States really doing to defuse its debt and deficit perils and the sump of problems behind them? Where is the hard work, the mending, the bone of realism, the grit of resolve required to turn your fortunes around?

Their questions echo loud in the mind at homecoming.

Where is the sense of urgency I've come home expecting to find? In spite of every warning sign, in spite of all that we have to lose, America seems willfully trapped in its "feel good" mode. Is it simple resignation? One doubts it. Is Ronald Reagan's "morning in America" spell still so strong? Surely not.

To one coming from a continent of rising expectations, America's response so far to uncertainty over its future is alarming. Shrugged shoulders and an escapist "live for today" attitude seem to prevail. The refrain of a Citicorp bank TV ad intones: "Because Americans want to succeed, not just survive." Is this an exhortation, this incredible statement of the obvious? Is it a reminder? A plea? A diplomatic way of saying, "Watch out, you're tempting mere survival"? One cannot imagine the line in any Asian medium.

looker. But this is the material world.

"To a competitor it must look great: That's the way, big guy. Keep staring at your navel, dissipating yourself on self-analysis while we carve you up. You will sit up from the psychiatrist's couch and find all the other furniture gone, the house gone, find that you are talking to yourself. And then, when you are hungry and cold and poor, then see how little the words matter, how these personal crises can look like so much silly prattle. They see it. They have had centuries to figure it out, to know it, bone deep, as nations. And now it is simply assumed. Their knowledge is a hard weapon against our soft swirl of emotion."

Yes, we worked hard. We remember. We were tough. Our folk songs have us working on the railroad, forging west, plowing the sod, rolling steel, building cities, cities of big shoulders.

But in the Asian eye, the larger fact is that we were lucky. We won history's biggest lottery, beat the richest slot machine. An entire continent dropped in our lap, brimming with riches, like a groaning table of food just waiting to be eaten. And we ate it and congratulated ourselves on the eating and on our great generosity in inviting one and all to our vast feast.

Well, broods the Asian question, who couldn't have done that? Across the Pacific, they curse themselves for having been too inward-looking, too hidebound to grab for the New World. But the fact that we happened to get it and to subsequently get rich on it is less than astonishing to them. As for the role of democracy in our ascent to affluence, they sometimes seem to hardly see it. They question its real significance.

The point is, as for luck, they think we've had it in spades. In technique, we've made some marvelous innovations. They have snapped them up with a vengeance.

But for system, well from Asia, ours looks more and more like a one-time shot — a grand, openhanded bouquet of gestures made for wide ranges and unlimited resources. And both of those are now gone. Our great virgin treasure is

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rant? Perhaps no one. But the power of self-delusion can be strong. Already, much of America appears to live to a striking degree in a rosy electronic cocoon of television images of itself — rich, buoyant, and ever-consuming. Show triumphs over substance. The happy golden light of the small screen casts its patina over a widening reality of dereliction.

Never mind, we seem to say, we will grab all we can grab, buy all we can buy, live the dream. For everything that has been said and written about it, American consumerism in full flower is still awesome to behold. America's vast supermarkets and stores have no rival for their sheer volume of goods. Whatever our self-perception may be, the view from Asia sees the cushy culture, an indulgent national psyche adrift from larger purpose, wedded to consumption, weakened by the addiction, suspended in a tenuous, fragile addict's state.

Certain ironies are not lost on me as I watch my own homecoming reaction. No doubt in the years before World War II, Japanese emissaries to the United States sent similar appraisals back to Tokyo, reports tinged with a visceral, disdainful response to America's less tightly marshaled society. That very appraisal surely fueled Japan's belief that it could win in an all-out struggle, its view that America was fundamentally handicapped by disharmony and a shallowness of spirit. And Japan was wrong.

But there will be no Pearl Harbor to rouse the nation this time. And in an era of more civil striving, America has taken its debt and trade-deficit blows with stunning nonchalance.

Our Asian neighbors embody ancient cultures. They have been around, known long ups and long downs, known suffering. By their standards, we are only now beginning to face a real national test, perhaps the first and only real test in our fortune-blessed history. So far, our response is not a pretty sight.

Notes, Bloomington, Illinois, June 9:

"At breakfast, the milk carton advertises a missing child. The morning papers announce a gruesome routine of violent crime. Once I was immune to such news. Soon I suppose I will be again. We revel in our shootups. So be it. But for now, I am simply reminded: This is not a safe country.

"What a psychic price Americans pay for living in a society so laced with crime. Fear makes every citizen a victim. It is an invisible tax that Americans now seem to take for granted. But it leaps out at anyone returning from the low-crime regions of Asia. I am pondering how to make my children understand that their homeland is a different kind of country from what they've known — how to alert them to the lurking violence of America. It is a disheartening job.

"America is loud and jarring to the kids, coming from the orderly, muted life of Tokyo. I am glad for the change, glad to let them know the boisterous energy of the American hubbub. But there is something missing in all the glitz and noise. Where is the still, small voice that should remind them of their duties, their responsibilities, and therefore their value to this society?"

I have pitied Asian children for the burden of duty they often come to know so young, but this American vacuum is too

empty. Asian kids learn their national mission — push up, push ahead, join in, put your shoulder to the wheel, let's succeed — with their mother's milk. American children now seem never to be told. Is personal wealth the only goal? What about the commonweal? Upholding principles? An unhampered way in deciding constitutes freedom. A failure to pass on principles and give guidance looks like simple irresponsibility. Against the Asian model of common assumptions and pervasive atmospheric "lessons" for the young about responsibility, I feel suddenly very much alone in instructing my children. Alone and somehow abandoned.

Yet Americans are not blind. We are self-indulgent these days and insular, but not stupefied. Returning, one feels at some level a knowing streak of nihilism in our steady bow to the economic supremacy of others.

Our looming time of trial will be different from the genteel retrenchment of Europe after its glory days. We took the helm from Britain, and a skein of preeminent values was left largely intact; the tune of international life did not fundamentally change. With the rise of Asia, it goes into a very different key.

Maybe we are disgusted with the long era of Western supremacy, with its legacy of imperialism, exploitation, and war. Fair enough, even wise. But what of the advances we have achieved? In some vitally important regards — acceptance of racial diversity and equality, respect for the individual, awareness of women's rights — we find ourselves, despite our failings, far ahead of Asia. Are we prepared to throw this over?

The question is not an appeal to old Yellow Peril-style phobias. Our Asian neighbors are people we know now, no longer a faceless mass. We drive their cars and sell them our hamburgers. We know their strengths, their humanity, their weaknesses. But don't we owe ourselves and our rich, hard-won traditions a deeper second thought? A firmer underpinning of support?

Maybe we don't think so. Perhaps at some critical juncture of affluent flabbiness and self-doubt we hand off the baton with a shrug. Maybe we don't want to ponder our heirs. Maybe we don't have the energy to resist this drift. Behind the puffery of the Reagan-era strut perhaps there lay a fundamental loss of self-confidence, of self-respect. "There is no worse neurosis," wrote British author Anthony Burgess once in an essay on American angst, "than that which derives from a consciousness of guilt and an inability to reform."

Where is our leadership? Not political panderers or television shamans, but moral leaders of high secular stripe, leaders of hardheaded vision who themselves project an example of attitudes that can win, an example of honest courage. In America's blow-dried leadership wasteland, the rare standout such as steady Paul Volcker or even sober George Shultz takes on an awkward sheen of saint-hood. Surely the ranks can be thickened, a broader banner raised.

Notes, Boston, January 1989:

With every passing month, the pull of America's avoidance rituals grows on me. They are distinctive habits of mind. Don't think about the world: think about the movies. Don't think about the future: it may not be as good as today. Don't think about the country's well-being; grab your own private piece and guard it well. Think of burglar alarms and private schools. Pull up your little drawbridge. Enjoy the flush of affluence while it lasts.

"The presidential election campaign has not been heartening. Avoidance on a grand scale. Can Americans imagine that there are still countries where talk of knuckling down and doing hard tasks, of sacrificing for the long-term good, can actually win public support?

"We know implicitly the great strength of our national resources and of our diversity. Indeed, they are real strengths, and many Asians still recognize their unique potential with a sense of near-awe. But strength unmarshaled, strength squandered, is not strength at all.

"It is good to be home, to see the verve and open humor of Americans again, to feel again firsthand the unbounded potential, the great chorus of individual wills that has always

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made our country a rich and beckoning world.

"It is good to be home, but painful, too, to see the disrepair of a cherished homeland. It is unnerving to feel the national hollowness underfoot. The false-bottomed life. Even garbage day leaves a little taint of guilt, a little knowing decadence when the hour for decadence has passed. In Tokyo, we separated everything — newspaper, organic stuff, bottles and cans. So did the whole city, 12 million strong. But not here. Just toss it in the can. This is America. We have great valleys we can fill."

Coming home, do I detect an urge to blame democracy itself for our troubles? What irony. An election ends in disaffection and we mutter that in a democracy people get what they deserve. But are we creating a debased electorate — ill-led, ill-educated, and veering toward economically divided camps where the affluent are guarding their golden retreats and not the future of the nation?

Ronald Reagan was right when he waxed poetic on the beauty of America's inheritance and ideals. They are beautiful and unique. But beauty requires tending, and the unique requires knowing care. The last best hope of mankind? Yes, but we must continue to make it so.

Viewed from somewhere mid-Pacific, both great shores can inspire deep unease these days — a rising Asia for failing to share the ideals of freedom and openness more deeply, the United States for failing to make those ideals work more successfully. It is easy to feel bereft.

Give a half-turn to that dark perspective and one can imagine a far brighter scene. Picture the United States grafting some of contemporary Asia's honest resolve onto its own great tradition of liberty. Picture Asia further unbinding its societies in the new security of affluence. In tandem, such trends could make for a vibrant, inviting 21st century; for a fresh opening and melding that would profit all parties.

But American delay in coming to the table with its house in order casts a long shadow of doubt across such prospects. If we come as a vital, sharp-witted partner, Asia will welcome the partnership, and both sides can benefit. If we dither and decline, we can expect to find a more exploitative, less receptive set of neighbors across the Pacific.

Indeed, the same might well be said of our future relations with Europe. But the contrast of American laxity and Asian dynamism is today the more marked. At bottom, my unease is with that simple, stark contrast. Leave aside all questions of principles and ideals, and dynamic Asia may simply stand as the great and rising yardstick that measures our rejuvenation — or our decline. •