

Culture and Technology

Masjraul Hidayat

Most people in the world think that Japan means traditional culture and the latest technology. For example, in terms of culture, young Japanese workers still generally defer to their seniors and people are always in a hurry but arrive on time. The latest technologies symbolized by automation even appear on almost every street corner too. A typical example is the ubiquitous vending machines that are now connected to the Internet to permit credit card payments and that sell everything from cold and hot drinks to batteries, vegetables, train tickets, meal tokens, snacks, etc. And in most other countries, technology is synonymous with Sony TVs, Toyota cars, etc. Think of railways and the Japanese shinkansen springs to mind.

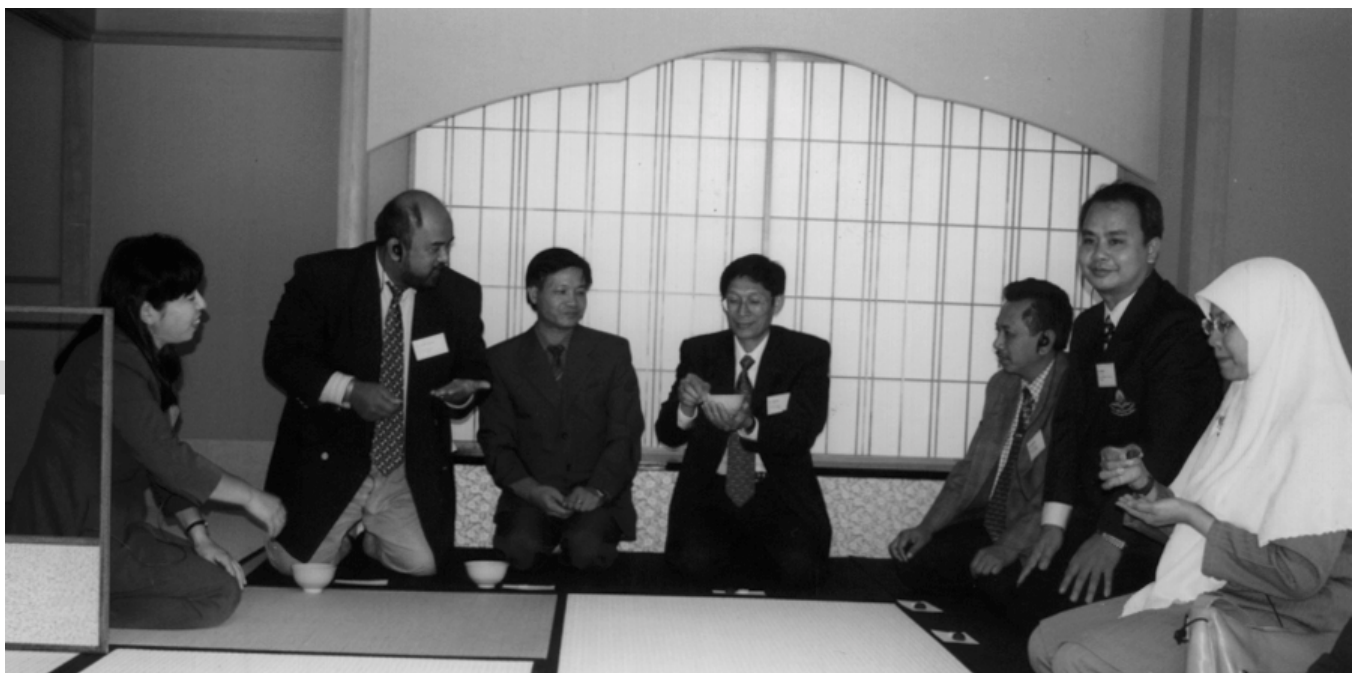
In 1984, I visited Japan for 1 month to study railway telecommunications and early developments in fiber-optic technology, which was already being used as the backbone for most telecommunications lines. At that time, signs in railway stations were mostly in

Japanese and not many people spoke English, making it very difficult for me to get about. My guide was also off on weekends, but had told me that there was an Indonesian restaurant near my hotel. I spent more than an hour searching for it before asking at a local *koban* (police box). But the policeman could not understand English or my attempts at body language. A passerby volunteered to help in Japanese (perhaps because I look Japanese) but I could not understand and replied in English. Finally, he understood and showed me the restaurant, which was actually close by but the sign was written in Japanese not Indonesian or English. What a struggle just to get to lunch!

At first glance, I was horrified by the apparent complexity of the public transport networks but I found it relatively easy to learn the railway and subway maps because the different lines are colour coded. Outside Jakarta, Indonesia has a simple railway system with just one line to each city. But when I was

appointed Chief of the Jakarta Commuter Train Division in 1999, I changed the ticketing for each line to colour codes based on my ease of use in Japan.

I had another opportunity to visit Japan for two weeks in 1987 to study elevated track construction. I visited Musashinakahara Station on the Nambu Line, which was under construction. I studied network planning and the job training how to manage resources. Time was short and the study programme was very intense. The programme was during winter, so it was very cold especially when we visited the construction site. It was my first experience of winter season since there is no winter season in my country. It was an interesting experience. Two years later we built our first elevated track between the Manggarai and Jakarta Kota stations (9 km). I was Signal & Telecommunication inspector for the Jakarta Region when we built the elevated track, and was able to make full use of the experience gained from my 1987 visit. My third visit to Japan in October 2001



Mr Hidayat (middle) learning *sado*, the Japanese way of tea.

(Author)



Mr Hidayat (middle) enjoying his Japanese-style lunch

(Author)

was marred by the 11 September terrorist attacks in the USA. Since Indonesia is the world's largest muslim country, all Indonesian citizens entering Japan after the attack were subjected to very close immigration checks. Fortunately, I was assisted by a guide from East Japan Railway Culture Foundation who met me at the airport. She was so well prepared with details of my 2-week schedule that it reminded me once again of the importance of punctuality and preparation in Japanese culture. Even after 17 years between my first and third visits, people still walk and eat breakfast very fast. However, I noticed some changes. Few people read on the train any more and most are preoccupied sending email on their mobile phones (despite the fact that the conductors make announcements asking people not to use their mobiles), which can also be used to check Internet sites and send short video images. Unfortunately my mobile phone from Indonesia was useless because of system differences based on more advanced technology. Another change is the greater frequency of English signs and alphabetic characters. In addition, some of my study materials were in English too. And, to my

amazement, more Japanese spoke English. These changes make it much easier for foreigners to get around. In Indonesia, especially in big cities and tourist areas, English words and Japanese kanji are quite common. English is also the second language in these locations. But Indonesian railway stations don't have many English signs or English announcements and that is one thing I plan to change.

During my third visit to Japan, I had the chance to see many excellent railway training facilities demonstrating a high commitment to increased competency. The trainees are enthusiastic in participating in the training programmes. In Japan, training and education are embedded in every activity. One example is the TV programming, which has a relatively high educational content using the

venue of chat shows, etc., and visits by a reporter to a foreign culture. After perhaps a 10-minute report from the country, the panel of TV personalities in Japan is asked to answer quite difficult questions about the local culture, geography, animals, etc. This is really a social-studies class disguised as popular TV.

Vending machines were quite common even on my first visit but now they seem to populate most streets and railway stations in ever-increasing numbers. The hand-clipped tickets of 17 years ago have been completely replaced by automated wickets using both magnetic tickets, prepaid stored-fare cards and even contactless commuter passes that remind me of a science fiction movie. But amid all this efficiency, Japanese still put a high value on traditional activities like the sedate tea ceremony which contrasts so completely with the daily hurly burly. Karaoke is now a worldwide phenomenon enjoyed by most people everywhere. In 1987, I was rather surprised to see Japanese abandon their normal polite reserved nature and burst into song in a karaoke bar. Perhaps it provides a release from the stresses of city life. In my opinion, karaoke embodies the spirit of Japanese culture and technology that is so famous worldwide. From what I have seen, most of Japan's core traditions have not changed a great deal despite their huge and rapidly changing technological achievements and I hope that Japan continues in this same vein for the future. ■



Masjraul Hidayat

Mr Hidayat is Personnel and General Affairs Director at Indonesian Railways. He has a bachelor's degree in electronic engineering and a master's degree in human resources management.