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Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, for your kind invitation. What else can justify the attempt of a layman on things Asian to address the experts on Asian affairs gathered here and meet the expectations that this event with its great tradition gives rise to? For I have to admit that I am a layman as far as Asia is concerned. To be sure, I have visited several countries between the Indus and Tokyo over the years, and I have some good friends in the region. But do I know enough? Have I seen and experienced enough to be able to claim that I am familiar with that highly important and venerable part of the world and its people with a great future ahead of them? I believe that many people bearing public responsibility - be it in the political, economic or cultural sphere - must ask themselves this question, and not just in Germany. It is conceivable that the opposite question is of relevance in Asian countries. Here, our view of Asia is still all too often obscured by our traditional Eurocentric outlook on the world shaped by a historical era that has now passed. In Asia, the revitalization of its own political, economic and cultural resources and the justified pride in doing so may occasionally result in the tendency to observe the old continent of Europe from the wrong end of a telescope, as it were, which makes it appear very remote, very small and without any cumbersome, complicated details.

However, it is a fact that today, at a time when the claim to dominance by the old continent of Europe has been relegated to history, nations have not drifted apart but are moving ever closer together in a world that is constantly shrinking and becoming more populous. Lao-Tse's *Tao Te Ching* contains the following delightful words: "Even if neighbouring countries lie in each other's range of vision and the crowing of cocks and the barking of dogs in one can be heard in the other, the people will grow old and die without any intercommunication ever occurring." The atmosphere that is described and invoked here touches upon a deep human yearning: to live unhindered as one pleases, but without being isolated. However, this is no longer our world; nor will it be. In the future, Europeans and Asians