

SPEECH
Presented by HE Mr YAMAGAMI Shingo, Ambassador of
Japan to Australia
On the occasion of Cowra Sakura Matsuri
Evening Reception Speech
Saturday 24 September

Mayor of Cowra, Cr Bill West

Chairman of Cowra Japanese Garden and Cultural Centre, Mr Bob Griffiths

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am so glad to have the opportunity to be here for this year's Sakura Matsuri – the first one in 3 years.

It is great to finally bid a fond farewell to COVID-19 – or, as Aussies might put it – tell the pandemic 'onya bike'!

And as proof that this festival is known throughout Australia, today, for the first time, we have with us Consul-General SHIMADA from Melbourne, and the newly-sworn-in Consul-General TOKUDA from Sydney.

I am pleased to see that Consul-General TOKUDA has made it to Cowra so early on in his term – he only arrived from Japan yesterday!

As I always tell my colleagues, 'you cannot talk about Japan-Australia relationship without visiting Cowra first'.

So it is just as well he is here!

In addition, I asked Mr MAEDA, a world-class magician from Japan and my friend, to visit Cowra. I am sure you all enjoyed his magic today.

So, if we happen to run out of wine tonight, maybe you can ask him to pull some out of his hat.

As for me, this is my eighth visit since my arrival in Australia. At this point, I am thinking it might be easier just to buy a holiday home here. Or perhaps start a hobby farm. What do you think?

In any case, perhaps I am setting the bar a little too high for Consul-General TOKUDA.

When we look back at the history of the Japan-Australia relationship, I believe that Cowra makes up an important chapter.

The very first chapter takes place in Broome and on Thursday Island.

I was fortunate to visit both of these places just last month, and hear the fascinating stories of the Japanese pearl divers – who were the pioneers of our relationship.

I also had the chance to pay my respects at the cemeteries in both Broome and TI where their souls are laid to rest, and I am grateful to the local communities who continue to maintain them.

The second chapter in our relationship takes place here in Cowra.

And, since 1945, Japan and Australia have grown together and supported each other, taking advantage of our complementary trade relationship to advance both our economies and entrench a deep friendship.

This is the third chapter in our relationship.

In this chapter too, Cowra appears as an important setting.

I cannot help but admire the efforts of all those in Cowra who have worked so hard to grow the friendship between our countries, and continue to strengthen our relationship.

This is seen through the work that goes into the maintenance of the Japanese cemetery and this beautiful garden. I often tell people that the Cowra Japanese Garden is the best of its kind outside of Japan. And I am sure Consul-Generals TOKUDA and SHIMADA must agree with me on this.

Of course, they *must*, or they might find themselves on the next flight back home!

But, jokes aside, Cowra's pivotal role in our relationship is the reason that I always feel the need to 'return home' to Cowra.

... As well as the spectacular garden views and lamb so delicious you might think Mr MAEDA has played a trick on your taste buds. Indeed, please forgive us for leaving early, as it is my duty as Ambassador to make sure Mr MAEDA and the Consul-Generals can sample this lamb at dinner later.

Spring is one of the best times of year for Japanese gardens, and this one here is no exception.

Many of you will know that, in Japan, we have a long-standing tradition of *hanami* or 'cherry blossom viewing'.

Actually, this has been a custom for the Japanese for more than 1200 years – so long that it is a part of our DNA.

Sakura also have a very special place in Japanese culture. Although they have a very short flowering period, the sight of these petals floating in the wind is itself considered exquisite.

So much so that many songs and poems have been written about them, in some of which the writers imagine the falling petals traveling all the way to faraway loved ones.

This is a sentiment I am sure many Japanese living in Australia can sympathise with.

One of the most poignant poems about sakura was written by an Edo-period priest just before he passed away.

It reads, 散る桜 残る桜も 散る桜. "Falling cherry blossoms / Those remaining are destined to fall as well".

The meaning is simple – no matter how beautiful the flower, all sakura will eventually fall.

But this poem also reminds us that, although we all have limited time on earth, each of us can still flower beautifully.

This is a time of year to reflect on how we can use the time and the role we have been given to live life to the fullest.

I hope you will join me in my endeavour to further promote our Japan-Australia relationship that is built on the accomplishments of those before us.

And I am so grateful that all of you have invested so much of your precious time into our very special strategic partnership

Thank you.