

## RESPONSE OF PROFESSOR VO-TONG XUAN

### Upon receiving The Order of the Rising Sun, Gold Rays with Neck Ribbon from the Government of Japan

*Honorable WATANABE Nobuhiro, Consul General of Japan in Ho Chi Minh City,  
Honorable DUONG Tan Hien, Standing Vice Chairman, People Committee of Can Tho City  
Esteemed Guests from the Consulate General of Japan in Ho Chi Minh City,  
Dear Representatives of Can Tho Department of Foreign Affairs,  
Dear Assoc. Prof. Dr. Le Viet Dung, Vice Rector of Can Tho University, Chairman of Vietnam -  
Japan Friendship Association of Can Tho city,  
Dear Lawyer Dr. Nguyen Tien Dung, Chairman of the Board of Directors, Southern Can Tho  
University,  
Dear Dr. Nguyen Van Quang, Secretary of the Party Committee and Rector of Nam Can Tho  
University,  
Dear Colleagues from Can Tho University and Nam Can Tho University  
Dear Friends, and Representatives of the local and national press,*

I am very honored and moved to receive the Order of the Rising Sun, Golden Rays and Neck Ribbon from the Government of Japan today conferred by His Excellency Consul General WATANABE Nobuhiro. This is not only an honor for me but also for the members of the Vietnam Japan Friendship Association of An Giang province and Can Tho city that I have had the opportunity to participate in since the 1990s. This is also an honor many enthusiastic friends, agricultural students at Vietnamese universities and my family members.

Since I left the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) Philippines and returned to Vietnam in 1971, I joined the Agricultural College of Can Tho University. I taught + research with my students, collaborating with the Japanese Technical Team composing of Kuyshu University professors who were teaching and doing scientific research at the school at that time. We actively participated in the preparation of the Japanese Government's project to build Can Tho Agricultural University right after the Cho Ray Hospital construction project is completed. In mid-1973, OTCA (now JICA's predecessor) invited Prof. Nguyen Duy Xuan, Rector of Can Tho University, Dr. Nguyen Viet Truong, Director of Can Tho Agricultural College, and I to Tokyo to defend the construction project of Can Tho University of Agriculture. In the spring of 1975, the Japanese National Assembly approved the project funding, but right after that, the big war ended and brought peace and reunification throughout Vietnam. The Japanese professors then bid us farewell. Since then we haven't heard from this project anymore. The Japanese Embassy in Ha Noi told us that we had to wait until after the American embargo. That time finally came. In February 1994 the US ended the economic embargo on Vietnam, in 1995 the US re-established normal diplomatic relations. The Japanese Embassy in Hanoi began to reprocess the construction project of an Agricultural



University at Can Tho City, providing the whole Mekong Delta a fully equipped facility with the most modern equipment to train talented human resources in agricultural science by teachers who had been sent to study specialized fields of agriculture in Japanese universities with scholarship from the Japanese Ministry of Education. I learnt that the Japanese government follows a unique Asian tradition from the Great Emperor Meiji, who possesses a wide and profound vision which is very sensitive to social development issues, and very receptive the world's scientific and technical advances to create favorable conditions for the Japanese people to expound their talents, contributing to the reconstruction of Japan very quickly after the greatest atrocity of the World War II, bringing the Japanese economy to the second largest position after the United States. Thanks to that broad vision, Japanese policymakers dare to think and innovate to compete in a competitive world. I give a few small examples that have had a huge knock-on effect, such as the decision in 1873 to change government and international business schedules to a strict Gregory calendar that forced people to save time, do everything on time, achieve high efficiency; or consider "quality is prestige-reputation" into a habit to make others have trust in you, your products, your agency, your company, the country you produce.

Although very competitive, but at the same time, Japan always shares her prosperity with developing country so that they can grow on their own. The vision that Japan has helped Vietnam in agricultural development has been focused on two fronts: on the one hand, helping to build a national human resource training homebase, and on the other hand, helping to train experts in Japan to possess the full caliber to return to their already equipped homebase to train a solidly skilled workforce to serve the national economy. In the case of Vietnam, I and some colleagues who are here this afternoon belong to the early group of international scholars to do that task. While preparing for the construction project of Can Tho University of Agriculture, I was studying and carrying out research experiments with Japanese Technical Team in Can Tho College of Agriculture, and then I was recommended to receive a scholarship to study in Japan in 1974 with some of my colleagues. After the war, the country was unified, many lecturers of agricultural universities in Vietnam, including many from the newly reformed Can Tho University, were also recommended to receive scholarships from the Japanese Ministry of Education to study at several Japanese universities.

Returning from Japan to Vietnam exactly 28 days before the end of the war, I tried to develop my knowledge, skills and experiences learned in Japan, especially at the Department of Crop Science, Faculty of Agriculture, Kyushu University, to convey the rice technology to hundreds of colleagues, thousands of students and farmers and local leaders in the Mekong Delta. From time to time, I travelled to Japan to attend scientific meetings to accompany educational-touristic delegations. In 1998 I spent a whole-year sabbatical working at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies of Kyoto University where I devoted all time for studying about the Japanese Agricultural Cooperatives.

During my study and research in Japan, I consider myself very fortunate to have access to the valuable experiences of the Japanese people, which, under the reign of the Venerable Emperor, began to revive only 16 years after being destroyed by two atomic bombs. I observe the characteristics of the members of my Department, from my Professor Kenji Ito to my Assistant



Professor Jun Inoue and other teachers and fellow students, everyone is humble, honest, disciplinary, timely, in conformity with the standards and always adhere to the principles of things, respect each other. In the winter of 1974-75, every morning was very cold, as usual my Asst. Prof. Jun Inoue comes early to the laboratory by bicycle, turns on the gas heater, and at the same time puts the kettle on the hot end of the heater to boil water for making tea, clean the tables, chairs, and the lab benches before the arrival of our Professor. One day I tried to get to the lab earlier than Teacher Inoue to clean the room, but the next day he showed up even ahead of me. He kindly guided me from the time I wrote the outline of my doctoral thesis while we were still in Can Tho, and carried out experiments at the farm of Can Tho University, to the time I used the phytotron to conduct further experiments at the Faculty of Agriculture in Kyushu University. All the things I learned and observed in school have shaped me into the habit of working and acting like a Japanese. Even a small but impressive experience in Japanese society reminded forever not daring to do wrong in my whole life, such as the time when my friend Ho Minh Bach and I rode together on a bicycle. When an elementary school kid saw this, he said, "My teacher said that riding bicycle with only one person, why you are two big men can ride on one bicycle?" Or another time, when I crossed an empty street but there was a red light, a child also said, "My teacher told me to stop at the red light, but why are you going through?" I realized that certainly thanks to such characteristics that all Japanese from the statesmen to the common people have come together to make Japan the second richest economy in the world after the United States.

I was curious specially to find out how rural poverty in Japan was eradicated very effectively and sustainably in less than 20 years after the war? Soon I learned that the whole country of Japan ended hunger and poverty thanks to the agricultural cooperative law that the Japanese Government implemented throughout Japan for all farmers to participate from 1947. In 1998, the Economics Professor Kenji Cho of Kyushu University – my other great mentor – guided me through Japan's experience in agricultural cooperation from theory to practice. The key policy here is that the government uses agricultural cooperatives as a tool to help poor farmers to produce better income from their lands. The government applied a value chain approach, using state funds to subsidize almost every activities along the value chain, from agricultural planning (what commodities to produce) to technology (what infrastructures, how to produce, how to process after harvest) and to marketing (what logistics, who the customers). At this crucial period in history, when farmers are poor and have not much to eat, the government invested funds to help them produce the goods efficiently. That's a wise spending of state funds, effectively and sustainably. With that experience, since I returned to Vietnam in 1999, I have visited all the provinces and cities in the Mekong Delta to present the Japanese Agricultural Cooperative System for the understanding of the leaders of the provinces, districts, and existing cooperatives.. I also presented these same information directly to many members of the National Assembly to ask them for their comments on amending the Law on Agricultural Cooperatives in Vietnam. Afterwards, Vietnam's Law on Cooperatives has been revised, but regretfully those revisions are still far from usefulness. In early November 2016, I coordinated with Prof. K. Tsuji of Saga University to arrange a visit to Japan's cooperatives (JA) in Saga and Fukuoka-prefectures for Mr. and Mrs. Pham Chanh Truc and Saigon Co-op officials and two leaders of My Loc Agricultural



Cooperative in Tam Binh District, Vinh Long Province. Through this study tour, there was a clear change on the perception of My Loc Agricultural Cooperative leaders in how to organize farmers to participate in agricultural cooperatives along the entire value chain. However, their backhome attempt to restructure their agricultural cooperatives has so far not met the requirements of cooperative members, because the Revised Law on Agricultural Cooperatives in Vietnam is still not yet "entered the hearts of the people." At a nationwide online conference on February 15, 2022 to review the operation of the present agricultural cooperative system, Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh asked relevant ministries and sectors to review the problems faced by farmer cooperative members in order to develop a more appropriate proposal to further revise the Law on Agricultural Cooperatives. Supporting the Prime Minister's directive, the weekly magazine SAIGON KINH TẾ is preparing to launch national a program "Promoting the development of modern agricultural cooperatives" in order to solicit relevant suggestions to the government. I will be an active contributor to this program.

*Dear Mr. Consul General and Distinguished Guests,*

Throughout my works, I have always been interested in the friendship relations between Vietnam and Japan, especially in matters of mutual benefit, encouraging the development of agriculture and rural areas, needing to It involves a wide range of professions and requires a wide range of research skills to be able to pinpoint the core problems of rural areas and the potential of the region. For example, countries around the world now want to fulfill their commitments at the COP26 Conference held in Glasgow, UK, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions so that the atmospheric temperature does not increase by more than 1.5°C from 2025. Japan intends to switch 50% of its electricity demand to biodiesel derived from the seeds of jatropha, a crop well adapted to arid tropical regions like some areas in Vietnam. A Japanese company, Nippon Toyo, through the Vietnamese-American Deputy Director, met me to discuss a program to grow jatropha trees in Vietnam and some other tropical countries to meet Japan's needs. Surely this program will bring benefits to the people of Vietnam and Japan.

Throughout my work, I have always been interested in the friendship relations between Vietnam and Japan, especially in matters beneficial to both sides, encouraging the development of agriculture and rural areas (DARA). It is a field that involves a wide range of expertises and requires a great deal of research skills to accurately identify the core problems of rural areas and the potential of the region. For example, countries around the world now want to fulfill their commitments at the recent COP26 Conference held in Glasgow, UK, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions so that the atmospheric temperature does not rise more than 1.5 OC from 2025. Japan intends to switch 50% of its electricity demand to biodiesel from the seeds of jatropha, a crop well adapted to arid tropical regions like some areas in Vietnam. A Japanese company, Nippon Toyo, through its Vietnamese-American Deputy Director, met me to discuss a program to grow jatropha trees in Vietnam and some other tropical countries to meet Japan's needs. This is a DARA program that will definitely bring benefits to the people of Vietnam (who have good income thanks to the production and sale of jatropha seeds) and Japan (reducing greenhouse gas emissions, contributing to the implementation of commitments at COP26).



Today, I am honored to be the Vietnamese recipient of the noble award that Emperor Meiji established since 1875. Obviously, the achievements that I have made so far are not only my own, but there are contributions of many people. Regarding Agricultural Development, I would like to acknowledge first of all the "Doi Moi" policy of the Party and State of Vietnam, the country's leaders have approved and supported my ideas. I would like to thank my colleagues and comrades who have supported and cooperated to turn my ideas into reality, leaders of departments, especially the Ministry of Education and Training, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Ministry of Science and Technology, leaders of many localities, colleagues at Can Tho University, An Giang University and Nam Can Tho University have encouraged my works and shared with me their belief in the bright future of Vietnam. My numerous and capable students, alumni, doctoral students working at agricultural agencies across the country, scientists in provinces and in the Vietnam Farming System Network, many foreign experts and leaders of many international organizations. The enthusiastic support of the press agencies, media, and television reporters in Ho Chi Minh City, Can Tho City and other provinces has helped me to realize my goals and timely popularize the relevant research results to farmers. The Vietnamese farmers who stand at the end of the production process deserve to be honored because they have worked hard in the fields.

Finally, I would like to thank my deceased parents, my late wife, my next spouse, my three children and my brothers and sisters, for their son, husband, father, brother are often busy with research works, teaching, business trips, field visits, but neglect family responsibilities. Thanks to their sacrifices and support, I feel secure in my work and try my best to serve farmers and the agricultural industry. They understand that I always put the interests of thousands of farmers above the interests of my small family. This success is attributed to my perfect wife who passed away too soon, who was very sympathetic and spent her life accompanying me since my student days at the University of Agriculture of the Philippines and the University of Kyoto and Kyushu, Japan, Ngoc Le is a strong support for me, taking care of everything in the family, meticulously checking everything to make sure each plan I participate in is successfully completed.

I would like to express my gratitude and admiration to the People and Government of Japan, JICA (formerly OTCA), the Embassy of Japan in Hanoi and the Consulate General of Japan in Ho Chi Minh City for their support and assistance to me and my country Vietnam, from the time the country was still miserable to the more prosperous time like today. However, Vietnam, after more than 40 years of living in peace and reunification, has developed to its fullest potential, but it is still not commensurate with its potential in human and natural resources because most of us still lack the virtues that the Japanese people have accumulated. I am just a small unit in the big Vietnamese community, but fortunate to have access to those good virtues of the Japanese people, I have determined to always work and live exemplary so that my students and partners can follow, with the hope that one day Vietnam can turn its potential into reality to stand in the rank of advanced countries.

*Thank you Honorable Consul General Esteemed Guests.*