

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, *mga kaibigan*,

Magandang tanghali po. Minasan, Konnnichiwa.

It is my great pleasure and privilege to welcome you all to this intimate ceremony.

Today, we recognize outstanding individuals with different backgrounds whose respective contributions have significantly strengthened the bonds of friendship between Japan and the Philippines.

As we celebrate the 70th anniversary of the normalization of our diplomatic ties this year, we see our relationship has grown into a deep and enduring partnership over the last seven decades—spanning security, diplomacy, culture and people-to-people exchanges.

Behind this grand picture of friendship are the countless dedicated figures on both sides who have worked quietly yet diligently to

elevate our relations to new heights.

To know these remarkable individuals has been a truly great honor.

It is an even greater honor to introduce these advocates of our nations' friendship.

Allow me to start with our first honoree, Mr. Nobuo Fujii, Director and Advisor of the Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

Mr. Nobuo Fujii, Director and Advisor,

The Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the
Philippines, Inc.

Mr. Fujii has long worked to resolve challenges faced by Japanese businesses in the Philippines.

Closely engaging with foreign chambers and key government agencies such as DTI and PEZA, his keen guidance on taxation, labor, environmental, and recruitment issues has made him a great force in strengthening our economic ties.

I have been impressed to see many photos and references of his younger days in the memoir of former PEZA DG Lilia De Lima.

On a more cultural front, our next awardee, **Dra. Nora A. Torres**, highlights our nations' close personal connections as a member of the Philippines-Japan Ladies Association (PJLA).

Dra. Nora A. Torres, President, The Philippines-Japan Ladies Association

Joining the PJLA in 2006 and serving as its President since 2019, Dra. Torres has led the Association with vision, warmth, and dedication.

Under her leadership, the PJLA has thrived through a wide range of cultural and social activities, fostering deeper friendships and a vibrant sense of community among its members.

Her deep commitment exemplifies the enduring spirit of friendship between our two countries.

I also appreciate her warm hospitality and friendship extended to

my wife, Akiko.

Carrying this same spirit forward are our next awardees, **Ms. Bendette McFarland** and **Ms. Thelma Salumbides**, both true educators and cultural bridges.

Ms. Bendette B. McFarland, Filipino Language Teacher for MOFA
Diplomats

Since 1976, Ms. McFarland has served as a Filipino language instructor at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Institute of Japan, contributing to the development of its Filipino language specialists. Having also taught at Sophia and Waseda Universities, she has played a significant role in deepening the Japanese youth's understanding of the Philippines.

Even after returning to the Philippines, she continues to serve as a Filipino language examiner at the Japanese Embassy.

Going beyond as an educator, she is currently compiling a Bicolano-Filipino dictionary, commissioned by the Komisyon sa

Wikang Filipino.

Ms. Thelma Cleto-Salumbides, Filipino Language Teacher for
MOFA Diplomats

Ms. Salumbides also has built a distinguished career as a Filipino language instructor over the past three decades.

Using her own authored textbooks, she has mentored eight Ministry of Foreign Affairs language trainees since 1994, even welcoming them into her home as a homestay host.

Her practical yet thorough instruction has deepened her students' understanding of the Philippines, laying a strong foundation for the Ministry's future Philippine affairs specialists.

You two have helped build the solid foundation of Philippines-Japan diplomatic relations.

Finally, we recognize a group that has elevated an artform into a living link of friendship: the Philippine Bonsai Society, Inc.

The Philippine Bonsai Society, Inc.

Since its establishment in 1973, the Society has been the country's leading bonsai organization dedicated to promoting bonsai culture throughout the country.

They have championed the use of native Philippine tree species such as Balete, establishing a unique tropical tradition distinct from Japanese and Chinese styles.

Through its exhibitions, workshops, and nationwide network, it has nurtured generations of eager bonsai enthusiasts.

Its establishment of dedicated organizations for bonsai education, along with the training of judges and instructors, has greatly contributed to the preservation of the art, ensuring bonsai culture grows its way to future generations.

A valued partner of the Embassy of Japan, they continue to support our events and help promote Japanese culture in the Philippines.

To all of our honorees — on behalf of the Government of Japan

and the Japanese people — I extend my deepest and most sincere gratitude.

This award stands as more than a tribute to your accomplishments. It honors the true impact of your dedication, as future generations of Japanese and Filipinos build upon the bonds and ties you have forged in your lifetimes.

On a more personal note, I will be concluding my tenure as Ambassador of Japan to the Philippines at the end of next month.

It has been an extraordinary privilege to serve in this beautiful country, among such warm, resilient, and remarkable people.

The memories and friendships Akiko and I have made here will remain with us for the rest of my life.

And I must say — being able to celebrate our outstanding friends today before my departure is one of the greatest joys of my time here as Ambassador.

It is a moment I will carry with me for long.

My only comfort is knowing that the summer heat back in Japan at the end of August will make me feel as though I never left the Philippines, even if only for a few months.

As I look to the future, I am filled with great confidence and optimism that the friendship between Japan and the Philippines will only continue to grow stronger for the decades to come.

Our awardees today are proof that more Japanese and Filipinos will continue to carry this heritage of friendship to greater horizons.

To our honorees — may you continue to be an unwavering pillars of friendship for both our nations.

And to everyone present here— may this moment reaffirm the true strength of our bond, as we celebrate the 70th year of our friendship.

Maraming salamat po sa inyong pagsisikap sa ating relasyon.

Patuloy natin ang pagkakaibigan ng Japan at Pilipinas. Mabuhay.