

A New Perspective on American History from the Other Side of the Pacific

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Several years ago, during the so-called La Pietra conference, Tom Bender asked the non-American participants an interesting question: “How well does American history written by American scholars travel in foreign countries with very different settings from those of the U.S.?” Bender asked this because he assumed American history was less well received abroad, compared to European history written by European scholars. Thus the aim of the La Pietra conference was set up “to imagine American historical narratives that situate the United States more fully into its larger transnational and intercultural global context, with the intention of revealing more clearly the multiple narratives, time scales, and geographies, both larger and smaller than formal national boundaries, that constitute the American past.”¹

The reasons for the difficulty American history as written from a US perspective faces in foreign countries seem multiple. Among them, American exceptionalism as a historiographical frame is perhaps the single most important factor, for it entrusts a special historical mission only to the United States and places it in unique historical contexts. As Stanley Hoffmann points out, any nation tends to insist on its uniqueness, but only two of them, France and the United States, regard themselves as exceptional because of their belief in the universality of their values, and only the United States “has tried to develop foreign policies that reflect

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such exceptionalism.”² Until the end of the Cold War, American exceptionalism had taken one of two forms, that is, either isolationism or crusading interventionism. Both forms held in common the desire to protect uniquely American (and also universal) values; the difference lay in the strategies employed. In the post-Cold War, and particularly after 9/11, a totally new version of American exceptionalism “based almost exclusively on military domination” has been emerging under the sponsorship of American strategic thinkers and diplomats in the governing circle.³ As long as governing elites use one of these three versions of American exceptionalism as justification for their statecraft and the majority of the public believes in the elites, historians will always face an uphill struggle to restore sober and judicious histories, de-provincialize American history, and re-connect it with a history of the larger world. American historians who disavow American exceptionalism thus have to endure isolation from the general public.

However, these factors inherent in the practice of American history in the US are not the only reasons that make foreign reception of American history difficult. Also on the receiving end, many traps usually await US versions of American history. In Japan’s case, for example, the answer to Bender’s question is not simple, because the swiftness or smoothness with which US American history travels to Japan varies greatly depending on its destination in Japanese society. Generally speaking, the Japanese public’s view of America is too opinionated and stereotyped to allow for a sufficiently sophisticated and diversified understanding of American history and society. In addition, such an understanding is not necessary for students and young Japanese in order for them to adopt a fully “Americanized” way of life. In other words, for these segments of Japanese society, American history travels far less and far slower than American fashions and cultural icons, which originate at the center of American hegemony and easily cross national boundaries.

American history and scholarly American studies of course find more avid recipients among Japanese politicians, bureaucrats, businessmen, and journalists, who are engaged in official or civilian diplomacy with America. The view of this audience, however, might be somewhat biased, since Japan has not had even a single anti-American administration for the past 60 years. Having few serious challengers to American hegemony, the Japanese government has been a most consistent “in party” for the American government throughout the post war years. In general, official and civilian diplomats need some knowledge of

American history so as to understand current American policies and adjust their activities to the rationale given by their American counterparts. For those elites the US is special, if not exceptional, so the idea of American exceptionalism would find a sympathetic reception with them. They study American history, but do so very selectively. As a result, Japanese diplomacy, again particularly since 9/11, has become so constrained by the binary relationship with the United States that it lacks international insight, imagination, and creativity. Here the trans-Pacific perspective almost equates with a bilateral perspective between the US and Japan.

To return to Bender's question, history written by Americans travels very well among Japanese professional historians who engage in research, write, and teach American history in academic institutions. These historians usually keep in close touch with the state of American historiography, and follow the innovative turns in methodologies imported from America. They have been very able and quick in absorbing various historical notions born in the United States such as New Left history, new social history, the republican synthesis, postmodern, feminist or postcolonial cultural studies, multiculturalism and identity politics, and recent whiteness studies. Nonetheless, their impact has been largely contained to a narrow circle of Americanists and has seldom affected historians and social scientists working in adjacent fields, not to speak of politicians or diplomats and the general public. As a result, there is a wide gap between professional Americanists and the general public in terms of the perception of American life and experience. In Japan, too, historians specializing in American history are relatively isolated from the non-academic world. Unfortunately, current American history in Japan has not been able to offer an alternative way of seeing international politics or to suggest another diplomatic course for the nation. In this regard Japan is not necessarily an exception, for now the practice of American history and American studies nearly everywhere suffers from tunnel vision caused by the overwhelming global presence of American power. Therefore it is time to internationalize American history by adopting truly comparative perspectives.

Overspecialization and the facile acceptance of American historiographical trends have prevented Japanese Americanists from proffering original innovative interpretations of American history. When John Higham visited Japan in 1980, he personally deplored the lack of ambitious inventiveness among Japanese Americanists vis-à-vis their

counterparts in India.⁴ It is highly probable that most Indian Americanists were raised by their country's elite culture, one formerly immersed in the British way of seeing the world. They therefore inherently tend to shed light on American history from not only an Asian point of view, but also from another internalized, Euro-Asian, point of view. In addition to what they learn in their training as American specialists, their interpretive framework tends to reflect India's legacy as a former British colony, as well as a nation within Asia. For them, America was and is always no more, though also no less, than one of the western powers.

This is not the case in Japan. One may well ask why American history in Japan exists as a fragmented and secluded area of specialization in the Japanese academy. As Bernard Bailyn stresses, "[h]istory should be studied because it is an absolutely necessary enlargement of human experience, a way of getting out of the boundaries of one's own life and culture and of seeing more of what human experience has been."⁵ If this is the case, American history in Japan needs to be reoriented in a fundamentally different and innovative way. But before searching for the solution to this problem we need to understand the cause of it.

The limitations concerning the reception of American history in Japan have a number of reasons, and one may well wish to ponder first whether these limitations stem from problems in the way this history was brought to or received in Japan. To answer this question we need to return to the original encounter between the two nations.

In the past century and a half Japan has dramatically encountered America twice: once with the opening of an isolated Tokugawa Japan by the fleet of Commodore Matthew Perry, and a second time in the War and Occupation led by Douglas A. MacArthur. Dramatic meetings with other cultures are usually thought to engender serious interest and deep insight in the historical origins of the other culture. In the case of Japan's meetings with the United States, however, these meetings were not particularly conducive to promoting a historical understanding of the United States. Why? Partly because in both nineteenth-century and twentieth-century encounters with America the Japanese people believed that the United States represented an evident and overwhelming military power without history, and partly because Americans made few efforts to explain the history of the origins of their power and the reasons why they were now in Japan. In either case, both sides were too preoccupied with immediate power relations to concern themselves with history.⁶

But it was not only American power that overshadowed American history in the Japanese mind. More importantly, Japan's relative indifference to American history finds its roots in Japan's ever-changing view of the world and of itself. By the time Perry came to Japan in 1853, the most enlightened intellectuals and political leaders in Japan were already aware of China's tragic encounter with western powers, an encounter epitomized by the Opium War. For those Japanese leaders, the United States first represented a part of an unfathomable, western and modern power, invading the east and establishing its colonial rule over one country after another. As a matter of fact, Perry's official title was "Commander in Chief, United States Naval Forces Stationed in the East India, China and Japan Seas" and he took the east-bound route to Japan stopping at ports under the aegis of the British Navy.⁷ Thus, to Japanese leaders, the United States initially appeared not as a "Pacific" power but merely as another western power.

The Japanese notion of the coalescence of America with other western powers, however, did not last long. By the end of the Tokugawa period, Japanese elites had already recognized the fundamental differences between each western nation-state. And after the Meiji Restoration the new oligarchy began to seek the best model for modernizing its own country. Although some of the Meiji leaders fervently studied the United States Constitution by reading *The Federalist Papers*, they quickly forsook the United States as a national model, mainly because they viewed it as a republic lacking a historical tradition. After all, Meiji Japan was a somewhat schizophrenic nation, vigorously seeking modernization, while at the same time boastful of its antiquity. As a result, the Imperial Constitution, when it was finally promulgated, was modeled not after the American one, but rather after the Prussian. The legal system too, was based on continental models, and the army and navy adopted Prussian and British forms. The first national universities were also established based upon the German model. As a whole, the Japanese governmental structure ended up European in form.

As Japan created a new nation-state in this manner, it also adopted a peculiar worldview and pecking order among civilizations and nations. In this imagined world order the United States was seen as a lesser western power, lesser not because of its lack of power, but because of its supposed lack of history and culture. This view of America itself originated from Europe.⁸ Since then, American history has long been studied

and taught not as an independent academic subject, but as an auxiliary part of western history. In other words, Japanese in those years saw American history not by gazing across the Pacific, but instead by gazing across the Atlantic through a particularly European lens. Under this arrangement, American history was introduced into western history in a very inconsistent, almost arbitrary way. Important topics such as settlement, independence, the establishment of the Constitution, western expansion, the Civil War and the like appeared on occasion around the periphery of what was taught as “western history.” Haphazardly incorporated into world history, this type of American history lacked any consistent analytical viewpoint. It did not exhibit any systematic connectedness to the histories of other nations.

Consequently, during the first half-century after the inception of modern higher education in Japan, most Japanese universities did not offer a permanent chair for American history, but instead placed the discipline in a position under the rubric of Western history. Only in 1925 was the first chair of American history, funded by an American banker, established at the University of Tokyo.⁹

Strangely enough however, Meiji Japan sent more students to the United States than it did to any European country. This fact did not necessarily contradict the pecking order of nations, for the most elite students and promising young bureaucrats invariably chose Europe as the place to train and westernize themselves. In contrast, America was the destination for ambitious, but poorer, non-elite students and impoverished immigrants. In times of political repression it also provided a refuge for oppositional activists. Ardent Christians and socialists also numbered among students going to America.

Thus America was accessed in two ways by modern Japan. One way was the westbound, elite route leading first through Europe; the other was a non-elite, eastbound route directly over the Pacific. Those who studied history in Europe and returned home to occupy university chairs tended naturally to slight American history in their research and teaching. On the other hand, most of those who studied in the United States tended to be present-minded and engaged in practical and vocational pursuits rather than academic history. This situation adversely affected the development of academic studies regarding American history in prewar Japan.¹⁰

The Pacific War and subsequent Occupation changed this situation drastically. This time the US military power came from the southeast,

across the Pacific. In addition, after the defeat, Japan was expelled from the East Asian and South East Asian regions and occupied by the US military. The direction of Japanese international consciousness turned suddenly to the eastbound route. Once again, as after the opening of Tokugawa Japan, the United States appeared as a great power, but this time as a power much more self-assertive and formidable than on the first occasion. Now it was a power that even assumed the role of the savior of world civilization. There was little room for Japan to choose how to reconstruct its war-torn country. American ways inundated every sphere of human activity.

The occupying Allied Powers, led by the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) and his General Headquarters (GHQ), launched a relentless Americanization of Japanese life. The constitution was fundamentally rewritten after the American model. The military was disbanded and the most notorious war leaders purged. The educational system was reformed under American instruction. Even the family began to be restructured in a more democratic manner. There was a great influx of American arts and sciences, not to mention technology. After years of strict control over freedom of speech and of the press by the ultranationalist government, the Japanese people coveted and devoured new information. American English became by far the most dominant second language in schools. American natural and social sciences poured into Japanese university curricula and transformed traditional (somewhat European) scholarship. Had it not been for the memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the Cold War, Japan might have been even more completely Americanized.

Even in this situation, however, American history and American studies largely failed to make headway in the Japanese academic world. There were several reasons for this. The US occupation army was at once a non-self-reflective and a forward-looking governing power. The leaders of the GHQ were much less concerned with teaching the historical origins of American democracy to Japanese people than with destroying the remnants of prewar Japan's peculiar historical understandings in order to teach them the practical means of democratic government. In the Japanese academic world during the Occupation period, social sciences such as political science, economics, psychology, and sociology were considerably Americanized, while history was not. America's interest in Japan (and perhaps in the rest of the world as a whole) has invariably been present-minded and future directed. To Japanese people,

most Americans seem to be indifferent not only to other peoples' history but also to their own.

Partly because of the occupation policy, but mostly because of internal organizational inertia, even after the era of reform under the Occupation, most Japanese universities did not reform the traditional disciplinary division of history into National, Oriental, and Western compartments. In addition, from right after the end of WWII to the end of the Cold War, the influence of Marxism was dominant throughout Japanese academia, for Marxism as an ideology and as a social scientific theory provided a comparative and holistic perspective from which to understand modern Japanese history, the capitalist world, and American power. It affected not only historians associated with the Japan Communist Party, but also many progressive historians. For those academic Leftists, the United States was now the most reactionary imperialist power. In this ideological configuration, American history (in other words, the history of the enemy of the progressive forces) was despised as a field fit only for those with a bourgeois mentality. For all these reasons it was therefore marginalized within the historical profession once again and continued to occupy a slightly larger but still modest position in the study of Western history in general.

This plight of American history and American studies in Japanese higher education hardly improved in the following years. The late 1950s witnessed the surge of radical labor movements, the anti-nuclear peace movement, anti-military-base movements, the student movement, and, most dramatically, the movement against the revision of the US-Japan Security Treaty. In those movements, the United States became the prime object of public resentment. During the 1960s and 1970s, the situation was aggravated by racial violence raging in American cities and the Vietnam War, both of which eroded Japanese trust in American freedom and democracy.

In the late 1980s, this situation eased slowly but surely. Japan's success in overcoming two oil crises made its people more confident of their country's status as a competent but friendly rival of American capitalism. While Japan gradually overcame its inferiority complex, the United States recovered from the nightmare of Vietnam and at last succeeded in subduing its prime enemy by winning the Cold War. As both Japan and the United States succeeded in coming to terms with their obsessions, it became possible for historians to better understand American history. In fact, the period after the late 1980s has witnessed an increase

in the number of students specializing in American history and the steady development in both the fields of research and education about American history.

At this juncture, however, American studies and American history in Japanese education is still racked with traditional difficulties. One history teacher explains as follows:

Since the fall of the Berlin wall, education in world history has been changing. More attention is now paid to modern and current history. Asia and Africa, particularly Southeast Asia and Inland Asia, draw much attention. In this situation, however, American history is still treated as a part of European history and America is still regarded simply as one of the advanced countries. Thus American history does not receive a proper treatment for its reality.

This teacher, however, adds quickly another reason for the distorted image of American history:

Because the view of American history in high school textbooks was basically imported with American democracy after World War II, it inevitably assumes a happy-ending nature and lacks an analytical edge. As for the Korean and Vietnam Wars, the description in textbooks is too factual to represent the reasons why the United States became involved in those wars. I suppose that the importance of the US-Japanese relations no doubt prohibits the authors of those textbooks from being critical enough to touch on negative aspects of American history.¹¹

In addition, US-Japanese relations and globalization led by the US, which created something of an exuberant mood during the 1990s, has caused another sort of difficulty for the Japanese understanding of American society and particularly its history. One of the most salient consequences of globalization is the emergence of a common culture based on a sense of propinquity in relation to the hegemonic nation. Ironically, some of the most vexing problems in terms of historical understanding also result from this situation. Particularly in Japan, the "American presence," which has loomed large during the last half-century, has also contributed to difficulties in understanding American history objectively. As pointed out already, American history has long been disadvantageously treated in the Japanese academy. The scholarly, objective study of America has thus been hindered by a kind of double obstacle.

What can Americanists in both the United States and Japan do to cope with such tasks as to overcome their isolation from the public in the US

and Japan, to restore society's interest in history, to rectify ethnocentrism in national history, and to de-provincialize and internationalize national history? To emphasize the transnational aspect of American history does not necessarily mean that the nation has become obsolete as a unit of historical analysis. Rather, "we need a history that understands national history as itself being made in and by histories that are both larger and smaller than the nation's."¹² If we Japanese Americanists intend to rethink American history from such a point of view, it seems sensible to select the Pacific world as a focal point.

But even the path-breaking La Pietra project did not bestow as much consideration on the trans-Pacific as on the trans-Atlantic perspective. That was not without reason, for until very recently the United States itself has paid much less attention to the Asian-Pacific region than the Euro-Atlantic region. It was only between the late 70s and early 80s that the US recognized the People's Republic of China, the trade dispute with Japan flared up, and Asian NIES (Newly Industrialized Economies) started growing rapidly with Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines following the suit of the NIES. In 1982, the total amount of US trade with Asian countries for the first time surpassed that with western European countries. In 1984, the balance of transoceanic commerce tipped in favor of the Pacific at last. US direct investment abroad also increased steadily, particularly in East Asia, which saw five-fold growth between 1975 and 1995. A burgeoning economy in the region entailed an international movement of labor, which was accelerated by the enactments of non-racist and less discriminatory immigration laws in the 1960s in the United States, Canada, and Australia. By the end of the Cold War, these transnational movements of people, goods, and capital were conducive to the rise of a new "Pacific Rim" concept, which would include Asia, the Americas, Australia, New Zealand, and Southern Pacific Island countries. Now the US has a vast economic and political stake in the Pacific Rim, and Asian and Pacific nations count on an American presence to guarantee the security and prosperity of the region. Against the backdrop of these recent developments, it seems judicious to place the US in a trans-Pacific context and consider it a Pacific nation.

However, putting the current international situation aside, it is doubtful whether the US has been a Pacific nation from its inception. Like all other scholarly perspectives, the trans-Pacific perspective in American history has its own history. The age of a globalized "Pacific Rim" is the fourth great phase in the history of the relationship between the United

States and the Pacific region. The first was the age between the American Revolution and the Civil War, when the United States as a young republic belatedly joined a Neo-European Pacific world while rapidly expanding westward in the continent. The second was between the 1890s and WWI, when the US acquired Pacific islands, colonized the Philippines, and started intervening in Chinese affairs on the basis of the Open Door principle. The third was the age of the Pacific War and the subsequent Cold War, when the United States played a hegemonic role in keeping the security of the entire Pacific region.

It is intriguing to trace American history according to these four phases of the US as a Pacific nation. It demonstrates quite a distinct view of American history. Compared with a notion of the US as primarily an Atlantic nation, this Pacific perspective paints America as invariably more interventionist. While perhaps less of a crusading or idealistic force, the US comes to be seen as a commerce-oriented and selfish country simply acting upon its national interests. Already in the first years after the American Revolution, the Pacific engaged American interest because of the highly profitable fur trade on the Northwest Coast, the newly discovered whaling industry, and also the opening of commerce with China. At that time the Atlantic Ocean provided America not only with lanes for international commerce but also with security against possible intervention by European powers. But the United States became attracted to the Pacific area based on purely economic and commercial motives. As the official report of Commodore M. C. Perry's expedition to Japan stated, "the Pacific ocean is destined to be the theatre of immense commercial undertakings," and America sought commercial intercourse with Japan out of selfish commercial motives.¹³ In sum, the US in the Pacific region rose as just another nakedly imperialistic power. In other words, the US has not been very exceptional in this trans-Pacific context.

By taking this perspective, American historians in Japan would have much work to do in rectifying American exceptionalism. At the same time, however, it is important not to flatten the historical difference between Japanese and American culture. While being conscious about the difference, we should always reconsider the meaning of "America" and the significance of studying "its history" for the Japanese. The US and Japan differ fundamentally as modern nation-states: a regime of republicanism vs. the emperor system, diversity vs. homogeneity in terms of population, individualism vs. groupism regarding social ideology,

pious monotheism vs. secular polytheism in religious life, etc. Today anti-American sentiments are rapidly spreading among Japanese people. One of the reasons for this is undoubtedly the unilateralism of American diplomacy in recent years. But perhaps an even more fundamental reason is the difference in value systems. It is thus time for Japanese Americanists to replace research topics they uncritically borrow from American colleagues with a broader comparative historical context. Failing to do so, Japanese Americanists will always remain trapped in narrow confines, whether they wish to be or not.

At the same time we should ask US historians in America to place their work in as international a context as possible. For outsiders, American power always appears devoid of history. This phenomenon itself is an interesting subject of American studies. But I suppose that US historians in America are at least in part responsible for that. During the OAH meeting several years ago, the theme of which was, I believe, the internationalizing of American history, I had a very interesting experience in a session entitled, "McCarthyism at Home and Abroad." In this session no speaker, commentator, or moderator referred to McCarthyism's impact on postwar Asia, while all of them talked about its impact on Euro-American relations. So from the floor I made a short comment about the general indifference of those historians to the question of how McCarthyism changed the US occupation policy in Japan and also Japan's internal politics after the 1950s. One of the speaker's answers was intriguing, for he implied that studying the US State Department was enough to understand the impact of McCarthyism on Japanese politics and on occupation policy: "But we have much studied the State Department." I hope his attitude is an isolated exception. But if not, we should ask American Americanists to be slightly more sympathetic to the peculiar contexts in which other countries' Americanists become interested in the subjects and works of American history. I believe that this will make history written by American Americanists a little easier to accept abroad.

NOTES

¹ Thomas Bender, "Project on Internationalizing the Study of American History," post-conference report for Conference III, Villa La Pietra, New York University in Florence, Italy, 5–8 July 1999, 2–3.

² Stanley Hoffmann, "American Exceptionalism: The New Version," in *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 225.

³ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁴ John Higham, personal interview by author.

⁵ Bernard Bailyn, *On the Teaching and Writing of History*, (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England), 12.

⁶ William L. Neumann, *America Encounters Japan: From Perry to MacArthur*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1963), chaps. 4, 13, 14.

⁷ Yasunobu Soumura, *Peri ha naze nihon ni kitaka* [Why did Perry come to Japan?] (Tokyo: Shincho sha, 1987), 147–70.

⁸ By the 1890s, the discipline of history in Japanese universities was divided "into national history (Japan), Eastern history (Asia without Japan), and Western history (primarily Europe)." Eastern (or Oriental) and Western history were coupled to form "world history." See Carol Gluck, "House of Mirrors: American History-Writing on Japan," in *Imagined Histories: American Historians Interpret the Past*, eds. Anthony Molho and Gordon S. Wood (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 436.

⁹ Makoto Saito, "Nihon no amerika kenkyu zenshi" [Japanese American-studies at its inception], in *Amerika kenkyu an'nai* [An Introduction to American Studies], 257–59.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 256; Jun Furuya, "Graduate Student and Quaker," in *Nitobe Inazo: Japan's Bridge Across the Pacific*, ed. John F. Howes (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1995), 55–76; *idem*, "Showa zenki ni okeru 'amerika kennkoku no rinen' zo" [The image of the "founding ideals of the United States" in early Showa Era], in *Amerika kennkoku no rinenn to nichī-bei kankei* [The founding ideals of the United States and U.S.-Japan relations] (Tokyo: NIRA Research Report No. 940051), 113–30.

¹¹ International House of Japan, *American Studies Curriculum in Higher Education* (Tokyo: International House of Japan, 1997), 121.

¹² Thomas Bender, *A Nation among Nations: America's Place in World History*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 3.

¹³ Francis L. Hawks, comp., *Narrative of the Expedition of An American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan, Performed in the Years 1852, 1853, and 1854 under the Command of Commodore M. C. Perry, United States Navy*, (Washington, D.C.: Beverly Tucker, Senate Printer, 1956), 62, 73.