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The Transnational Turn in the Study of American History and Its Aftermath: A Personal View

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This article provides a personal perspective on the so-called "transnational turn" in the study of American history that took place around the early 2000s. The transnational turn was significant because it gave greater visibility to the researching and writing of history that moved across traditional geographic divisions, and developed in parallel with the rise of Asian American studies. Juxtaposing the growth of these fields with the author's own upbringing between three countries—China, Japan, and the United States—this article seeks to describe the accompanying shifts in scholarly approach and training from the view of a former anthropology major turned historian. Through relating the author's own experience of attending graduate school in the United States in the 2010s, where he went from specializing in Japanese history to engaging in transnational history and Asian American history, the article highlights the importance of gaining increased awareness of adjacent fields through teaching and research, as well as the difficulties involved in overcoming disciplinary boundaries. It also touches upon the recent advent of Global Asias as an emerging framework for creating new intellectual pathways for scholars of Asia, Asian America, and Asian diasporas.

1. Introduction

In this article, I offer my perspective on the so-called "transnational turn" in the study of American history, and how it has impacted my own work as well as that of others in related fields. The turn toward transnational history is generally considered to have taken place around the late 1990s, growing out of earlier attempts to break out of the confines of nation-centric approaches to history such as "world history" and "international history."

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However, given the breadth of this topic, I will limit this article to those areas closest to my own personal perspective—that of a historian of modern Japan who has developed a teaching and research interest in the fields of American studies and Asian American history.

When I entered graduate school in the early 2010s, transnational history was still relatively new as a field of study. Although the idea of researching and writing history that moved across traditional geographic boundaries has—depending on one's definition—arguably existed from much earlier, the transnational turn placed a stronger emphasis on the interpenetration of borders and the movement of sub-state level actors. Around the 2000s, scholars and activists began to publicly debate the issue of globalization, and there was a heightened consciousness around the sense of change in the world, as historical processes were understood to be becoming ever more "global." The strong interest at the time could be seen in the 2006 *American Historical Review* article, "AHR Conversation: On Transnational History," which has become one of the journal's most widely cited pieces in recent years.[1]

Over the course of my graduate career, not by deliberate design but rather through a series of serendipitous choices and fortunate encounters, I found myself gravitating increasingly toward transnational history as an approach that would allow me to bridge the institutional barriers between my primary field of study (Japanese history) and my secondary field (American history). While I do not claim to have succeeded in achieving this lofty goal, I nevertheless hope to illustrate through this essay some aspects of the shift that has taken place in these fields—especially with regard to the rise of the discipline of Asian American studies—and how that has helped to shape my own path as a scholar.

2. Starting Out

The field of Asian American studies started as an outgrowth of the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Inspired by the African American movement for equality and justice that fought against the pervasive problem of racism in US society, the various Asian ethnic groups (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino)—whose efforts at collective organization and social action had been hitherto confined to those who shared a common heritage and ethno-national background—began to think of themselves together as "Asian Americans" for the first time. This new identity and political consciousness manifested itself in a series of student strikes, most notably on the campus

of San Francisco State University (SFSU) in 1968–69, that demanded greater recognition and representation of people of color in the student body and among the faculty. Such movements led to the establishment of the College of Ethnic Studies at SFSU and the Department of Ethnic Studies at UC Berkeley in 1969, both of which incorporated Asian American studies as a key component, with similar programs springing up around the country in the ensuing years. As can be seen from this early history, Asian American studies had its origins in youth-led social activism.[2]

As a result of such institutional growth, in subsequent decades, there has been an expanding interest and readership for books that specialize in this field. According to the observation of Gary Okihiro, who served for two decades as the director of the Asian American studies program at Columbia University, the number of books published on Asian Americans from 1961 to 1980 was roughly the same as the number of books published on the subject from 1851 to 1960. In one decade, from 1981 to 1990, the number of books published equaled the number published during the previous two decades. That number further doubled during the decade of 1991 to 2000.[3] This rapid rate of expansion has sustained the rise of a field that has, by the very nature of its subjects, centered on the experience of transnational migrants and their descendants.

My personal upbringing, while transnational in its own way, was initially far removed from the orbit of such concerns. Having been born in Shanghai in 1986 to Chinese parents, our family moved to Japan when I was three years old. Because of the work of my father, who was an academic, we moved to the United States when I was six, moved back to Japan when I was ten, and moved again to the US when I was fifteen. After attending high school in Belmont, Massachusetts, I moved down the I-95 to Providence, Rhode Island, where I went to Brown University for my undergraduate studies in the mid 2000s. At Brown, I was a Biology and Anthropology double major (or "double concentrator" in Brown jargon), which provided me with an education grounded in diverse and rich experiences but did not lead directly to a well-defined career path. At the suggestion of my father, I decided that doing a master's degree in China after college would allow me to explore my options while brushing up on my Chinese language skills.

Living in Shanghai during my master's program at Fudan University from 2008 to 2011 allowed me to reconnect with the language and culture of my family and ancestors. This was during a time when China was starting to reassert itself on the world stage. The 2008 Beijing Olympics

and the 2010 Shanghai World Expo, the latter of which I was able to attend in person, showcased the energy and vitality of China, as the nation sought to let the world know of its economic and political might. The excitement could be felt in the streets. Increasing numbers of international tourists, students, and businessmen came to the country, as China became known as a global destination for ambitious youth.

Meanwhile, as a student, I struggled to find a suitable topic for my master's thesis. Luckily, my mentor at Fudan, Edward Yihua Xu, provided invaluable advice. Professor Xu was an expert on Chinese Christianity, and had studied at Princeton University, where he received a Ph.D. in religious studies. As a result, he took interest in my upbringing in Japan and the US and suggested as my topic of research a Japanese Christian leader by the name of Toyohiko Kagawa (1888–1960). Even though Professor Xu did not speak any Japanese, he had nevertheless heard about Kagawa as an internationally well-known Christian figure in the early twentieth century. At first, I had no idea who Kagawa was, but soon found myself intrigued by his wide fame and international ties. In time, his suggestion turned me toward the topic of religion and international relations, and eventually toward the study of history.

Working on my master's thesis gave me a taste of scholarship based on primary sources and introduced me to concepts such as the study of war, peace, and international history. One of the documents I examined regarding Kagawa was a 1941 letter he wrote to President Franklin D. Roosevelt. While I had read about Kagawa's peace activism and how he made efforts to broker a peace between Japan and the US in the prewar era, I wanted to know what exactly this entailed in practical terms. My curiosity soon led me to send an inquiry to the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library in Hyde Park, New York. It turned out that the library had official records concerning Kagawa and the letter he had written to FDR, including a well-preserved scroll portrait of FDR that the Japanese Christian had commissioned and presented to the president as a goodwill gift. This experience opened my eyes to the excitement of conducting historical research based on archival materials, and the possibilities of writing histories on lesser-known figures who nevertheless attempted to have an impact on broader world events. The discovery became a chapter in my master's thesis, and was eventually published as a journal article.[4]

While working on my master's thesis, I also applied to graduate programs in the United States. At the time, I was still a newcomer to the discipline of history and was therefore completely oblivious to the larger

debates that were taking place within the field at large concerning the rise of "transnational" approaches. Looking back on my application materials, however, there were hints of what was to come.

As part of the admission process Yale's Department of History—one of the programs I applied to— requires all applicants to submit a short book review on a book "that has most shaped the applicant's understanding of the kind of work he or she would like to do."[5] For my book review, I chose Akira Iriye's *Nijusseiki no sensō to heiwa* (*War and Peace in the Twentieth Century*), published by the University of Tokyo Press in 2000.[6] Below is an excerpt from my review at the time.

> As a scholar of American diplomatic history and transnational history, Professor Iriye has made significant contributions to our understanding of United States-East Asian relations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His scholarship is noted for his use of multi-lingual and multi-archival sources, as well as his abiding concern for the role played in interstate affairs by images and perceptions, as opposed to the traditional focus on geopolitics and hard power—i.e. a "cultural approach" to international history. Following a series of monographs on the Pacific War and the periods leading up to it, *War and Peace in the Twentieth Century* was first published in 1986 as a survey of the diverse strains of thought regarding war and peace in one of the most violent centuries in human history. This enlarged edition includes two additional chapters which cover the events around the end of the Cold War and the emergent trends of the new millennium.
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> *War and Peace* marks the broadening of Iriye's scope of interests beyond the international politics of the Asia Pacific region toward a more general examination of contemporary history from a global perspective. In what might be called a history of the concepts of war and peace, Iriye masterfully guides the reader through the major tides of thought of the twentieth century (starting actually in the late nineteenth)….
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> The strength of this book lies in Iriye's rejection of the simplistic characterization of international relations as alternating cycles of war and peace. Instead, he tries to show a more complex picture, exploring the various political and ideological influences that led to war, the numerous efforts for peace often left out from conventional narratives, and the interplay between them.…For Iriye, international affairs is the study of human society and behavior, and his concern for the "softer"

aspects of world politics shines through in this highly accessible work. In the final chapter he sums up the effects of globalization into four basic aspects: politics, economy, culture, and NGOs. In particular, he stresses the rising significance of the fourth aspect, arguing that transnational networks of NGOs will form the basis of an international civil society—a theme that was further developed in his 2005 autobiographical book from Kōdansha, *Rekishi o manabu to iu koto* (*On Studying History*).

Looking back at this piece, although I was still operating in the mindset of international relations and nation-states, my reading of Iriye's *War and Peace in the Twentieth Century* also introduced me to the notion of cultural and ideological factors as being an important part of international history. In fact, by the time of publication of the enlarged edition of the book in 2000, Professor Iriye was already moving toward a stronger emphasis on non-traditional actors in international relations, as evidenced in his 2002 book *Global Community*, and his 2004 review of works on transnational history in the journal *Contemporary European History*.[7] In the latter, Iriye writes about the rising interest among historians in going beyond national history and the nation-state as the key framework for historical inquiry. Noting several developments that led historians to become more fascinated with social and cultural topics, rather than strictly political and diplomatic subjects, he defines transnational history as the "study of movements and forces that cut across national boundaries," marking it out as a viable and emerging conceptual framework for historical research.[8]

3. Converging on Transnational History

While my trajectory up to the late 2000s had brought me to the field of international history, during the same period, larger shifts were taking place within the discipline of Asian American studies. Previous scholarship had assumed America as the location of its central framework, preoccupying itself mostly with the racialized experience of Asians and Pacific Islanders in the United States, while paying little attention to America's overseas colonial and imperial projects in Asia and the Pacific. From around the turn of the new millennium, however, new studies emerged that challenged this paradigm. Books such as Madeline Hsu's *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home* (2000), for example, did so by engaging closely with both sides of an immigrant's life—the home country and destination

country—and demonstrating the transnational ties between the two.[9] Rumi Yasutake's *Transnational Women's Activism* (2004), on the other hand, looked at the activities of an organization—the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), the Japanese branch of which was known as the Nihon Kirisutokyo Fujin Kyofūkai—and how it operated within a vast transnational network.[10] Daisuke Miyao's *Sessue Hayakawa* (2007) dissected the fame and career of the titular early Hollywood star from a transnational lens.[11]

This increased attention to transnational topics within Asian American studies coincided with a rising interest in empire studies in Japanese history. As a result, we saw the emergence of works such as Eiichiro Azuma's *Between Two Empires* (2005), which deftly weaved together the historiographies on the Japanese empire with that of the American West, producing a richly layered portrait of the Japanese American immigrant experience in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[12] Azuma's work served as an exemplary model for how to do transnational history by taking a multi-archival approach and engaging seriously with the historiographical demands of both sets of societies being discussed, thus paving the way for the emergence of exciting studies by a new generation of scholars. Some recent examples include Sidney Lu's *The Making of Japanese Settler Colonialism* (2019) and Chris Suh's *The Allure of Empire* (2023), both of which use transnational history to interrogate the meaning of often taken-for-granted concepts such as "settler colonialism" and "progressive" empire.[13]

4. From East Asian to Asian American History

Upon graduating from the M.A. program at Fudan and entering the Ph.D. program at Yale, I was assigned an advisor in Japanese history (Professor Daniel Botsman). While there was a tentative effort to offer an experimental "Global/International History" track to a few select incoming Ph.D. students, the vast majority of my cohort would belong to one particular geographic region around which our coursework and research activities were to revolve: Africa, the Caribbean, Western Europe, Eastern Europe, East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the most highly represented of all, the United States. I quickly came to identify myself as one of the "East Asian" historians within the department—taking courses related to Japanese and Chinese history, going to lectures and seminars about East Asian topics, and socializing mostly with students who shared a similar geographical

interest. As budding researchers, we were expected to take language courses during the academic semester and spend our summers studying the languages that would be required for us to read primary sources in their original form. Those languages included not only Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, but depending on our research topics, languages such as Russian, German, and Dutch as well. While my Japanese was already good enough from having lived there in my youth, and my Chinese was already good enough from having completed a master's there, I nevertheless took advantage of the class offerings at Yale to work on my classical Chinese reading skills and attended a course on reading *Sōrobun*-style texts from early modern Japan.

It was in the course "Asian American History and Historiography," taught by Mary Lui, that I gained familiarity in a field that was as yet new to me but would prove crucial to my development as a scholar. This graduate seminar, which centered around the reading and discussion of a few key classical and recent texts each week, covered topics such as US imperialism, US capitalist development and Asian labor migration, gender and sexuality, transnational and local ethnic community formations, and the racial formation of Asian Americans in US culture, politics, and law. While I had some general idea of the concept of Asian American studies and had read some related books during my undergraduate years, it was not until this course that I fully appreciated the rigor and dynamism of the field. This was especially true as it pertained to the formation of racial identities in American history, first as a sort of imposed racial and social construct that was directly tied to legal rulings related to immigration restrictions, and later as a more self-conscious term of empowerment that emerged in the aftermath of the cultural upheavals of the 1960s. Crucially, Asian American history provided me with a new framework from which to understand and interpret US-East Asian relations—including issues I had previously only viewed through the lens of foreign and military relations—thus allowing me to branch out from my initial, nation-centered focus on Japan.

Another opportunity to branch out from my preconceived notions presented itself during my third year in the program. After two years of coursework, Ph.D. students were expected to work as teaching fellows (TF) in undergraduate lecture courses as part of our graduate training. I went into my first semester of teaching with slight apprehension, however, because of the special circumstances of that year. Due to the timing of faculty members taking sabbatical leaves, there was no fall semester course on Japanese or Chinese history—the usual options for somebody in my position—for

which I could serve as a TF. My only option, as it turned out, was to be a TF for a course that was completely outside of my comfort zone: an introductory course on Indian history.

Despite my initial apprehension, however, this turned out to be one of the best teaching (and learning) experiences of my entire graduate career. "The History of Modern South Asia" covered the history of India starting in the Mughal era and extending through the East India Company and British colonial periods, ending with the Partition of 1947 that resulted in dissolution of the British Raj and the creation of independent India and Pakistan. In teaching about a region I had previously very little contact with, I had to study the material just as hard as the students whom I was supposed to be leading in the weekly discussion sections. The adage, "teaching is the best way to learn," was certainly true in my case, as I worked hard to stay just one step ahead of the undergrads in my charge. Luckily, I found that the subject matter itself was very fascinating, as it opened my eyes to topics such as Indo-Islamic culture and architecture, the workings of the British empire outside of the American context, and the issue of post-colonial legacies that continue to affect the region to this day.

Moreover, the instructor, Julia Stephens (now an associate professor at Rutgers), did a great job of making me feel comfortable as her sole TF, giving me ample materials and advice to prepare for each session. Through one of her lectures, for example, I learned that there were direct ties between India and Japan that I was not aware of—such as the close relationship between the Bengali artist Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951) and Japanese painters Yokoyama Taikan (1868–1958) and Hishida Shunsō (1874–1911).[14] During a 1903 trip to India, the two Japanese modernist painters impressed upon Tagore their unique "water-dripping" painting technique, which the latter ended up adapting in his famous *Bharata Mata* (Mother India) painting that became an iconic symbol during the Swadeshi nationalist movement of 1905.[15] Examples like this added to my growing belief that transnational connections offered a new and exciting approach to the study of different peoples and cultures.

As I transitioned from being a student to a researcher after passing my qualifying exams and becoming an ABD (all but dissertation), I would occasionally be reminded of Professor Stephen's course. In researching the ties between India and Kagawa, who was often referred to in Western newspapers as "The Gandhi of Japan," I discovered that Indians and Japanese looked toward each other at various points in their modern histories. Japan's victory in the Russo–Japanese War, for example, was

seen as a triumph of Asia over the West, with Japan becoming a successful model of a powerful Asian nation with an highly industrialized economy. Contemporary observers noted that in the aftermath of Japan's defeat of Russia in 1905, Indian villagers named their newborns after Japanese generals as an expression of Pan-Asian pride. Whether dissidents seeking safe haven from a hostile government or reform-minded students eager to learn the secrets of non-Western modernity, Japan attracted many visitors from India, including the revolutionary leader Rash Behari Bose (1886–1945) of Nakamura-ya fame.[16] Later, in 1939, Kagawa was visiting the western Indian city of Bardoli, waiting to meet with the leaders of the Indian National Congress, including Gandhi. While waiting for his audience with the Congress leaders, he commented on the crisp white *khadi* garments that his hosts were wearing—handwoven cloth made from homespun cotton, promoted by Gandhi as the unofficial uniform for India's freedom struggle from British rule. Kagawa noted that the *khadi* gave them an air akin to that of the so-called "men-of-spirit" (*shishi*) who, in the twilight years of the Tokugawa shogunate some seventy years earlier, fought for the Meiji Restoration and paved the way for the emergence of modern Japan.[17] This seemed to be a comment by Kagawa on the Pan-Asian transnational solidarity that he felt between Japan and India at the time.

5. Global Asias

As it happens, in a recent conversation on transnational history in the *American Historical Review*, Julia Stephens, my former mentor, contributed an essay on the mobility and immobility of historical subjects, as part of a reflection of her own experience of being stuck at home during the Covid-19 pandemic. Stephens' essay was part of the article, "On Transnational and International History," in which a dozen younger and mid-career scholars voiced their opinions on the impact of the transnational turn as a follow-up to the previously mentioned seminal 2006 *AHR* article of a similar name.[18] Writing in the aftermath of the pandemic lockdowns, Stephens reflects on the personal and professional privileges that had enabled her to frequently travel across Asia, Africa, and Europe, practicing the kind of multi-sited, multi-archival research method that has driven the expansion of global history. Being forced to stay at home, however, gave her a new perspective, as she was physically cut off from the archives and colleagues that inspired her work, thus compelling her to develop a new appreciation for subjects who were caught in global circuits but remained

themselves tethered in place.[19]

Stephens goes on to discuss her concern with mobility in relation to her engagement with the framework of "Global Asias" that has emerged in recent years. The Global Asias approach draws inspiration from several decades of transregional scholarship, following peoples, ideas, and objects as they moved through wider oceanic regions, and pushing scholars to engage with newly emerging methodologies. In 2017, anthropologist Engseng Ho published a manifesto of sorts for the study of inter-Asian spaces, in which he identified seven key concepts: mobility, disaggregation-reaggregation, connection, circulation, partial societies, transregional axis/intermediate scale, and outside-in analysis.[20] Christine Yano, on the other hand, in her 2021 presidential address to the Association of Asian Studies, described Global Asias as an approach that "focuses on the circuits themselves, on the oceanic flows and dynamic encounters."[21] This was further expanded upon by Tina Chen in her article, "Global Asias: Method, Architecture, Praxis."[22] In laying out her vision for this research agenda—of which she is one of the most vocal advocates as the director of the Global Asias Initiative at Penn State University—Chen stresses the multidisciplinary nature of the approach, attempting to relate it to fields such as Asian studies, American studies, Asian American studies, and diaspora studies, while also not necessarily forcing alignment between them unless it feels natural and beneficial. The decision to use the plural "Asias" (instead of "Asia") is a deliberate choice, highlighting their conscious effort to move away from self-evident expressions of geographical identity to relational dynamics and the multiplicity of geographically demarcated but culturally inflected semiotic space.[23] While perhaps a more ambitious and encompassing project than just transnational history, this Global Asias approach proved to be a key factor in finding a community of researchers in the next step of my career.

Having finished and submitted my dissertation at the end of 2019, I graduated from Yale in the midst of the global outbreak of Covid-19, with the pandemic destabilizing an already-precarious job market.[24] As such, I did not have any job offers in hand. With no prospects in sight, I moved back to Japan to live with my parents for a while. While I was fortunate enough to find a teaching position at my current institution (Chiba University) within a year of moving back home, the circumstances of the pandemic meant that most of my courses had to be taught online, and almost all on-campus meetings had been replaced with virtual ones. Due to such restrictions, my first year of teaching at a Japanese university left me

feeling isolated, with very little in-person interaction with either students or other faculty members. Within this environment, it was incumbent on me to reach out to others to try to find a new scholarly community that shared a common interest.

One of the central pillars of Penn State's Global Asias Initiative is the publication of the multidisciplinary journal *Verge: Studies in Global Asias*, which also lends its name to panels and roundtables as a means of supporting and increasing visibility for work that engages in such scholarship.[25] During this time that I was struggling with academic isolation, I saw an announcement soliciting a call for proposals for Verge-sponsored panels for the next year's Association for Asian Studies (AAS) conference at Honolulu in March 2022. This seemed to be an ideal opportunity to reach out to the wider world and try to find like-minded individuals. I quickly wrote up a proposal, which was accepted and eventually led to the formation of a panel titled, "Transnational Religious Communities in a Globalized Asia." The panel abstract is excerpted below.

> This panel examines the historical formation, development, and expansion of transnational religious communities that are either partially or fully based in Asia. Although transnational religious movements are hardly new phenomena, the technological and infrastructural advancements of modernity have greatly enhanced the ability of religious organizations to extend their networks beyond national borders, thus enabling them to more readily view themselves as being part of a larger, global community. In the modern period, communities of faith became markers of identity and rallying points for Asian peoples struggling under the burdens of colonial rule. On the other hand, in Japan—the only non-Western nation to become an imperial power in its own right—membership in a religious organization allowed for an alternative mode of engagement with the world, while also placing adherents under scrutiny from the agents of state control. The panel will explore the various ways in which religion negotiated, and at times, transcended, national and political boundaries to produce hybrid forms of spiritual beliefs and practices, with individuals often sustaining multiple identities and loyalties. By paying attention to both the transformation of religious culture in diasporic and immigrant contexts as well as its reciprocal influences back in the home country, this panel seeks to envision migrant and non-migrant religion as occurring within a single transnational social

> sphere, thereby bridging gaps between Asian studies, Asian American studies, diaspora studies, and religious studies.[26]

Soon enough, I received many intriguing responses from around the world—with topics ranging from denominational affiliations among Kerala Christian migrants in the Persian Gulf, Catholic churches in built in Hue (Vietnam) in the early twentieth century, the transnational coordination of South Korean multisite churches, and ritual links at the Buddhist Temple of Chicago—although not all of them ended up being part of the final panel for various logistical reasons. All in all, I considered it a successful experiment in the exercise of my transnational "agency" during a time of crisis.[27] I have always been interested in individuals who led "international" lives and whose careers straddled multiple countries and cultures—perhaps as a reflection of my own multicultural upbringing—and being able to organize a panel with such diverse scholars who shared a similar research interest was a uniquely enriching experience.

My own paper, "Transnational Imaginary: Kagawa-inspired Mythmaking and Community Building in the Interwar Period," began in the following manner, highlighting some of the transnational themes I have discussed thus far in this article. The excerpt begins with a quotation from a letter that the missionary Sherwood Eddy wrote while he was visiting Japan in 1922, and continues with my analysis.

> Here in Kobe I spent a day with my friend Kagawa whom I saw six years ago as a student at Princeton. I found him living in the heart of these slums. He is a pastor of a little church where he conducts services for the laborers who have to go to work before six o'clock in the morning. He is the Saint Francis of the poor, the Gandhi of the labor movement of Japan…Like the title of his book, he is living "Beyond the Death Line." But he walks unafraid, the friend of little children, the benefactor of the poor, the guide of labor, the arousing conscience of the church.

Thus wrote Sherwood Eddy (1871–1963), a veteran YMCA missionary of international standing who was visiting Japan in 1922. Eddy, together with his YMCA mentor and superior, John R. Mott (1865–1955), symbolized a generation of ecumenical Protestants who set out to promote American-style moral reform abroad starting in the late nineteenth century. They directed groups such as the World Young Men's (and Women's)

Christian Association and the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, both of which were highly influential international organizations in their time. One of their most persistent Asian interlocutors was Kagawa, as can be seen from the above quote by Eddy.

Born in 1888 to a merchant household in Kobe, Kagawa first encountered Christianity as a teenager when he happened upon a bible school run by a pair of American Southern Presbyterian missionaries in rural Tokushima. After being baptized at the age of sixteen by the same missionaries, he contracted a near-fatal case of tuberculosis during which he experienced a revelatory vision of God. Having narrowly escaped death, he took the new lease on life to make the fateful decision to move into the impoverished Shinkawa neighborhood of Kobe and dedicate his life to serving the poor. Kagawa's decade-long residency in the slums of Kobe served as the inspiration for a semi-autobiographical novel that became one of the bestselling books of prewar Japan, and was his major claim to fame. It was through the translation of this book and many others, as well as the publication and circulation of various journals and pamphlets centered on Kagawa and his work, that led to him becoming a celebrated religious figure in the 1920s and 1930s.

During the Great Depression, for example, he went on a lecture tour of the United States and won admirers among American churchgoers impacted by the economic downturn, leading to the creation of numerous church prayer circles and supporter groups in his name—and, in one instance, the installment of a stained-glass window in his honor in a church in Michigan. He was also welcomed among Japanese American communities on the West Coast—and indeed, even here in Hawaii, where he visited in 1924 and 1935. Kagawa's extraordinary status allowed many interwar Christians in different countries to imagine the creation of a global community of faith centered on internationalist ideals such as peace, brotherhood, and mutual aid. While such lofty ambitions of transnational solidarity remained, for the most part, largely unfulfilled, he nevertheless earned the admiration of a wide range of supporters.[28]

As hinted above, Kagawa's influence as a transnational religious leader stemmed from his elevated status within the global movement for Christian internationalism, as well as his position as a citizen of the Japanese empire. The complexities and contradictions of this duality is the subject of my forthcoming book, which is due to be published from the University of Hawaii Press in 2025.[29]

6. Conclusion

In this essay, I have attempted to sketch the impact of the transnational turn in the study of American history and on my own academic journey as well. Of course, there are many obstacles that prevent scholars from potentially engaging in transnational scholarship and research, as has been pointed out by others. These may include such barriers as the segmented system of graduate training, institutional differences between academic fields, as well as the regimented processes of academic hiring, publishing, and tenure evaluation.[30] In addition, I can count many ways in which I benefited from the more traditional area studies framework that had been institutionalized on American campuses during the Cold War era, as it has provided a source of structural support, funding, and community to those who study a particular world region.

However, it is also clear to me that transnational history presents a compelling argument for expanding our notions of how people have related and interacted with each other across national boundaries. This point seems all the more important in today's globalized world. On a personal level, I am hopeful that such transnational approaches allow people like me—who have grown up between more than one country and culture—to express themselves more fully in their work.

Note

[1] C. A. Bayly, Sven Beckert, Matthew Connelly, Isabel Hofmeyr, Wendy Kozol, and Patricia Seed, "AHR Conversation: On Transnational History," *The American Historical Review* 111, no. 5 (December 1, 2006): 1441–64.

[2] William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 1–10.

[3] Gary Y. Okihiro, *The Columbia Guide to Asian American History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), xv.

[4] Bo Tao, "In Search of Mutual Aid and Peace: Kagawa Toyohiko's Relations with the U.S. and the Wider World, 1929-1960" (written in Chinese), M.A. thesis, Fudan University, 2011; Bo Tao, "The Peacemaking Efforts of a Reverse Missionary: Toyohiko Kagawa before Pearl Harbor," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 37, no. 3 (July 2013): 171–76.

[5] "Admissions–Program in History," Department of History (Yale University), https://history.yale.edu/graduate/prospective-students/admissions, accessed September 7, 2024.

[6] Akira Iriye, Nijusseiki no sensō to heiwa [War and Peace in the Twentieth Century] (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 2000).

[7] Akira Iriye, *Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Akira Iriye, "Transnational History," *Contemporary European History* 13, no. 2 (2004): 211–22.

[8] Iriye, "Transnational History," 211-13.

[9] Madeline Yuan-yin Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home: Transnationalism and Migration between the United States and South China, 1882–1943* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000).

[10] Rumi Yasutake, *Transnational Women's Activism: The United States, Japan, and Japanese Immigrant Communities in California, 1859–1920* (New York: New York University Press, 2004).

[11] Daisuke Miyao, *Sessue Hayakawa: Silent Cinema and Transnational Stardom* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

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[25] In addition to editing the Verge journal and helping to organize Verge-sponsored panels at conferences, the Global Asias Initiative also hosts an annual summer institute in University Park, Pennsylvania, as well as the online "Cyber Chats" series. "Global Asias Initiative," Penn State University, https://sites.psu.edu/vergeglobalasias/, accessed September 9, 2024.

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[28] Bo Tao, "Transnational Imaginary: Kagawa-inspired Mythmaking and Community Building in the Interwar Period," paper presented at Association for Asian Studies annual conference, Honolulu, March 25, 2022.

[29] The book is currently in the final stages of copy-editing and is titled *Cooperative Evangelist: Kagawa Toyohiko and His World, 1888–1960*.

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