

THE
UNITED
STATES
AND

ASIA

CHANGING ATTITUDES AND POLICIES

William Watts

Foreword by Robert B. Oxnam

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*For my brother, Bigelow, whom Asia keeps;
and my wife, Eve, and my children, Evie,
Shelby, Heidi, and Obadiah, whom Asia awaits*

Foreword

This is an important and disquieting book about American attitudes toward Asia. It proves how little U.S. citizens know about the countries and peoples halfway around the globe. We cling to our traditional affection for Europe while seeing most of Asia as "crowded, underdeveloped, dirty."

Such stereotypes are especially disturbing as one flies across the Pacific these days. As I write, I am doing just that, riding in a Boeing 747 on a return flight from Singapore to the United States. Singapore itself is one of the most modern nations on earth with its sparkling new buildings, wide clean boulevards, and bustling harbor (the second most active in the world behind only Rotterdam, and way ahead of America's busiest harbor in New York). Around me on the aircraft I see the new face of Asia: smartly dressed businessmen and bankers from Tokyo, Seoul, Taipei, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Manila; families coming to visit relatives or perhaps for permanent residence where they will join the 2.5 million Asian-Americans. Interspersed throughout the plane are clusters of Europeans and Americans who have just been to Asia, in numbers that grow rapidly each year, to do business or to enjoy fresh tourist opportunities.

The aircraft symbolizes a brand-new era in Asia and Asian-American relations. It takes you to an Asia full of surprises. All of East and most of Southeast Asia is rushing pell-mell after Japan (now the world's second biggest economy) and growth rates of 6-10 percent per year are commonplace throughout the region. Superb products flow out of Asia, ranging from high-technology electronics to high-fashion designer jeans. In many places, new agricultural techniques have wrought rural transformations to parallel those in the pulsing urban centers.

Of course Asia has its serious problems, but they are problems of growth, not stagnation. China, for instance, is struggling to modernize with a total population of over one billion, three-quarters of whom live in the countryside where food production barely keeps pace with population growth. Yet China, in spite of these burdens, has made important strides in recent years and has turned to Europe, Japan, and the United States for commerce and assistance.

Another problem area, also born of success, is that of trade conflicts. The classic example is U.S.-Japanese trade where an American deficit of \$15 billion is expected in 1981. American domestic industries, both management and labor, are screaming loudly that Japan and other Asian countries will wipe out everything American from automobiles to textiles.

A third problem area is military. Asia has thousands of miles of hostile border areas and a modern history of prolonged conflicts. The United States, so often drawn into Asian wars in this century, now finds a menacing Soviet Union with a new foothold in Indochina and a beefed-up naval presence in the Pacific.

In a nutshell, Americans face tremendous challenges in dealing with this new Asia. Can we realize the potential in trade, diplomacy, and cultural exchanges? Can we avoid the perils of commercial clashes and military confrontation?

The biggest challenge of all is that of knowledge. Unless Americans bridge the ignorance gap across the Pacific, we are likely to miss opportunities and repeat mistakes. So often we have looked to Asia through Americanized visions and missed what was really happening. The Vietnam War is a case in point. Hawks shouted that Vietnam was merely an extension of China's global appetite. Doves spoke of the beleaguered North Vietnamese who wanted no more than a peaceful nationalism with their own borders. History has proven both sides wrong as China and Vietnam have gone to war and as Vietnam has invaded Cambodia. The lesson is clear: more information and less certitude in our views of Asia. Without it, the results can be tragic.

But where do we start? What do Americans know about Asia? What do they need to know? Here is where this valuable book comes into play. Watts begins with a well-designed Gallup Poll to determine American knowledge and attitudes. Then he goes on to interpret the poll based on his extensive knowledge of polling, of American foreign policy, and of Asia itself. Finally, he offers insightful recommendations for policymakers, businesspeople, journalists, and educators.

Some of his findings are pretty bleak. It appears that many Americans look to Asia the way Hobbes viewed man's natural state: a life that was "nasty, brutish, and short." Americans tend to identify with those Asian nations closest in geography and experience, most particularly with Japan, the Philippines, and Australia. Sadly,

we know little of the economic breakthroughs of South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore, all of which are wrongly seen as behind China in terms of estimates on standard of living. It is also a pity that Americans know so little about the key countries of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), comprising Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines. ASEAN is a regional grouping of energetic noncommunist countries with great potential in economic cooperation. The ASEAN countries have recently taken the lead in seeking the resolution to the ongoing Indochinese logjam.

Some of Watts's discoveries are surprising. U.S. normalization with the People's Republic of China, for instance, has produced a surge of support for closer U.S.-China relations, a dramatic turn-about from more suspicious attitudes in the mid-1970s. Toward Japan, Americans have evolved a split view of great respect for its industry and great fear for its exports. Curiously, less than a third polled saw the Japanese government as democratic (though the other options in this question may have biased the result somewhat). South Korea still suffers from the bad press of the last decade so that concerns for human rights and corruption continue to overshadow American awareness of Korea's economic vibrancy.

Some of the results are a little more positive. On a quiz of basic information, more than half the population scored a passable grade of five correct answers out of eight. Although the bias remains in favor of Europe, substantial numbers of Americans now recognize that U.S.-Asian trade is now greater than U.S.-European trade.

All this demonstrates that some accurate knowledge about Asia has seeped into the American public at large. To some extent this is due to the hard work of a new generation of Asia experts in universities, government, business, and the media. To some extent it reflects the labors of a small band of outreach coordinators at the universities and teachers committed to upgrading the K-12 curriculum about Asia. It also indicates the impact of a few fine television specials and documentaries, as well as the increased attention to East Asia in the press. Yet the reverse is also true. American ignorance of Southeast and South Asia is due, more than anything else, to the miniscule attention they receive in U.S. print and broadcast journalism.

The bottom line of Watts's book, however, is that we have a long way to go. Most American schoolchildren learn almost nothing about Asia. Most textbooks are still filled with stereotypes and outmoded information. Only 3 percent of college students take any

course having any connection to Asia. Foreign-language study is sharply down throughout the United States, and Asian languages capture only a tiny percentage of that dwindling number. One estimate is that no more than 20,000 Americans are studying Chinese and Japanese (compared to a majority of students in China and Japan who are learning English).

What can be done about it? Watts correctly proposes a multi-faceted strategy that links the White House, the Hill, Wall Street, Harvard Square, Madison Avenue, the nightly news, and your local high school. Such an effort must focus not only on the Asia over there, but also on the important roles played by Americans of Asian extraction whose numbers have jumped in recent years. Such an effort demands, as Watts indicates, new infusion of government and foundation support (at just the time when everybody is cutting back). Above all, it requires a strong push for understanding Asia by many prominent Americans, ideally the president himself.

Watts and The Henry Luce Foundation have given a good, hard nudge in the right direction.

Robert B. Oxnam
President
The Asia Society, Inc.

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I hasten to add that the final result is my responsibility alone, and any errors, faulty interpretations, or inappropriate recommendations that have worked their way into the text should not be attributed to anyone else.

Introduction

A comprehensive survey of American opinion, knowledge, and attitudes about Asia, its countries and its peoples, conducted in the summer of 1980, revealed the following:

A majority of Americans believed at that time that the People's Republic of China was one of our fifteen largest trading partners.

A majority said that Indonesia was not a major supplier of oil and petroleum products to the United States.

A majority believed that the United States still provided major economic aid to South Korea.

The majorities were wrong on all counts.

More than three Americans in ten did not know that the Philippines was once an American colony.

Less than one-third thought that the government of Japan was democratic.

The adjectives or phrases that Americans selected most frequently from a varied list when asked about Asia included "crowded; too many people," "underdeveloped," "political unrest," and "dirty; poor sanitation."

Much misinformation and negative stereotypes appear to characterize the thinking of many of our citizens when they turn their minds to Asia today.

Yet think about the following facts:

More than 20 percent of the world's population now lives in China, and about one-half lives in Asia.

Japan has emerged as one of the world's economic superpowers.

U.S. trade with Asia surpassed that with Europe in 1977, and the volume of our commerce across the Pacific is sure to continue to increase.

Immigration of peoples from Asia to the United States has soared, with the number of Chinese in this country almost dou-

bling during the 1970s, the number of Filipinos more than doubling, and the number of Koreans increasing by 413 percent.

The Korean peninsula, where American forces and our national security are clearly engaged, remains one of the most dangerous flashpoints on the globe, with the interests of China, Japan, the USSR, and the United States all directly involved.

Some of the world's most dynamic and rapidly growing economies are located in the region, including those of Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan.

Asia has one of the most constructive regional organizations in the world, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The last three wars in which the United States was involved began, for us, in Asia.

Given such fundamental realities, virtually all of which have major implications for U.S. policy, both official and nonofficial, it behooves us to become well informed and nonparochial about Asia.

This book deals with the realities of American perceptions of Asia as they now exist and suggests some steps that need to be taken both here, and in those Asian nations that so wish to improve the mutual levels of understanding and intercourse. Our discussion will also deal with some of the most pressing policy issues now before the United States in Asia, and suggest new policy approaches that might be taken.

For purposes of our analysis, Asia has been defined in terms of the Pacific rim, to include the following countries and areas: Australia, Cambodia, the People's Republic of China, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea (South Korea), Singapore, the Soviet Union, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam.

The primary body of data has been derived from personal interviews of a nationally representative sample of 1,616 adult Americans eighteen years of age and older, completed July 2, 1980, by The Gallup Organization of Princeton, New Jersey. The results of the survey have been broken down into various demographic groups, allowing for more detailed examination of attitudes according to sex, age, income, race, education, and region of country where one resides, occupation, and level of interest in international affairs.

An additional set of interviews was conducted with forty-seven individuals who have direct, personal contact with one or more countries in Asia and their peoples. Drawn from business, labor, the academic and foundation community, and government (primarily the executive and legislative branches), these people encompass a broad intellectual and professional spectrum. Their views have provided an exceptionally rich resource.

It is my hope that the pages that follow will provide some food for thought, debate, and argument, and perhaps even contribute to the greater understanding, dialogue, and promotion of mutual self-interest that is vitally needed on both sides of the Pacific and that can add to the well-being and security of us all.

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