

THE  
ASIAN

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CENTURY

WARREN I. COHEN

**T H E  
A S I A N  
A M E R I C A N  
C E N T U R Y**

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When I received the invitation to deliver the 2000 Reischauer Lectures at Harvard University, I was both delighted and troubled: delighted because it was a great honor, troubled because my audience would be familiar with the writing that had merited the invitation—and bored if I repeated it. I decided to offer something that built on the foundation of my previous work on American–East Asian relations, primarily *state-to-state* relations, and to go further in the direction in which Akira Iriye had been pushing me over the years: to look more closely at American–East Asian *cultural* relations. The focus of the lectures was therefore the intensified contact between Americans and the peoples of East Asia during the twentieth century and how this affected their respective cultures.

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## INTRODUCTION

In December 1968, in his presidential address to the American Historical Association (AHA), the great Harvard sinologist John King Fairbank urged his audience to take up the study of American–East Asian relations as the historian’s “Assignment for the ’70s.” The AHA created a prestigious Committee on American–East Asian Relations, chaired by Ernest R. May and including such luminaries as Fairbank, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Oscar Handlin, and Dorothy Borg. The Ford Foundation provided the initial funding to stimulate the study of Asian languages and research in this newly defined field. I was one of those who responded to the call: I wrote the first edition of my history of Chinese-American relations (*America’s Response to China*, 1971) during the 1969–70 academic year.

The year of Fairbank’s presidential address was also the year of Hanoi’s Tet offensive and the massive protests against America’s tragic war in Vietnam. Underlying Fairbank’s

argument and the AHA's decision to establish the new committee was the assumption that a greater understanding of the interaction between the United States and East Asia might spare the peoples on both sides of the Pacific from future mistakes of the kind that led the United States to plunge into the quagmire in Indochina.

Thirty-one years later, in December 1999, the *Journal of American History*, the preeminent publication of the Organization of American Historians, devoted an entire issue to transnational history. One author, an Australian, cited a famous 1891 essay, "The Significance of History," in which Frederick Jackson Turner asked: how shall we understand American history without understanding European history? Not a single author saw fit to suggest that *East Asia*, north or south, had an impact on American history—or vice versa.

Having spent most of my adult life writing about American–East Asian relations, I was frustrated by this evidence that such a narrow view of American history persisted thirty-one years after Fairbank's presidential address and a quarter of a century after America's defeat in Vietnam. American civilization is unquestionably more than an extension of European civilization. A generation ago we realized that we had neglected Africa's contribution to American culture. Surely the time has come to acknowledge that to understand the history of the United States, it is also essential to understand its interaction with East Asia. And certainly the obverse is also manifest: the cultures of other societies have been

affected by contact with the United States, and this is true for much of East Asia in the twentieth century. The history of East Asia cannot be understood without recognizing the impact of the United States.

In the pages that follow, I will approach the story of this interaction from three discrete angles. First, and most obvious, is the realm of international politics, the collisions of nation-states and empires that stimulate cultural change. I begin by reviewing the role of the United States in East Asia from the closing years of the nineteenth century to the conclusion of the twentieth, noting its growing power and influence in the region. Playing with counterfactuals, I offer some suggestions as to how differently East Asia might have fared had the Americans not been so active. What might have happened to the Philippines had the United States not seized them in 1898? What would the map of East Asia look like today if the Americans had abandoned the region to the Japanese in 1941? What form of government and what kind of society would Japan have developed without the American occupation? How different would the history of Korea have been without American intervention in 1950? What kind of life would the people of Vietnam have in the year 2000 if the Yankees had stayed home?

The focus of my second chapter is the often disparaged "Americanization" of East Asian culture. I examine the ways in which contact with the United States has changed the way East Asian peoples are governed, how they eat, how they

think, how they amuse themselves. I look at cultural change, cultural transfer, and the concept of cultural imperialism. The most difficult part of this investigation was separating *American* cultural influence from generic *Western* influence. I have tried to focus specifically on the former, noting that for much of East Asia, globalization has a distinctly American flavor; that for many Asians, the United States is perceived as the center of the world. It appears that Americanization has been most successful and will be most enduring in those instances when coercion was minimal, when Asian peoples freely chose elements of American culture that they perceived as improvements over what their native cultures offered.

My third topic of investigation is the extraordinary "Asianization" of America—the accelerating influence of East Asia on American life and identity, a phenomenon neglected by most students of American history. It is clear that art, film, food, and religion in the United States have been profoundly affected by contact with Asia. In a few years there will be more Buddhists than Jews in the United States, and one in ten Americans will be of Asian ancestry. Of greatest importance is the fact that Asians, especially as a result of the migration waves of the last third of the twentieth century, are changing American identity—what it is to be an American. Finally, to complete the circle, Asian Americans are beginning to affect the course of state-to-state relations.

# 1

## THE STRUGGLE FOR DOMINANCE IN EAST ASIA

At the close of the nineteenth century, the United States and Japan were admitted to membership in the society of “civilized” nations. Gerrit Gong, in his book *The Standard of “Civilization” in International Society*,<sup>1</sup> makes much of the way that standard of civilized behavior, as defined by *Euro-peans*, was codified in the international law of the day. The reality, of course, is that both countries muscled their way into the club—Japan by defeating China in 1895 and the Americans by destroying the Spanish empire, in East Asia as well as the Caribbean, in 1898. Any remaining reservations about how “civilized” Japan was were dropped when the Japanese defeated the Russians in 1905. There can be no doubt that respect for the law, domestic and international, and adherence to the norms of international behavior were important to European statesmen, but power was the ultimate trump card.

For the first forty-four years of the twentieth century, until its navy was decimated in the battle of Leyte Gulf in October

1944, Japan was the dominant power in East Asia. It faced only sporadic and ineffectual challenges from the United States—until the aftermath of its attack on the American fleet at Pearl Harbor. No European power, with the early and unfortunate exception of Tsarist Russia, was secure enough in Europe or perceived its interests in East Asia sufficiently threatened—or had leaders stupid enough—to risk confrontation with the Japanese. The British were quick to recognize Japan's strength and attempted to secure their interests in the region by entering into an alliance with the Japanese in 1902.

On the sidelines, the Americans, led by men who were unquestionably "Atlanticists," focused on Europe whenever they looked abroad. To them, it was apparent that Europe was the locus of power in the world, whether economic, military, or political. Nonetheless, reflecting the influence of the navalist Alfred T. Mahan, they slowly built up U.S. might in the Pacific, enlarging their Pacific fleet and developing their bases in Hawaii and the Philippines. Armchair strategists such as Brooks Adams stressed the future importance of Asia in world affairs, and a few businessmen salivated over the opportunities of the mythical "China Market." All concluded that it was essential for the United States to control the sea lanes of the North Pacific.

In the last years of the nineteenth century, the American seizure of Hawaii and the Philippines thwarted Japanese ambitions toward both sets of islands. In the Philippines, the

Americans also put an end to peaceful *Chinese* expansion. The Chinese had been migrating to the Philippines for centuries (many, if not most, of the contemporary Filipino elite have Chinese ancestry). When the Philippines were annexed by the United States, the islands became American territory, to which the laws excluding Chinese from the United States applied. When the outraged Chinese minister to the United States, Wu Tingfang, asked if this meant that wherever Americans in their wisdom chose to expand, Chinese would be denied access, the American secretary of state, John Hay, confirmed Wu's apprehensions. The Chinese also fared poorly in 1900 when American troops stationed in the Philippines were available to join the forces of other ostensibly "civilized" nations in crushing the Boxers, who were attempting to rid China of foreign influence. Americans were thus able to join in the looting of Beijing that followed the success in lifting the siege of the diplomatic quarter, bringing much fine art—and some not so fine—back to the United States.

The Philippines might have been better off without the American occupation, but perhaps not. Certainly the culture of the islands would have developed very differently. Most likely, the Japanese would have seized control of the islands. At a minimum, we would have been counting Imelda Marcos's kimonos instead of the huge cache of designer shoes discovered when "People Power" and Cory Aquino overthrew her husband's dictatorship in 1986. Japanese rather than English would likely be the lingua franca of the islands.

And surely Filipinos would not constitute the second largest group of Asian Americans.

Although the Americans preempted Japan's expansion in the Pacific and limited the peaceful expansion of Japanese through migration to the United States and its possessions, they revealed respect for Japanese power by acquiescing, however grudgingly, in Japanese imperialism on the Asian continent. In 1905 Horace Allen, American minister to Korea, begged President Theodore Roosevelt to protect Korean independence, but Roosevelt was convinced for the moment that American interests were served by Japanese expansion, an obstacle to that of the Russians he despised. Subsequently, he fretted over Japan's advantage as the only Great Power privileged to focus exclusively on the affairs of East Asia, unconcerned by the European affairs that held the attention of the United States as well as the other Great Powers. To avoid conflict with Japan over California's treatment of Japanese migrants and to protect Hawaii, Alaska, and the Philippines (which he had come to view as America's "Achilles' heel"), Roosevelt readily appeased the Japanese appetite for continental expansion. When his successor, William Howard Taft, attempted in 1911 to counter Japanese (and Russian) control of Manchuria with a hopeless scheme to have American investors buy into the railroad network in those Chinese provinces, Roosevelt was quick to condemn the effort. He insisted that it was suicidal for the United States to challenge the Japanese, that America lacked the military strength to op-

pose Japan on the Asian mainland. In brief, while American missionaries in Korea were providing support and havens for Korean nationalists and a handful of Korean nationalists established a military training camp in Nebraska, no American government challenged the Japanese annexation of Korea or criticized the later mistreatment of Koreans.

Throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century, U.S. Department of State specialists in Chinese affairs begged their leaders to stop Japanese inroads into Chinese territory and sovereignty, primarily with regard to Manchuria. They were appalled especially by Japan's effort to make China a virtual Japanese colony with the notorious "Twenty-one Demands" of 1915. Although several efforts to restrain the Japanese were launched by Presidents Taft and Woodrow Wilson, they all failed miserably. Japan was too strong, American interests too minor, and Northeast Asia was left to the Japanese. In the 1920s, when the Japanese pursued their interests more subtly, generally avoiding the use of force, cooperation with Japan was relatively easy. This was the period in which Shidehara Kijuro managed Japanese diplomacy, the era Akira Iriye has labeled "After Imperialism,"<sup>2</sup> suggesting that Shidehara and his colleagues were responsive to Anglo-American complaints about Japanese behavior in China.

In 1931 and 1932, however, anger erupted in the United States, as elsewhere in the world, over Japanese aggression in Manchuria and the Japanese military's disruption of the peace machinery created in the 1920s. Supporters of the

popular and influential American peace movement were devastated by Japan's blatant violation of the Covenant of the League of Nations, of the obligation to respect China's sovereignty and territorial integrity which it had undertaken during the Washington Conference of 1921–1922, and of the commitment Japan had incurred when its representative signed the Paris Peace Pact (“Kellogg-Briand Pact”) of 1928, perceived by many as outlawing war. But the Manchurian crisis could not long hold the attention of Americans struggling desperately to survive the Great Depression. Had Bill Clinton's political bulldog James Carville been around then, he doubtless would have said, “It's the economy, stupid.”

No event anywhere in the world could compete for very long with the depression for Franklin Delano Roosevelt's attention—certainly not before 1937, when full-scale war began in China. Until then—and for more than a year afterward—FDR's policy, like that of his Uncle Teddy, stressed avoidance of conflict with Japan. Much as he disliked what the Japanese were doing in China, Roosevelt, when he could look beyond domestic affairs, was unquestionably more concerned with events in Europe such as the Spanish Civil War and the menacing actions of Nazi Germany. He managed to provide small-scale aid to the Chinese over the next few years, but when war came to Europe he concentrated his country's efforts on aid to Great Britain. Increasingly after the fall of France in 1940, the United States was engaged in

the war against Hitler, initially as a non-belligerent and in an undeclared naval war in the autumn of 1941.

The war in Asia was a distraction, a war in which the United States perceived no vital interest, a war in which Roosevelt hoped to avoid involvement. Nonetheless, the United States began applying economic sanctions against Japan in 1940 and intensified them in 1941, ultimately rejecting a proposed *modus vivendi* with Japan and provoking the attack on Pearl Harbor. The reasoning behind Roosevelt's policies toward Japan in those crucial years is probably less well understood than any other major policy decision in the history of America's foreign relations.

The United States had not chosen to antagonize Japan as part of a plan to replace Japan as the dominant power in East Asia. Indeed, concern for China, for East Asia *per se*, had relatively little to do with the pressure the United States exerted on Japan. Neither the famed Open Door notes of 1899 and 1900 urging the preservation of China's independence and territorial integrity nor lust for the China market drove American policy. As historians such as Dorothy Borg and Waldo Heinrichs have demonstrated, it was Japan's alliance with Hitler's Germany that was critical in determining the American response.<sup>3</sup> Aid to China was designed to keep the Chinese in the war, keeping the Japanese engaged so that they would be unable to put pressure on the British empire or to undermine British efforts in Europe and North Africa. In the