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Teaching American Experience in Japan*

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A few years ago in the famous La Pietra conference Tom Bender asked non-American participants an intriguing question, “How well do American studies and history travel for the foreign scholar/teacher who must teach in a very different setting from that of the U.S.?” In Japan’s case the answer to this question could not be a simple, because the swiftness and smoothness of such travel would vary greatly depending on the destination. The Japanese public’s view of America is usually too opinionated and stereotyped to allow for a sufficiently sophisticated and diversified understanding of American people and society. Students and young Japanese can lead a fully “Americanized” material and cultural life without being immersed in intricate details of American studies and history. In a sense, however, history written by Americans travels very well among professional historians who engage in research, write, and teach American history in Japanese 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. 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. I shall return to this problem later.

As an academic field, at least, American studies in Japan seem to have come to life in recent years. The Japanese Society for American Studies, which some fifty years ago had only a few dozen members, now boasts a membership of over 1200. In addition, the Society of American Historical Studies, which was organized in 1975 and is now the most active Japanese association devoted to American history, also has some 400 members. Each year a large amount of scholarly work on America is published in Japan across a great variety of disciplines and fields. In institutions of higher education courses of study devoted to American politics, economics, society, culture, and history exist in profusion on both graduate and undergraduate levels.

In 1998 the Japanese Association for American Studies published *A Guide to American Studies in Japan*,¹ based on a survey funded by both American and Japanese

foundations. This guide included four parts, one of which is composed of five chapters devoted specifically to historical studies. Three of these are dedicated to chronological surveys, divided into the Colonial period to 1815, the 19th Century, and the 20th Century; two more treat respectively Social History, including subjects like race, ethnicity, gender, family, and class, and Economic History. Other chapters in this guide are divided into three categories: Social Sciences (politics, economics, and law); Foreign Relations (diplomacy, pre-WWII US-Japan Relations, and post-WWII US-Japan Relations); and Literature and Thought. Since the chapters not specifically dealing with history also include many history-oriented studies, about 80 per cent of total works cited in this guide could be classified as American history in a broad sense.

Each chapter of this guide is composed of a general historiographical review essay, an introduction to major works written in Japanese after 1970, and a list of important works on each period or genre. For good or ill, this guide reflected the present state of American history in Japan. First of all, it testifies to the high degree of activity current in scholarly American studies in Japan, particularly American history. Some 700 historical works are cited in this volume.

The works cited in this guide are fairly diverse in subject matter and approaches, thereby reflecting the state of division of labor among Japanese historians. This diversity often reflects the historiographical changes in American history in America since 1970, moving from the new political history to New Left history, and then to new social history, the republican synthesis, and more recently postmodern, feminist, or postcolonial cultural studies. Most recently the influence of multiculturalism and identity politics has given a new impetus to minority studies, including the ethno-cultural history of Japanese-Americans. These historiographical shifts are well documented in the review essays of each chapter, which connect individual works with the paradigm shifts occurring in American history in America.

Neither the number nor diversity of works written by Japanese historians of American history necessarily implies that the history written by Americanists working in the U.S. are easily accepted in Japan as a whole. The guide seldom refers to the significance of studying American history to other historians, those working in history of different areas, to students concerned with historical studies, and to the general reading public. This lack of interest in the impact of American history on the public beyond the narrow specialist world evinces the limitations American history written by Americans encounters in Japan.

The trend in American studies in Japan since 1970 to produce too many specialized and narrowly positivist fragmental works and too few broad, synthesizing arguments seems to be something of a chronic disease. This causes a peculiar difficulty

in survey courses on American history at Japanese universities. As Bernard Bailyn explains, undergraduate teaching is “an effort to convey the structure of an entire subject,” “to present, at an elementary level, a whole subject in an integrated form for intelligent, critical, but uninformed people,” and “[to] boil down a great deal of technical material into a general story and presenting it as a whole, so that when the course is over, the student really can see the outline of the overall subject.”²

This is the most difficult task for American history teachers in Japan. Unfortunately, the wonderful survey textbook *The Great Republic*³ by Bailyn and others is probably least utilized for the purpose its authors conceived. It is probably used just as much for giving professional historians a standardized interpretative overview of their own research subject as it is for giving Japanese students a broad contextual view and basic analytical and explanatory perspectives.

Another textbook, written by leading Japanese scholars (in Japanese), has the same problems. Mainly because of poor profitability, very few survey textbooks are published on American history in Japan. *Amerika-shi* (American history) published in 1994⁴ is an exceptionally voluminous and comprehensive survey. In this textbook American history is divided chronologically into 10 chapters, each of which was authored by a leading historian in each period. Consulting a wide variety of secondary sources by their American counterparts, each writer submitted very detailed views of American history. Because of their keen awareness of the current historiographical trends in the American profession, the book that resulted displays the influence of the vogue of multiculturalism and a new international perspective after the Cold War. The book thus results in a fine overview of the state of American history in America. As a survey textbook, however, its prohibitive price on top of its difficulty has caused it to fail to spread widely among students.

Overspecialization and the facile acceptance of American historiographical trends has stymied Japanese Americanists from proffering original innovative interpretations of American history. When John Higham visited Japan in 1980, he deplored the lack of ambitious inventiveness among Japanese Americanists vis-a-vis their counterparts in India.⁵ In my view, most Indian Americanists were raised in their country's elite culture, one formerly totally immersed in the British way of seeing the world. They are therefore naturally inclined to attempt 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, they have two other receptors in their interpretive framework. 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. Again as 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.”⁶ 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 of 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 to this question we need to return to the original encounter between the two nations.

In the past century and a half Japan dramatically encountered America twice, once with the opening of isolated Tokugawa Japan by the fleet headed by 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 both in 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 this power and why America was now in Japan. In either case, both sides were too preoccupied with immediate power relations to concern themselves with history.⁷

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 the 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 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.⁸ 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 of its being a republic lacking a historical tradition. After all, Meiji Japan was a somewhat schizophrenic nation, vigorously seeking modernization and while 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 Prussia's. The legal system, too, was modeled on continental ones; and the army and navy adopted Prussian and British models. As a whole, the Japanese governmental structure ended up Europeanized. The first national universities were also established after the model of Germany.

As Japan created a new nation-state in this manner, a peculiar world view and pecking order among civilizations and nations was also created. 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. As Carol Gluck writes, by the 1890s the historical discipline in Japanese universities was divided "into national history (Japan), Eastern history (Asia without Japan), and Western history (primarily Europe)."⁹

Since then, American history has long been studied and taught not an independent academic subject but as an auxiliary part of western history. Western history, in turn, has been coupled with eastern, or Oriental, history, to form "world history." 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 other nations' history.

Consequently, during the first half century after the inception of modern higher education in Japan, American history was given a permanent chair in almost no university except for a subordinate place in the Western history section. Only in 1925, the first chair of American history, funded by an American banker, was established at the University of Tokyo.¹⁰

Strangely enough, Meiji Japan sent more students to the United States than to

any European country. This fact, however, did not necessarily contradict the pecking order of nations, for the most elitist students and promising young bureaucrats invariably chose Europe as the place to 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. Most ardent Christians and socialists also numbered among students going to America.

Thus America was reached in two ways in modern Japan. One way was the west-bound, elitist route leading first through Europe; the other was a non-elitist east-bound 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 engage in more practical and vocational pursuits rather than academic history. This situation affected the development of academic studies on American history and society adversely in prewar Japan.¹¹

The Pacific War and subsequent Occupation changed this situation drastically. This time the US military power came from the east, across the Pacific. In addition, after the defeat, Japan was expelled and rejected from the East Asian and South East Asian region. The direction of Japanese international consciousness turned suddenly and utterly to the east-bound route. Like the case of the opening of Tokugawa Japan, the United States again appeared as 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 the 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 traditional Japanese way of life. The constitution was fundamentally rewritten after the American model. The military was disbanded and the most notorious war leaders purged. The educational system underwent reforms under the instruction of America. 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 the years of a strict control on freedom of speech and press by the ultra-nationalist government, the Japanese people coveted and devoured new information. English became by far the most dominant second language in schools. American sciences and social sciences poured in Japanese universities 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 in making their way into 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 teaching 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 all the rest of the world) has invariable 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 division of the discipline of history into National, Eastern, and Western compartments. In addition, right after the end of WWII (and perhaps until the end of the Cold War) Marxism was the most vigorous and dominant ideology throughout Japanese academia, for Marxism as an ideology and a social scientific theory provided a perspective to see relativistically and analytically 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 (history about the enemy of the progressive forces) was despised as a field fit for those with a bourgeois mentality. It was therefore marginalized in the historical profession once again. For all these reasons American history 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 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.

By 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 prepare for a better understanding of American history. In fact, as I suggested already, the period after the late 1980s has witnessed the quick development in Japanese American-studies in both fields of research and education.

At this juncture, however, American studies and American history in Japanese education is still racked with the traditional difficulties. One history teacher expounds 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 War, 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 being critical enough to touch on negative aspects of American history.¹²

In addition, US-Japanese relations, globalization under American auspices, which created something of an exuberant mood during the 1990s, caused another kind of difficulty in 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, which in turn results from the power

of a hegemonic nation. Ironically, some of the most vexing problems in historical understanding also result from this situation. In Japan, specifically, the immediacy of America, the “American presence,” in large part an effect of Japanese-American relations, which have grown increasingly strong over the last half-century, has also contributed to difficulties in understanding American history.

Soon after World War II, once the Japanese economy was rebuilt, the average Japanese citizen came into contact with things American at an ever-accelerating pace. More recently, the number of people who actually traveled to America and experienced it first hand has skyrocketed as well. Every year about five million Japanese (or one fourth of the total number of international travelers) visit the United States. Advances in communications technology and the creation of the internet allows the average college student, to say nothing of journalists and businesses, to acquire an amount of information concerning America that was unthinkable even only a few years ago. The gap has thereby widened between the importance of the American presence on the one hand, and scholarly interest in America within the walls of academia on the other.

This gap presents a major obstacle to the teaching American politics, history, and society at the university level as well. In recent years countless college students eagerly attend classes devoted to American studies. These students have of course already experienced America in everyday life long before they have understood America on an intellectual level. In one sense they know America all too well; in another, they lack even the basic knowledge of what America means both historically and culturally. Students tend to believe that through the internet they can obtain all the information about America they need. But in fact, quite often there is little connection between the America they know in their daily life and the America about which they learn in their coursework. The field of American history particularly bores young people who are absorbed in the here and now of internet communication. To them America represents wealth and pleasure in the present and the future; American history *thus becomes something of a contradiction in terms.*

The difficulties of American studies in Japan should not, however, be blamed simply on the situation of postindustrial society or the ubiquity of information technology in the age of globalization. The fundamental cause must instead be located *in the manner in which American studies and a certain type of academism arose within the context of Japanese modernization since the Meiji period.* American studies in Japan as they exist today have internalized and even amplified these old and unsolved historical problems while Japanese society has undergoing wholesale Americanization and globalization. The scholarly objective study of America has thus been hindered by a kind of double obstacle.

What can we, Japanese Americanists, do to cope with this problem? US historians in Japan have much work to do in order to reorganize both research and educational institutions. But speaking as a scholar, it is most important to reconsider the meaning of “America” and the significance of studying “its history” for the Japanese. The US and Japan differ fundamentally as a modern nation-state: republicanism vs. the emperor system in regime, diversity vs. monolith in population, individualism vs. groupism in social ideology, pious monotheism vs. secular polytheism in religious life, etc. Today anti-American sentiments are rapidly spreading among Japanese youth. 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 I have indicated above. In order to overcome this anti-Americanism it is most important to come to terms with its motivations. It is thus time for Japanese Americanists to replace research topics they uncritically borrow from American colleagues with a broader comparative historical context. Without doing this Japanese Americanists will always remain trapped in narrow confines, whether they wish to be or not.

At the same time I would ask US historians in America to place and see their findings in as much an international context as possible. For outsiders, American power always appears devoid of history. The 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. In the OAH meeting several years ago, of which the basic theme 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 speakers’ answer was intriguing, for he said “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 with 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 travel abroad.

ENDNOTE

¹Hitoshi Abe and Takeshi Igarashi, eds., *Amerika kenkyu an'nai* (Guide to American studies in Japan) (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1998).

²Bernard Bailyn, *On the Teaching and Writing of History* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England), 14.

³Bernard Bailyn et al., *The Great Republic: A History of the American People*, 4th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin College, 1992).

⁴Tadashi Aruga et al., *Amerika shi* (American history), 2 vols. (Tokyo: Yamakawa shuppan sha, 1994).

⁵John Higham, personal interview by author.

⁶Bailyn, *On the Teaching and Writing of History*, 12.

⁷William L. Neumann, *America Encounters Japan: From Perry to MacArthur* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1963), chaps. 4, 13, 14.

⁸Yasunobu Soumura, *Peri ha naze nihon ni kitaka* (Why did Perry come to Japan?) (Tokyo: Shincho sha, 1987), 147-170.

⁹Carol 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.

¹⁰Makoto Saito, "Nihon no amerika kenkyu zenshi" (Japanese American-studies at its inception), in *Amerika kenkyu an'nai*, 257-59.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 256; Jun Furuya, "Graduate Student and Quaker," in *Nitobe Inazo: Japan's Bridge Across the Pacific*, ed. John F. Howes (Boulder: 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 nich-bei kankei* (The founding ideals of the United States and U.S.-Japan relations). (Tokyo: NIRA Research Report No. 940051), 113-30.

¹²International House of Japan, *American Studies Curriculum in Higher Education* (Tokyo: International House of Japan, 1997), 121.

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